Haunted: Claws and Teeth
Lynnette Lounsbury

When she had been told the valley was haunted she had assumed several things, an air of self-righteousness foremost amongst them. Ghosts were the realm of old people and children and she was neither. There were other assumptions though. There was an expectation that apparitions must be human; lost wafting creatures with sad tales of hypothermia or a fall from one of the knives of red stone that slashed upwards all around her. Mixed with her scepticism was the warmth of knowing she would never have to test her convictions. Only a fool would try to cross that pockmarked, frozen wasteland at night.

Yet now it lurched before her, the trees wavering in ice wind, the edges of the red cliffs blurred by low cloud. Stupid. It was so unbelievably stupid to be stuck out here. The crystal threads running through the cold air made her skin twitch and there was a heart shuddering moment when she knew her assumptions were as foolish as her attempt to find the boy. She was not alone. Her rational mind she knew she had never been alone out here. There were possums bolting up the trees as she moved down the trail and a myriad insects squeaking and hissing their displeasure at her disruption. There were slitherings in the low black grass. But this was something else. She turned around quickly. Darkness. Darkness barely penetrated by her small torch. Pivoting back she looked down the overgrown trail. And it was there. Watching her.

A dog. Perhaps. A ghost certainly. Silvery, threadbare, not completely there. It was bigger than a dog though. As tall as her hip. Its face was sharper. And its teeth needles of light. It glowed, though not in the torchlight; from within. Her heart stuttered to a halt, winding down and then attacking her chest wildly - get away from this thing! She couldn't. The boy was out there. Beyond.

The creature looked at her, turned slowly in a circle, like a wolf, its head low, eyes up. Could you be killed by a ghost dog? The adrenaline tearing at her veins told her she could. The side of its body took her by surprise. Thicker than a dog. A longer tail. In her muddled, frozen mind she felt a flicker of recognition.

The creature watched her and let out a low sound - a rumbling. Pulling back suddenly on its haunches, it lifted its front legs in the air, pawing at the air. The movement was strange and she stumbled back, off the path and into thick, sharp brush that held her in place. There was something odd about it, moving as it did - like a rat. Like a wallaby. It flicked its head quickly side to side and then turned to walk away, down the path. It wasn't going to kill her. Was she supposed to follow it? She mocked herself for the thought. Her limbs were losing sensation in the cold. It wasn't worse than being completely alone, was it? Unless it led her off a cliff. As she fell into step behind the apparition she saw the lines across its back and she knew it. It was a tiger. Thylacine. Only survived by its silver shadow.