

## Jeparit

When she first hears the news on the radio she takes the kitchen scissors to the front garden and begins working on the climbing rose. Fat burgundy blooms cluster and let off heady perfume. The sun is hot and the scissors no match for the woody branches of the vine. The irony, she thinks, of the pruning shears being trapped inside the shed.

She makes slow progress, clearing away the branches, revealing the roller door. Dried leaves flutter like confetti as she works. She wipes a stray, fair grey hair off her forehead.

It's suckers, the colour of the roses themselves, that have taken over. Growing from under the graft, beneath the point where things were permanently altered. Dark, thorned ropes sprouting out from before things changed and creeping, strangling the things that are prettier, sweeter, more delicate.

When the sun is half way to centre of a clear sky she shuffles back into the house. Fills the kettle, sits heavy at the table and waits for the whistle. A bunch of rescued blooms sag in a jam jar. A bee finds a gap in the flywire and buzzes over the vase.

A sandwich and a nap at the kitchen table, shoulders slumped, chin to chest. When she wakes there is a puffed blister on the side of her knuckle. She decides the scissors aren't up for the job.

The breadknife makes slow but steady progress through the climber. Brown flecks of once-sappy branch dust her hands as she saws. The sun is

hot on her back. She takes off her cardigan and is conscious of the skin on her upper arm brushing backwards and forwards across her dress.

She remembers her arms back then when they were firm and supple. Smooth and bronzed. When she would wear frocks with no sleeves so she could feel the heat. At the end of summer, after their classes had ended and all the children had been sent safely home, they would run to the water. Two young women, one blonde, one auburn. They'd spread a blanket out. Watch clouds make animal shapes. Swat flies with stalks of paspalum.

As she hacks more of the suckers away the stems dry out and she can break them free with her hands. They snap, hollow and empty. Her progress quickens and soon the roller door to the shed, blue paint peeling away, is fully exposed.

But she's forgotten about the padlock and has to retreat back indoors to find the key. It's elusive. Not in the pot of nick knacks on the bench. Not in the bottom draw in the kitchen (the effort to get down to check almost as exhausting as that to get back up). Finally she finds it in the cut crystal box on the dresser. Among a faded lock of auburn hair, a broken string of pearls. Two brooches. And the locket.

The search took too long and it's dark now. The veranda light bulb has blown, and there's been no reason to replace it. She'll wait for tomorrow. The radio says the water is still coming. Snaking down the Wimmera, finding its way.

Bed. She pulls the cover over herself. Light cuts through the curtain. It's yellow, streetlight, not the pure white of the moon. That special, clean light that makes skin glow. She remembers that sort of glowing. At the lake, the

blanket now sheltering them from the cooling night, mosquitoes and darkness. Kangaroos long gone from the banks. Birds settled and quiet.

In bed she holds the locket. She wants to press it hard into her palm, feel the chain dig into the softness of her fingers. But her hands are too stiff, the curl of her fingers at their most acute already.

She only wore it that one night. Rose strung it around her neck. She blushed. Rose took her chin and kissed her. A bat flew across the sky. Rose undid the top button of her blouse and she closed her eyes.

When Rose reached for the second button she cupped her hand and shook her head. Rose grinned, teeth pearly in the night. Took her hand to her own shirt, pulled the buttons loose, threw it to the ground.

In the bed she imagines the water flowing back into the river. Slowly creeping along, filling up cracks. Soaking into the soil. With her eyes closed the light through the curtain could be moonlight. The water flows. She feels her skin become soaked. Puffing up the creases and cracks. Filling the grooves. Smoothing out the lines. Her thirsty bones straightening back out.

She hears the splash as Rose dives. She calls to her but she remains on the bank with the blanket around her shoulders. She watches Rose swim out further into the lake until she becomes one with the water. Only the rhythmic stroke tells her where she is.

She lies back, watches another bat flap across the moon. Fingers the cool silver of the locket. Flicks it open, feels the empty hollow where their photo can never go.

When the birds start rustling in the messmate she sits back up. Walks to the bank, slips off her sandals. Pads into the mud. The night is silent. She

tucks her skirt into her knickers, wades in to her knees. The water is thick, brown, her feet have vanished. She strains to hear for Rose's stroke. Imagines her watching. Feels conscious of everything. She takes a deep breath and lifts her blouse over her head, throws it back behind her onto the bank.

As she strokes through the cool water her skirt drags behind her like a mermaid tail. She imagines it fanning out on the water surface. She laughs, calls out.

But there is no reply. Rose's body gives no further hints. It is silent.

She paddles further, searches with her hands down as deep as she can dive. But her mermaid tail restrains her, constricts her. She surfaces, calls. But there is nothing.

When Rose's body was pulled from the water people thought she must have done it on purpose. One of the teachers from Jeparit got into trouble with a boy was what they whispered. There was nothing to say in return.

At the funeral she sat in the fourth row from the back between the headmaster and the woman from the post office. She watched their grief and mirrored it tear for tear.

After, she put the locket in the cut crystal box and, around her, life carried on. But its succulence was lost, like a branch of the climbing rose, green outside, crumbling to nothing within.

That winter was dry. Clear, cold skies and no rain. A new teacher was sent up from Melbourne. She had a family of her own to get home to.

At the lake the water level started to drop until the marker stood high on the bank. Over time the Wimmera stopped running altogether. The lake started to smell. The brown water turned green, putrid. The bloated body of a kangaroo. Shallower. Seeping and withdrawing, drying out.

Summers became dustier. Heavy branches from the messmate, bored out and full of dust, crashing to the banks. No good for firewood, nothing inside them but sighs and crumbs. The bats stopped flying in the night. Fewer birds rustled in the branches.

She stopped going into town. Stopped going to the lake. She knew the river bed was cracking up, contracting, hardening. She saw it in her own skin. Tightening, becoming brittle, flaking away.

When she wakes her whole body aches. She struggles to sit up, and when she brings her hands to her lap she realises she is still holding the locket. She tucks her hand into her nightgown, warming it up to pry her fingers open. She tries to open the clasp but can't make her chapped fingers work at that fine level. Her flaking nails can't flick the catch open.

She boils the kettle. Peels off the tea cosy, spoons tea into the pot. It steeps as she dresses. When she returns to the kitchen it's stewed and dark. The tannin strips any remaining moisture from her mouth as she swallows.

The scratchy toast is unmanageable. It sticks and she coughs the crumbling mess into a tissue. Sets the remaining piece aside.

Two cotton dresses hang tattered and crisp on the line. She remembers the day she hung them and was too tired to bring them in when they were dry. Now reaching her arms overhead is too much. The faded fabric is streaked with bird droppings, spider webs. Twigs caught in fraying hems. Through the kitchen window some nights they look like two women dancing under the stars. As the Hills Hoist spins, grinding, squeaking, the pair swing. Sometimes she can almost hear them singing, laughing. Sometimes she feels as giddy as them, secretly dancing in the moonlight.

The shed. The key opens the padlock. The rusted pulley wheel at the top of the door squeals and sheds dry drops of rusty rain. It takes four tries to pull the sheet off the car. The key is in the ignition, where it always stays. She starts the engine every Monday. Lets it idle in the shed. Part of the ritual she can still manage, something she can keep ticking over.

Driving, she feels like a caricature, creeping down the main road in the Fairmont. It's almost like a boat itself, floating along the bitumen river. There are more buildings than there used to be. Houses now brick. Things move fast and someone toots.

Turing into the Reserve is difficult, her clawed fingers slipping around the wheel. There is a slick of brown across the bottom of the lake. A slow trickle flowing in from the river.

The soles of her feet are the only soft part she has left. She takes one foot out in front, then brings the other to meet it. Lopsided, she moves slowly out

towards the centre of the lake. The water reaches her ankles. Underneath the cracks remain, but she can feel the soil softening.

The fallen messmate, leaves long gone, stretches out into the water. She uses it for stability, creeping out into the middle of the lake. She leans against the trunk, feet submerged, knees peaking above the water level.

The floral pattern darkens as the water slowly soaks up her skirt. When her legs get too weak, she sinks into the water. Her skirt puffs around her, legs crumple and soften. Her body is cool. She scoops water into her mouth. Swallows the muddy taste, feels silt between her teeth. She eases herself lower still, turning on to her back. The ground is still hard underneath her. Water at her temples. Earthy, alive. She lifts one arm up. The locket glints in the sun. Her wet skin is shiny, she imagines it new. Turns her hand one way and then the other, watching the light glint.

She digs her blunt fingers into the lake bed, crumbling the cracked peds into mud, working the soil into a slurry. She pushes the locket down as deep as she can. Sinking it into the mud. Planting it. Pushing it down until she can't feel it and it's finally gone.