

Red

It wasn't red. That was what surprised you most all those months ago. Nine hours of teeth-chipping, brain-against-skull-thudding drive on that cratered track and it wasn't even red. It was a dusty frustrating shade that wasn't really any colour. It wasn't red. Or brown. Or pink. Or orange. Or any fancy shade of any of those colours. It was something of all of them combined, cooked by the furnace of the western wind and sucked of moisture until zig-zag lines cracked the surface in every direction. Now, as you open the door and rest one booted foot on that western soil again, you're reminded of her and how she'd said the endless flat plain looked looked like one giant terracotta tile dropped from the sky and left in a million shattered pieces.

Through the windshield, across the road, you see anthills rise like ancient ruins behind the strings of barbed wire enclosing farming beasts of the usual variety – horses, cows, sheep – swathed in haloes of flies. A dozen cows lay scattered like battlefield corpses in the sparse shadows cast by anorexic gum trees. Last December it'd taken you a week to realise the heifer in the neighbour's paddock was dead, not resting. The smell and the flies clued you in eventually.

After Christmas, the same thing'd happened with old Shirl Duncan. People kept walking past her verandah on their way to the general store, throwing a wave at the hunched shape in the settler chair till the smell got to the footpath and the number of flies grew alarming. They'd brought her in to see you, four days postmortem. Doctor. Miracle man. You were one and the same out here. Four days was beyond miracles. Four days in this heat was a glob of Friar's balm up each nostril to deaden the retching and half a roll of industrial plastic sheeting. As you'd wrapped her you'd wondered how many other community pillars had gone out rolled up like imported carpets.

And for all their country folk posturing, all their quiet 'by the way' questions and creased sun-damaged foreheads, they hadn't cared, not for Tess anyway. She'd seen the other doctor – unprofessional to treat your own – but within the hour there were looks. Questions. Of course Brett hadn't said anything. "They figured it out," he'd said. You could've reported him, but they all knew by then anyway. So Tess'd stayed home and washed the clothes, and the washing machine, and the pegs, and the door handles, and anything that was anything, then did it again for good measure. And you went on working.

And finally, when the rain came, it wasn't the mesiah they'd predicted. The cracks filled, turning the soil into a lake of sludge that slipped beneath your feet, sending you spread-legged as a novice skier. Then the river awoke from the bottom of the gully, the far away trickle rising and swelling until it thundered over the bridge, whisking whole trees horizontal, roots exposed as they gushed past on the current. Fence posts rippled along the surface too, innocent of the submerged wires they trawled.

When the waters dropped, some stockmen found her like that, all ripped and bound in wire a few stations down river. Dave at the cemetery had tried hard but you saw the smile as his shovel slipped through the flood-fresh soil. And, as you'd released your handful of sodden earth over the hole, you'd glanced at your palm and seen; in the creases of your hand, where you'd clutched tight the soil, the stain on your skin was red.