

Surface

They were trying to deal with it on the farms - the ones around Nanango. The catchment had been re-vegetated to stop all the salt reaching the surface. Uncle Terry kept an eye on things like that, and taught me most of what I know about it. He talked a lot about the droughts, and saturation points. He'd discovered new erosion, and old patterns, like how at the beginning of each winter, a slug of water entered the dams that connected the farms together. There wasn't much of it, but it had high levels of sodium. Seeped in there off the land, somehow, even with all the work on the catchment. They'd collect it in little sealed baggies and send it off to Terry's old surveying buddies, until I ended up finishing school, doing a degree and becoming one of them.

When I was a kid and my Mum went on business trips I'd stay on Uncle Terry's farm and follow him around while he took samples and drove his tractor. He did a lot more than that, but I didn't keep him company all the time. I'd often walk around by myself, using my chubby kid fingers to click photos with a disposable camera. Mum always gave me one before she left. 30 photos on the roll, and no more after that, so they all had to be good'uns. I'd creep down early in the mornings to the part of the dam's edge Uncle Terry owned. Couldn't stray too far cause of the dingoes. Had to stay in sight of the house, or within running distance at least. I'd carry around the same baggies I use now for work, collecting different coloured soils and sometimes rocks, but only the really good ones. The dam was my favourite place. It had edges that curved around the smooth old gums like puzzle pieces, and I couldn't even see where the water ended on the other side. Most of the time I went there by myself, and it'd be too early to be

light enough to click photos. I'd wear my togs and a rashie with a cardigan over the top, which I'd peel off and tie around my waist as soon as the sun came up. It'd always be there at that time of year - running along the top of the still body of water: the amorphous, corpuscular slick of salt. It was a film lying on the surface of the dam like the skin on granny's custard.

It was one of those mornings when Terry and my cousin Ben would put on their shirts and belts for a change and make a trip into town. Auntie Marlie came outside to see us off and check on Clancy the foal, quivering and grunting for some company at the steps of the house. Uncle Terry had told me that Clancy's mum was dead, but Ben's friend Ethan said she'd been sold to a kill-buyer at the market because she was too old to be useful any more. I didn't know if he was just trying to scare me, but every time I thought about it I felt a little bit sick. When I sat in the yard making clover chains, I would watch Clance plodding around by herself, trying to catch flies in her little gob. I'd imagine a big ghosty mumma horse following her around, real quiet so she didn't notice, catching all the ones Clance missed so they wouldn't bother her any more. Clance pressed her side up against Marlie, who handed the boys a list of things to pick up at the wholesale. She'd write 'all of my love' on the bottom of the list sometimes, because she meant it. Lordy though, Ben would tell me, she'd chuck a fuckin darkie if they forgot anything.

Most times when we'd go into town, I'd help load the smaller things onto the ute, but instead Ben took me to the pool and let me mess around there for a bit while Terry got the supplies. When I was much younger and didn't know how to swim, uncle Terry dropped me in the deep end and I learned pretty fast. Mum

was furious when I told her about it, but calmed down when I explained what I did. As soon as I hit the water, I closed my eyes and mouth, and pinched my nose shut with both hands. I stayed that way until I felt calm, and opened my eyes. Felt the water press against my eyeballs and creep under the lids a little bit. Let the bubbles of air out until I sunk to the bottom, and used the hard tiles to spring back up to the surface. Mum knew I always had strong legs, and she knew I could get myself calm and quiet when bad or scary things happened, just like Dad used to. After I told her that, Mum told me about how when she was a kid, she didn't know how to ride a bike. Her parents bought her a bike for her birthday and made uncle Terry teach her how to ride. Terry took her up a really steep hill, put her on the bike and pushed her down it. She told me she managed pretty well until she hit a rock at the bottom. Still has a little scar on the ridged bit of her lip right under her nose. She hates it, but Dad used to say it made her face more beautiful.

Once I got out of the pool, Ben gave me twenty cents to buy a redskin from the pool shop lady. Uncle Terry was at the butcher by that time, and we went to find him. There were a lot more things in the back of the truck: planks of wood, tractor parts, and hessian bags of something-or-other. Chickens; squawking and gurgling in their tiny little cages. I told Ben how I was scared of the meat and blood and the butcher man's belly, so he wouldn't make me go inside. I told him that the butcher shop was the cruelest place I know, and he said Nah, it's all over by the time they get here.

I sat in the truck while Ben and Terry finished their business, and put the stinking, bloody bundles in the esky. Then they got in either side of me and we took off towards the outskirts. Terry'd let me change the gears sometimes. As we

passed the new estate I whacked it down into third. It was on the bulldozed flats, an aberrant bulla of same-bricked houses that made the layout of the rest of the town seem lopsided and off-balance. Ben's school-friend, Ethan, lived in the estate. Every time we drove past it, we'd peer out the window together with furrowed brows and slack jaws at the parasitic blob of suburbia that someone important had decided to plop out there. They'd chosen a local indigenous Australian word for it, which Mum told me meant 'place of song'.

Pretty fuckin silent to me, Terry muttered. He revved hard and went straight into fifth a little too early for the highway.

Once we got home, Uncle Terry whipped a horse biscuit-stick out of his pocket. I grabbed it off him and ran around the yard to find Clancy before Marlie saw the stick and clapped me over the ear for making Clance fat on snacks all the time. The foal would be clopping around under the camphor laurels at the back of the house, usually, if she wasn't following auntie Marlie around the garden. Clancy's floppy lips would quiver as they worked their way over the biscuit stick. I'd know it was taking every ounce of her willpower not to bite my whole arm off with it. Always starving hungry, that horsie. When I finished feeding her I went back to the truck, and poked a finger through the cage to pat one of the chickens. I wanted to name it, but maybe it already had one.

Don't get too attached, little sheila, Terry warned me. Chooks have short lifespans around here.

Uncle Terry didn't have to go out on the farm in the afternoon, so he took Auntie Marlie, Ben, me, and the kelpies in his ute down to the dam to have a swim. It was good to give them some exercise on the days they weren't out working the

cattle and hassling Clancy because her tail was so fun to play with. We came out of the dam shivering and giggling, covered in bits of the weeds that grew in the water. The mud came all the way up to our knees, but we ran through the long grass back to the ute, and that scraped most of it off. There was never enough room for us kids in the cab of the ute once Terry and Marlie were in there, so on the way to and from the dam, Ben and I would always either try and run behind the truck with the dogs, or sit in the back of the ute tray without the sides up, and hang on, just hang on.

One time we came back from the dam and Ethan from the estate was at the house waiting for Ben. He'd ridden his dirt bike all the way from town. I could see wheel marks over the corner of one of Marlie's gardens. Wheezing and sore from the run, I got a rock from somewhere and placed it on the bike mark so nobody would see. I had my disposable with me that afternoon, and only a few days left to use it. Three photos left. I clicked one of Ethan, standing over his bike and putting his helmet back on. Ben ran into the house and got his own helmet, and jumped on the back of the bike with Ethan. He'd brought his backpack, and something was stretching it out long, like in a pipe-shape. Marlie and Terry were already inside.

I wanna come, I said. I wanna come, can I come?

No room, ya little shit, Ethan yelled.

Go help with the dinner, Ben said. We'll be back in a bit.

I knew they were going to the tractor shed. It was too far away to walk all by myself, but I followed the track along until my legs got tired anyway. I got up on a hill and could see it, off at the edge of the property. They'd turned the lights

on and everything. There was Uncle Terry's tractor, but the sun was going down and my eyes weren't so good at night. Nothing happened for a while, so I lay down on my belly and clicked a picture of the lit up shed. I thought it'd be one of the best photos, but later when I got them developed it was just a white blob on black. The night pulsed around me and I felt the last of the warmth drain from the earth underneath my body.

I heard a gun shot. Then another one. I heard the motorbike start up again so I jumped up and ran for the house. I wasn't going to tell, or anything.

I'd dropped my camera, but when they caught up with me Ethan had it in his hand. He shouted some things but my ears were ringing from running. Ben got off the bike and said something to Ethan, who threw my camera at me and took off. It hit me in the head, but I didn't feel it much. Ethan had Ben's bag, and Ben ran after him, harder than I'd seen him run, ever. I walked, clutching the disposable and trying to get my head on straight. I heard another shot, which made me start. I ran, just kept going until I caught up with them around the back of the house. Clancy was on the ground. Ethan got her, right in the head.

I did what Mum said to do when I couldn't get my calm. I tried to think about what the opposite thing, the opposite feeling was. Tried to pretend as if it just didn't happen at all, like how people do with nightmares.

When I came out for breakfast the next morning, Marlie was already in the kitchen. She always got up the earliest out of everyone, even Uncle Terry. She had my weet-bix ready with some bananas and some honey and a little bit of golden syrup.

Coupl'a sore looking heads in here this morning, she said.

Ben didn't look up from the table. He knew he was in for a hiding. Uncle Terry was putting his boots on outside, and barked Ben's name. Ben loped out after him. He hadn't finished his weet-bix. I went to follow, but Marlie said she needed my help making jam-drops, so I stayed and finished my breakfast real fast. She got the flour out of the cupboard and I got the beaters ready like she taught me. She didn't even get angry with me for not washing my hands. We made the dough too-easy, but then Marlie got her home-made jam out and handed me the spoon, and I dug out some of the red gooey mixture and it reminded me and I could hear Ben digging a hole for Clancy under the laurel trees and, oh, oh.

Uncle Terry found me later on, down at the dam. Had my head down in the silt near the edge of the water like always. Could smell the salt in the ground. The sun was going down and it looked like the land was glowing with a sick fever, the same way my cheeks did when I got food poisoning. The earth had been touched by a bad death, and it knew about it as well as I did.

One of the kelpies jumped off the ute and licked me on the face until I sat up and gave it a pat. Terry crouched down beside me and put his hand on my head, looking at the water too. We stayed like that for a few minutes until he ruffled my hair and pointed across the bank to a big tree with thick knobbly branches that hung between rills over some deeper water.

Now, there's a branch you could hang a swing off, he said.