

## H. C. GILDFIND

*All of this, everything*

You wake to a window turned white. Instead of trees, fog—as cool and thick as milk. This is the first opaque morning of the year. Lie in bed, look out, pat the dog snoring in her under-cover cave. Could lie like this forever and ever and ever, and forget the world outside. But no. Get up. Get dressed. Get in the car: you in the front, dog in the back. Drive down the rutted lane to the road, mustering yourself for another day in hell. But first, the carrot on the stick. A run around the lake in town.

Drive slowly, shoulders hunched, face close to the windscreen, searching the fog for kamikaze roos. That persistent background worry: what if one goes under the bull bar? What's the right thing to do? Drive on, or stop to help it? But how can you help it? You could call wildlife rescue—but you know they'll take hours to arrive and then, most likely, they'll keep the damned thing alive even if it's better off dead. So, should you shoot it, slash its throat, smash its skull with the axe in the tray? You've heard blokes down at the pub boasting about their road-kill stories. No one denies the humanity of their actions, but everyone senses their pleasure in the gore, in their power—in the mercilessness of their so-called mercy.

A rumbling behind. The rear vision mirror is just a white rectangle—useless. Suddenly, and too close, headlights. Lucky it's uphill. Probably a logging truck, towing a load from the plantations. Tonnes of high-speed steel and wood, only metres away. He tails closer, knowing there's nothing safer on a fog-blind winding road than a car in front, taking the first hit. Try to ignore him. Try to breathe down the adrenaline shooting through you as he inches closer. Hold steady—ignore him, ignore him, ignore him—until you hit the volcanic planes. The road straightens. The fog disappears. The bastard overtakes.

Follow him onto the flat. Let him speed ahead into the diamond-cut dawn as you gaze into the paddocks starred with fluro-lit milking sheds—they'll be heaving with peak-udder traffic. Hear the dog rise up from the back seat, this animal-full smellscape making her restless. She lays her head upon your shoulder, her cheek against yours. Ever familiar—ever strange—the warm breathing softness of this other creature who is so intensely and so particularly herself. Once in a while she licks your face, licks your ear, nibbles at its single diamond stud.

Carry on, like this, towards the twinkling town. Slow down past the wood mill with its strange steaming silos and Jenga-stacks of pine planks. Look over these to the lake, revealed only by the fog that hides it. Wonder, again, at how water seeks water—at why it clutches itself to itself so closely. Skirt the town's shaggy edges. Drive through the industrial estates and its scatter of derelict buildings: squatters and drug dens and brothels (so everyone says). Drive down the short steep road that marks a line between the bird sanctuary and the abattoir's gleaming white eight-foot fence. Here they are: the carrot—and the stick.

Sudden confusion. At the bottom of the hill, next to the cloud-shrouded lake where there's usually a big open space to park in, there's a double story building.

It wasn't there yesterday.

Slow slow *slow* right down. Crawl closer. Disconcertion, cold in the vein, that old fear flickering. (Others' warnings from long ago—from when there were others—about what is a natural, healthy, right and wrong way to live. Warnings about what solitude does to a brain.)

Roll past the mysterious structure. Look closely. You're not mad—not today. Do a u-turn and drive back. It's just a livestock truck, parked at a funny angle. It's just a driver pulled over, waiting for the blood-yards to open.

Pull in behind him. Sit for a moment. Wonder if it's foolish to park a white ute in a white fog behind a sleepy driver in a truck with a house-sized trailer. But this run is the only thing that gets you up in the morning. This run is what makes bad things better. You need it—that heart-pumping movement alongside silty silver water on flat-packed

gravel with pelicans and swans and spoonbills and swallows and a sky swelling with sunrise.

Get out of the car, dog on lead. Walk past the rear of the truck. Look up: three stories of sheep steaming up their own fog. Inhale it: grass, lanolin, shit, piss—warm smells, as repellent and comforting as the smells of any another living, breathing, eating, defecating thing. No bleating. No bah-bah-bahhing. Just the perpetual wordless noise of perpetual motion. Scores of lungs and mouths and noses rasping air. Scores of small hooves scuffling, stamping, trying to find footing but finding no space at all to move in. Look at them, pressed against the wooden-planked walls so that their stomachs, faces, ears and—here and there—entire legs stick out from between the slats, suspended in mid-air. You see one sheep lying on its side, trapped underhoof with a smear of shit across its soft floor-pressed muzzle. You watch another get pissed on from above. It doesn't seem to notice, doesn't seem to mind. You step closer and put your face up against a gap. You recoil. The shock of them: those eyes—those alien ovine ellipses—staring straight back at you.

Walk along the trailer. Your dog suddenly strains forwards, sniffing wildly. You see what her nose has seen. Three narrow metal cages welded to the chassis under the truck. Two cages are closed, locked, empty. One is open, with a puddle of vomit next to it—or is it shit? Adrenaline ices your skin, your body knowing that another dog is near and that, secured or not, big or small, young or old, it's as likely as any to go for you. A movement between the massive tyres. Your dog freezes—and so do you. A scuffling sound. And there, morphing from the shadows—and chained to an axle—a scruffy mongrel. Small. Pick-upable. A curly kind of dog. One of those cross-bred Oodles—what do they call them? Spoodles? Cavoodles? Labradoodles? One of those fashionable dogs—though this one is filthy, its white curls matted into grey dreadlocks. As it moves, you see long dark nipples tapering loose teats that swing from her saggy overstretched stomach. She slinks forwards, looking up covertly from under her curly fringe. Stops. Sniffs. Sidles closer until her chain tautens. She pauses. Sniffs and sniffs. Your dog belly-crawls towards her. Tentatively, they touch noses—then lick each other's

muzzles. Lick, lick, lick. Satisfied, the curly dog trots back to the tyres and keels over in the dirt between them: off to sleep.

You pull your dog to heel. Look again at those cages welded beneath the chassis. See the toy dog, teddy dog, lap dog—a kid's dog—balled up tight and being thrown about as the truck flies along the freeway with only a sliver of steel between her and the rushing road. Think of the noise. The scream of air brakes. Think of the face-cutting—eye-cutting—stone chips. Think of the tar-boil of bitumen in summer. Think of the cold and wet and mud of winter.

Walk past the driver's cabin. Its windows are open. A radio plays low. There's no one in sight, but you can feel his presence, feel it everywhere. Try to imagine him—this man who thinks that all of this is okay. No, cannot imagine him. Cannot imagine the mind that thinks it is okay to stack sheep like sacks. That it's okay to store a dog like luggage. That dog wool and sheep wool engrained with muck is okay, okay, okay. Cannot imagine a person who thinks that these creatures cannot think or feel or know just what it is that's done to them. Stand back. Stare down the length of the truck. Recall the accusation of the mocked few, the accusation that has haunted you since you saw it spat at the world by someone on TV: that this here, this truck, represents nothing less than an eternal Treblinka.

Hurry away. Begin to run along the water's edge. Focus on this, the run that makes the intolerable tolerable. But you cannot see your lake at all today. Even the birds—and their busy morning chatter—have been gulped by fog. You can only hear your breath and your heart and the gravel-crunch of feet and paws falling in time to the tune of that unasked for soundtrack. Tre-blin-ka. Tre-blin-ka. Tre-blin-ka.

It's not anger that comes. It's nausea. It's fear. So run harder. Suck in that cool white air. Suck it in. But the belly-gut of knowing surges up anyway—acid—searing your insides with the immutable fact that the unimaginable is real and it is everywhere. Yes, the unimaginable—all of this, everything—is real and it is everywhere all the time.

Jerk the lead to hurry the dog along. She resists, making the choker slide up around her ears. Jerk it again, though you know you might hurt her. She relents, speeds up, flashes you that will-remember-this-

later look—defiant but resigned, and oblivious to the caricature the fog has made of her soft black face: her dew-edged lashes and whiskers and goatee and ears have been transformed into cartoonish white lines. Joy rushes through you—this profound, inarticulable, unexpected love for her. Guilt chases it. And shame. You think of all the people who refuse to ponder the line between protection and possession, care and control, symbiosis and enslavement—and the consequences of convenience. You think of yourself. Your work. Your wage. Your own refusals and rationales.

Creatures materialise on the footpath ahead. A cyclist, heard before seen, clatters past, nodding hello. A many-legged form appears: a man with three sausage dogs rolling underfoot. He stands to one side to let you pass. Two figures approach. Two old men talking in another language, turned towards each other, one with his hand on the other's arm: neither looks up. Keep running.

Try not to picture your white ute parked in the white fog behind a truck blinded by its own heaving backside. Undoubtedly a stupid place to park. But you were taken by surprise—didn't, couldn't think. You're thinking now. You see the driver descend from his bed at the top of his cabin. See him, sleepy, turn on the ignition and casually let the truck roll back into the ute, not even hearing the crunch of metal. Run harder. Again, see the driver appear groggy in his seat. See him start the truck and, instead of rolling backwards, see him lurch forwards and gear up the hill to the blood-yards, his chained-up dog forgotten. Keep running. See him park at the abattoir. See him jump out of the cabin, look around. See him hesitate, walk a few steps then bend down by the back wheels and swear at the stupid mangled mutt for getting herself killed. Run.

The loop is nearly finished and suddenly—just like that—the fog begins to lift. Within minutes, it has thinned to nothing. Magic. The lake reappears, and so does the sky, each reflecting the other—pale, turquoise, luminous. Low clouds crack open. Golden rays beam down, creating a scene as tacky and beautiful as a postcard from heaven—a scene marred only by the black blot of the sheep truck and the white-walled maze creeping up and over the hill behind it. Run towards them.

Startle at the sudden jumbo-jet descent of two pelicans: albatross-winged, fat as turkeys, they swoop in smooth and fly alongside you—in tandem with you. They splutter to a stop, then glide along with instant grace. Run faster. Nearly there. Now, you can smell the sheep. Now, you can see the white blurs of their faces through the gapped wooden slats of the trailer. Still no sign of the driver. The filthy mutt appears. Sits. Yawns. Watches you walk past.

Of course, the ute is fine. Open the back door. Your dog leaps in. Get in the front and switch on the ignition. Reverse away from the truck and point the ute towards the road. Stop. Take one last look. The little dog stands and then bows, her backside up, her long-titted chest pressed to the dirt, her snout straining towards the beam-struck sky. Watch how all of her—every single filthy part of her—luxuriates in the innate bodily satisfaction of the everydog. Pull out onto the road. Drive up the hill. Turn into the open gate and pass through the corrugated walls of steel. Park the car. Let the dog out. She knows the deal. She hops into the tray. Sits on her blanket. Lets you chain her up. Awaits your offering of food and water. You give her a pat, then wander down to the change rooms. Get your gear on. Get to work.

Hours later, exhausted, you finally return home. You scrub yourself raw in the shower. Then, the bed beckons. Though it's only 4 pm, you get under the covers—just for a little while. You doze. You awaken when a big wet nose roughly nudges your face. You do as you're told. Lift the covers. In she hops, turning around and around and around then nesting in the warm dark safety of her under-cover cave.

Two animals—you sleep together.

Two animals—you warm each other.

You do not know what's natural or healthy, right or wrong. You do not know anything, except that you could lie like this forever and ever and ever, and forget the world outside. But instead, you're dozing into a daymare. Dozing into a daymare of a hulk anchored to a cloud. You're running from a hulk full of feeling into a fog full of spectres. You're running on a path that keeps looping back on itself, returning you again and again to that everywhere-nowhere man and the little cages and the big cage and the breeding bitch and the stories of sheep

with their voiceless noise and their other-worldly eyes staring out at a world that does not see them. You are drifting into a daymare where you're hosing red off white and scouring benches and sterilising knives and saws and hooks because that's your job and it's the only job you could get and it lets you live and you're good at it. And who says choice has anything to do with anything? Doesn't everyone—*everyone*—get paid with the same bloody money?

You try to shake yourself awake but you are so damned tired.

No, you cannot fight this daymare, this endless fucking nightmare: the normal—the everyday—all of this, everything.