

**FICTION**

# Quarry

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*Now from the dark, a deeper dark...*

Elizabeth Coatsworth, 'Calling in the Cat'

LUKE CROSSES HIS arms against the bluster and stares out across the grey. Even on the hottest days in summer, when dozens of people come here to walk their dogs or jog or fish or set up barbeques with their damn kids screaming everywhere, this bench just stands here empty. It seems to wait for him, as if his own name is gouged across its grain rather than Beck's and Ahmed's and Sol's and Renee's. Luke hugs himself and squints through the gritty spray. A rock wall ties one side of the lake to the other, dividing the water in two. A man sits in the middle of the wall, in the middle of the lake, fishing. Luke watches him, then looks over him to the twisted white gums drowned along the far bank. He studies the gums, studies them hard.

He doesn't want to look at the idiot girl struggling with a board and huge red kite on his side of the wall. Can't bear to watch her because, when he does, he sees her yanked under the chopped water. Sees her thrashing and sinking. Sees her wetsuit become heavier, slicker, blacker, bloated as she fights for the surface. Sees her stop. Stillness, silence. Feels the lake in her lungs. Watches her rise up again. Watches her tug to a halt, the ropes and pullies of her harness tangled in the trash below. She's a human balloon, floating forever in the toxic grey silence.

Luke's gaze flickers between the fisherman and the gums and the cormorants striking ridiculous poses on the ashen branches. He thanks Christ that summer, with its swarms of people and its glare and its endless daylight hours, has finally come to an end.

A red flash. The kite is up, hovering. The girl thrusts herself backwards. With powerful jerks of her long thin arms she wrenches the parachute left and right till it cups the full force of the wind. She races across the raging water. Faster. Faster. White foam fans up as she grinds her weight down into the board, turning and speeding away from him. Now she's aiming straight at the rock wall. Faster. Closer. Too fast, too close. Only once she's cleared the wall – for somehow, with the smallest spring of her knees, she rises up, up into the air and flies right over it – does Luke realise he's holding his breath. He's furious with himself. He's furious with her, but cannot look away as she flashes across the far side of the lake. Back and forth she goes, gathering speed till – again and again – she launches herself into the sky where she turns in strangely slow, windborne pirouettes. When he leaves his bench to walk his afternoon loops, the wind still carries her. It carries her to him in the ebb and flow of her whoops and yells.

Later, as he trudges up the overgrown gravel path he sees her. She walks further up the incline, dragging her gear in a big canvas bag. Despite the autumn chill, she's wearing denim shorts. Even in the low light, he can see her muscles shift under the smooth tanned lengths of her legs. Through her yellow shirt, see-through from her dripping hair, he counts the knobbls of her spine. One, two, three. He coughs so she can hear his approach. Four, five, six. She stops and turns. Suddenly, he's staring at her nipples jaggng through the thin fabric. Tiny flat breasts, a boy's chest except for those nipples and the dark shadows showing faintly around them. He looks down. Sees the taut tendons of her bony ankles. Sees stars, scores of black stars tattooed across the tops of her feet. Looks up. Aqua eyes. Blonde-lashed. Cool eyes in a face flushed from surfing, or from the icy wind, or from him, from being near him. She bites her lip. Gives him that rapid female assessment he's just so damned sick of. He stares at the gravel. She stands to one side, yanks her gear out of his way. Gives him a curt, 'Hi.' He nods, moves a few paces, stops near her, just below her. He feels his silence unloop within him, feels it stretch out to her, surrounding her like an arm, tugging her towards him. She looks away. Squints up ahead as if it's still sunny. As if she's calculating how long it will take to run up to the car park.

His voice lumps in his throat. 'It's not safe,' he says. He coughs. He points back to the scrub-hid lake. Steadily, she looks away. He steps forwards. Stops

right next to her. ‘It’s not safe.’ Still, she will not face him, and he sees it. How she leans back ever so slightly. A branch catches the hem of her sleeve, twisting the yellow fabric up into a tiny tepee. Suddenly he sees them both as if from above: a huge scarred man standing over a pretty blonde girl. A horror-movie man standing over a kid on a track in the middle of nowhere. If she screamed, he wonders, would they hear her up there, up there in the houses? If she ran, he wonders, could I catch her? And if I caught her, could I...? He coughs again, furious. Would I?

Whose thoughts are these? (Torture, to sense it, the fear pulsing from her.) Whose thoughts are these? (Agony, to see it, the fear bitten down in those thin, pale lips.) Whose thoughts are these? (Horror, to feel it, something stirring, stirring deep within him.) He storms up the gravel away from her. He slams out the gate into the dusky roads that enclose the old quarry and its flooded gut. Christ. *Christ*. I only wanted to warn her, didn’t I? I only wanted to ask her – did I? didn’t I? – what it’s like to fly.

CANE STRIDES STRAIGHT into the kitchen. Luke feels the shorter man’s eyes fix on the ruined side of his face. It’s your turn today, big shot. That’s what Cane’s saying without saying anything. Everyone understands. Luke senses Charlie and Dave stumble in their prepping on either side of him: their pity and relief that, today, it’s him and not them. Feels the shift in Quang’s back-turned muteness at the sink – a vibration, changing in the air. Luke keeps his eyes on his hands – huge, one scar-wrapped from nail to wrist – both continuing their work without flinch or pause. For the thousandth time he wonders at the disconnect that must lie within him, allowing him to keep working no matter how his mind rages. Though he’s endured a hundred humiliations in a dozen bastards’ kitchens, though he knows the banal predictability of these rituals, and though he finally understands that these rituals say nothing about him – and everything about them – Luke still rages. He holds steady on the outside, but rages on the inside, knowing he’ll waste hours tonight replaying what is about to happen, rehearsing it for how it could and should have been instead.

And here it goes. There’s Cane lifting one of Luke’s perfect breakfasts, asking, ‘What the *fuck* is this?’ There’s Cane’s stubby finger jabbing at the

silky white skin of a poached egg. There's the yolk spurting crudely across the gleaming ceramic. There's Sarah appearing over Cane's shoulder. Her immediate recognition of the scene. Her immediate, empty-handed, return to the café. There's the scuff of Miriam's footsteps stopping near the doorway. The pause of her listening. The brisk tap tap tap of her retreat. There's the chatter of the café lulling as Cane's rant escalates: 'Fuck this. Fuck that. Fuck fuck *fuck*.' There's Luke hearing Charlie – tiny Charlie, their head bloody chef – choking on her breath like a child. There's Dave trying to curl all six foot of his gawky, eighteen-year-old body into his concave chest.

And worst of all, there's Luke, just standing there and taking it. Taking it as he knows he must. Taking it while Cane's face twists in on itself like an arsehole gotten stuck on something. There's Luke, trying not to laugh, thinking: An arsehole with the face of an arsehole. There's the urge to laugh dissolving as he wonders why he must take it, why all of them must take it, always, always. Suddenly, he's acutely aware of the sheer volumes of his own blood pumping through the powerful machinery of his flesh as Cane – a man Luke could crush with one fist – grabs his two beautifully finished meals. A curiously intimate squish as Cane stacks the plates, one on top of the other. The clatter as he throws the meals into the bin, plates and all. Now, Cane's at Luke's shoulder. 'Make them again, *hot shot*.' Immediately, Luke obeys. As steady as ever, his hands remake the meals while his brain reminds his raging core that no one will ever take this from him. No one will ever take away his satisfaction at making something from nothing. At making wholeness from scattered parts. At knowing his creation is desired by someone. That his fingerprints – even the muted blanks of his bad hand – will travel over their lips and into their bodies. There's Cane shaking his head at Luke's remade meals. Cane playing the lead in his theatre of disgust. There's Cane, thumping the bell, clicking his fingers at Sarah and Miriam as they hurry down the hall from the café. There's Cane, passing Charlie's nerve-wrecked benedict to Miriam, his cool voice saying, 'Here, sis.' There's Miriam, averting her face from her brother's, her eyes already puffing up as she hurries the meals back into the café. There's Cane passing Luke's meals to Sarah, 'Here, sweetie.' And then – and Luke knows that this will plague him all the way home – there's Sarah's golden, speckled eyes. For just one second, Sarah stares

her anger and sympathy and understanding straight into him. And as she does, Luke damns his body for, though he knows what he is (a big man, boiling, boiling, boiling), he knows how he looks (a big man blushing, blushing like a fucking girl).

Cane follows Sarah into the café. Everyone listens, tracking his movements. No, he doesn't leave. He's not done yet. He's coming back. He storms by the server window to the tiny office at the back of the building. Miriam soon follows, hurrying past, head down.

Slowly, the kitchen returns to its usual rhythm. No one says a word and what is there to say, anyway? They work through the orders that have piled up since Cane appeared. As Luke prepares each meal, he damns the lot of them. He damns Cane, that animal who keeps them all in work. He damns poor, stupid Miriam, Cane's sister, who fears and depends on him more than anybody else. He damns the loaded, watching silence of Quang. He damns Charlie and her manic moods – one day you're her babe, the next day you're a cunt – and he damns the world for the bruises all over her. ('From kickboxing,' she says. 'From kicking some sweet bitch ass,' she says, each time, laughing, as if everyone can't see what's happening to her.) He even damns Dave, shy and gentle Dave, the most useless apprentice Luke's ever had to train. And of course Luke damns Sarah. He damns her to hell for the way she doesn't flinch at the mess of his scars. For the way her strange eyes seek his. For how she always tries to talk to him. Most of all he damns her for the low, husky songs she sings each night as she cleans up the café out front. He's never heard a voice like hers. He can't decide if he likes or loathes it, sure only of its power to lodge in his head so that her eyes and face and body – and her sweaty, cinnamony smell – follow him home each evening.

Luke keeps working, dreading what awaits him. For he knows that, alone in his bed tonight, he'll be killing Cane and fucking Sarah. That's what he'll be doing. And he damns himself for this, for his pathetic fantasies, for his sordid, fucked-up dreams that feed his nights and paralyse his days.

LUKE SITS ON his bench, chips spread out on butcher's paper across his knees, keeping him warm. He breathes in the eye-watering steam of vinegar, sucking it up with the sweet background rot of the leaf litter and the lake's

silty shallows. He's been cheffing for decades but still, nothing beats this: greasy hot chips, eaten outside.

He's watching the night roll in on the back of another storm, hoping those mad black clouds will blot out this morning's humiliation. There's no one around. No kite surfer, though it's windy as hell. No joggers. Not even the usual dog walkers. He'd normally be home by now too, but he just can't muster himself tonight. He's sick of his flat, of floating between the TV and the kitchen and all that filthy shit on the net he just can't look away from. Sick of white noise. Of watching his life shoot backwards in time, streaking away from him, leaving nothing behind. Is that why he started these walks? Did he really think the grip of his shoes on the ground would help him get a grip on the newly gaping hours of his nights and bloody endless Sundays? Idiot. Stupid, to have quit the restaurant after so many years. Stupid, to think working café-shaped days instead of restaurant-filled nights – working 'normal hours' – would make *him* normal too.

Luke discovered the lake by accident. A few months ago, at the beginning of summer, he'd stepped out of his unit for his usual late-afternoon wander and found himself halted at the sidewalk. His body was protesting. It refused to trace another lap of the gridlocked houses and shops near his home. Instead, it pointed him towards the industrial planes on the other side of the freeway. He'd never paid much attention to this area. It was unpopulated, polluted and ugly, but as he walked he felt his mind begin to unwind into the stark streets. Strange, how that concrete landscape welcomed him in a way that the domestic monotony of his suburb never had. And so he kept wandering until a fence dead-ended his path. He stood there, in long yellow grass. Saw how the fence's barbed-wire curl glittered for kilometres towards and away from him, marking a divide between the backs of the industrial estates on one side, and an endless stretch of scrub on the other. He pointed himself towards the distant refinery, kept walking. His curiosity dwindled when the estates ended and the freeway's twenty-foot high, corrugated soundproofing rose up in their place. It was hot. He knew he could walk for hours and get nowhere. It was only luck that saw him come across the gate before deciding to turn back home. He shouldered it open and found himself on an overgrown dirt path. As he walked, a wall of earth slowly rose to his left, its surface

scarred with worn, down-thrust gouges. On his right, a few feet from his shoes, the ground dropped to another path below which, he realised, was his own path turned back on itself. He was descending the rough-hewn shelves of an old, open-earth cutting. Down he went, picking his way over dusty weeds and tree roots until the path suddenly flattened out. And there it was. The lake. His lake. A vast stretch of water cut in two by a wall of black rocks.

It unnerved him. All that water in the drought. All those birds and trees and reeds – all that life – claiming a hole cut into a wasteland. All of this just kilometres from his home, but completely unknown to him.

Since that night, Luke has returned to the lake most evenings. He often drives here straight from the café, parking by the fence at the top. It's been raining for a month, and the water has finally turned from algal pink to milky grey. Though the days are getting shorter, Luke still traces a distorted figure eight around the lake's two halves most nights. If no one's around, he stands in the middle of the rock wall and closes his eyes. Sometimes, he loses balance and stumbles, sure that the rocks are about to crack open and suck him down into watery depths. Other times, he stands steady, his momentary blindness magnifying the sounds around him. The drip and slap of water. The moronic muttering of the birds. The endless drone of the freeway. The crisp rustle of the gums. On these days he shuts his eyes and lets the sounds press in on him, a thousand tiny hands holding him up like a column of stone.

It's getting late. His leftover chips have gone cold and starchy. Luke doesn't want to go home to his unit. There's nothing for him there. But he also doesn't want to be around when the kids arrive. He's seen them a dozen times now. Most Friday and Saturday nights they race through the dusk in their utes, swerving down the single steep road that ties the lake to the edge of the suburbs. Their cars are nothing like his dad's old ute, that rusted monster that ploughed them through the bush around the farm all those years ago. These kids have the same spotlights and roll bars, but their cars are built for speed, painted for show: flashy V8s sprayed in metallic greens and reds and golds. No, Luke's not sure what their cars are designed for, and he can't place the kids either. The older guys are in their twenties. They've got tats and are all bulked up, like they've stepped out of the gym. But they're clean-cut too. They remind him of Cane, smooth and cashed-up and hard. There's

something primitive about them, something corporate. The younger ones are just kids, awkward in hoodies and caps and jeans. They remind him of Dave, and of Miriam's son, Jamie: something soft about them, something pathetic. Luke realises these kids probably look just like he and his mates did, twenty years ago, when they drove out to the dam to drink and turn tricks in the dust till the air smoked. Whoever they are, Luke avoids them. He's not scared of them. He just assumes that they, like he, want to be left alone.

Luke sits up and shifts the cold greasy papers from his lap onto the bench. He goes to stand. Stops. A sound. Something snaps in the shrubbery. He stares at the dark bushes. Silence. Stillness. Slowly, he sits back. Nothing. He reaches for the chips and begins to scrunch them into their papers. Keeps watching the shadows. Then, again. A sound. Something presses softly into the leaf litter. He can barely hear it. Something dark upsets the darkness. He can barely see it. Luke freezes. Feels the shadow size him up. A shimmer. A momentary flash of white. Teeth. A black dog slinks into the clearing. It pads towards him, its head and body lowered, its huge ears cupping and turning like radars. It stops a few metres from him. Raises its pointed muzzle. Sniffs him out.

Luke knows better than to return a dog's stare. He looks over it, around it. He tries to stay calm though his blood thickens and thuds in his ears. He hates dogs. He saw too many of them go feral on the farm. He loved hunting them down. Loved that clean quick rip as he tore their scalps from their skulls for the rangers. What was it back then? Ten bucks for a fox's and fifty for a dog's because the dogs were different. They didn't kill for food. They killed for fun. At first, Luke had enjoyed the chase and he'd hang their bodies from the gums as a fly-struck warning to the others. He was proud of his work. But his pride stuttered within him as the landscape began to fill with dog trees. Then dog fences. The more dogs they killed, the more seemed to appear. He'll never forget that night on the back tracks. He'd pulled over to let a trapper pass in his ute. Unforgettable, the stench. Tragic, that man's face, its stoic lines carved deep with orange dust, exaggerated and distorted by Luke's bright headlights. The man nodded as he passed, dozens of dead dogs strapped to his tray. That was when Luke realised they weren't playing a game. They were fighting a war.

Luke monitors the black dog sidelong as these old images reel through him. He tries to read the animal's intent from its body. He can't. All he can

do is notice its huge ears. Its small pointed face. Its broad ribs rippling up to a tiny waist. Long, skinny legs. Huge paws. Puppy paws, perhaps, but a neck and chest as broad and muscled as any fighting dog's. A true mongrel. The dog takes a tentative step closer. Noses the air. Raises one of its front legs in the Pointer's archetypal pose. A hunter? Fighter? Racer? A working dog?

Again, it inches forwards. Luke raises his hand, palm outwards. The animal freezes. Its hackles flare. A low grumble sounds from deep within its chest. Luke doesn't move. Seconds pass like minutes. The dog begins to relax. It plants its feet firmly in the dirt. It noses towards Luke again, its long thin tail curled over its spine like a question mark. Luke looks at the dog's jut of ribs. Remembers the discarded chips. Reaches slowly for the papers. Again, the hackles flare. Another low growl meets Luke's movement and the papers' scrunch. Luke realises his hands – his ever-steady hands – are shaking. Suddenly, it's all too much. Luke stands. The chips drop onto the dirt. The dog bolts back into the bushes. Luke waits, breath held. But there is no sound. No movement. Nothing.

Eventually, Luke kicks the rubbery chips across the ground. He retrieves the papers and wanders back up the circling path. By the time he reaches the gate he is calm enough to be slapped, again, by the memory of Sarah witnessing his pathetic role in Cane's pantomime. Forget it, he tells himself. Just forget it, forget it, forget it. Only when he reaches his car does he hear the faint rev of utes across the lake. The squeal of their tyres pierces the darkness, mapping the kids' suicidal swerve down, down, down into the quarry's flooded gut.

THIS IS LUKE'S favourite time of day. He and Quang are cleaning up the kitchen. They don't talk. Sarah's low singing drifts in from the café where she sweeps and wipes and wraps up food. Accompanying her, the muffled clatter and odd self-chatter of Miriam counting out the till down the back. At this time of day, Cane is never around and Charlie and Dave are usually both long gone. At this time of day, even the most lingering customers have disappeared and so the four of them can finally relax, each working efficiently and quietly, getting everything done without anyone telling anyone what to do.

Screaming.

The quiet steels to silence.

Silence and screaming.

Silence and screaming.

Luke's scars ripple with recognition. He's heard these screams before. They thrust him back two decades, back to his first job in his first kitchen when his own arm and face sizzled in oil because some crazy cunt thought he'd show him who's boss. For two decades he's tried to forget it and for two decades his skin's phantom mind has clung to what happened: screams of agony and terror; the blinding horror of seeing skin melt off skin.

Look up. Look up.

Luke sees Quang dancing in the middle of the kitchen. Tiny Quang, red-faced and screaming, is dancing. He's hopping up and down. His long black ponytail swings from left to right, ridiculous, like something from a bad slapstick comedy. Why is he dancing? And, just like a movie, Luke feels everything slow around and inside of him. He is heavy and dull. Vaguely, he registers the same stupid torpidity in Miriam and Sarah's silence.

Luke sees that the mop bucket is overturned by Quang's feet. Sees the floor gone strange. Flooded and shining. Gleaming and steaming. Sees hot water lapping at the edges of his own rubber clogs. Looks from his clogs to Quang's runners. Sees how they don't steam from their soles, as his own do. Sees them steam from their tops, from their laces. Says to himself: Quang's feet are boiling. Quang's feet are trapped. Luke knows he must act. Instead, he stares and wonders, Why is Quang in lace-ups? I *told* Miriam to get him clogs, didn't I?

Then, everything happens at once.

He is slip-running across the wet floor. He's grabbing Quang by the arm. He's dragging him down the hall and out the back. He's throwing him onto the concrete. He hears himself yelling, 'Hose, hose, hose!' Sees his hands struggle with hot laces. The strangeness of that image: his gentleness, his brutal scars. Notes pain in his fingertips. Ignores it. Eases Quang's runners and socks off. Quang screams with every movement. Magically, a hose appears by Luke's shoulder. He grabs it. Runs the freezing stream over each of Quang's feet. One then the other. One then the other.

It takes an age for Quang to stop crying. To stop reciting those same three Vietnamese words. (What do they mean? Who are they for?) Finally, he is silent. He lies on the flooded concrete, propped up on his elbows. Stunned and sodden, he stares down at the newborn weals that have pinked his feet.

Luke glances over his shoulder to see who gave him the hose. Miriam stands with one hand covering her mouth. Her other hand clenches a fistful of T-shirt at her waist. She looks like she is about to be sick. Sarah stands next to her, arms loose by her sides, expressionless.

Luke looks up from where he kneels on the cold, wet concrete. The low winter sun has transformed them. The gold flecks in Sarah's irises glow, as if she is lit from within. Even her hair shines warmly though it's as black as ever. And Miriam seems different too. Her frizzy red hair flames around her soft, sad, moonface – a cartoonist's halo. Luke's mind reels. He senses their reality as never before. Their living, tangible, utterly female bodies. These two women of warmth, of flesh, of blood, of mind – of life, of life, of life – making his own body roar, making him feel the reality of *his* boiling flesh, *his* maleness, *his* livingness.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Luke beats down the waves of desire that pulse through him. Somehow, he turns back to Quang's raw feet. Calls, 'Ambulance. Ambulance.' When no one moves, he turns around again.

The sun has dipped below the buildings on the other side of the lane. Miriam and Sarah look normal. Miriam stares down at him. Her face is blotching with red. 'No,' she says, her voice as monotone as the dwindling light. She shakes her head. 'No.' Her voice quivers, almost inaudible. As her refusal drifts into the dusk, she turns away. Gazes at the garbage bins shoved along the back fence. 'Cane,' she mutters. She shrugs, as if it's explanation enough to state her brother's name. Finally she turns back to Luke. A terrible face. All that sadness. All that fear. All her strength and weakness.

Sarah disappears into the café.

Luke turns back to Quang, restraining himself. He will hit Miriam. He will belt her until she says, 'Yes, of course we'll get help, *of course* we will.' He tries to concentrate on Quang. Strands of long black hair are stuck to his face with snot and tears and sweat. He is silent, staring at his feet.

Soon, Sarah reappears with towels and a hotchpotch of clothes. She helps Quang hobble to the bathroom. She closes the door behind him, turns and crosses her arms. She's a sentinel, a guardian. Luke only glances at her for a moment, but long enough to see that he has misread her. She isn't expressionless. Her face is his. Disbelief. Anger. A knot of self-control.

Only when Luke stands does he realise how stiff and wet and cold he is. He struggles to straighten himself. Everything hurts. His head hammers. He walks past Miriam and Sarah without looking at them. He returns to the kitchen and mops up the congealing grey slick on the floor. He potters around until he hears Sarah leave. Realises Quang is leaving with her. Jealousy drenches him, unexpected and total. He wanders into the café, finishes Sarah's work. By the time he goes to the office for his jacket, it's getting dark. He's suddenly desperate to get to the quarry and walk away the day – walk away from Quang's screams, from Sarah's care – but as he nears the closed door he slows. Stops in the hallway. It isn't the first time he's heard Miriam cry in there. She's always crying in there. Stupid Miriam, he thinks, stupid Miriam with your fucked-up life and your fucked-up family – you fucking coward. Again, he wants to hit her, as if weakness can be beaten out of a person.

Luke steps quietly back from the door. Silence. He turns, then, and hurries through the shop. Ignores the sound of the door flying open behind him. Ignores Miriam's high voice calling out to him, 'Luke? Luke!' He stumbles into the cold bright street and slams into his car and drives straight to the quarry – his lake – her raw voice pursuing him. 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Luke! Don't tell Cane. *Luke?*'

THOUGH HE'S NOT built for running, Luke jogs by the water. He pounds his feet into the dirt, pushing himself harder and harder. And it works. The pain – Quang's screams from hours ago, his own screams from decades ago – shifts from his head to his shins. He pushes and pushes until he has to stop. Only then, bent with his hands on his knees and gasping, does he see the black dog across the water. It stands in the middle of the rock wall. Its tail and nose are lifted. It's a picture-perfect cut-out against the lake's low gleam. A living silhouette.

After that first night with the chips, nearly a month ago, Luke became sensitised to the dog's presence. He somehow knew when it was following

him. Somehow knew that it had followed him all along. When he initially sensed the dog near him, he stared straight ahead and tried to beat up a tattoo of distraction with his feet, just as he is tonight. But the rhythm only gave momentum to the words circling inside of him. It's stalking me, I'm being stalked. It's stalking me, I'm being stalked. He'd speed up, stare forward and strain all of his senses, trying to track the animal's proximity to him, working out when – just as suddenly, just as randomly – it disappeared back into the shadows.

The animal's presence was bad enough, but worse were the half-buried memories it awakened. One memory in particular: the huge brindle-coated dog from his final weeks on the farm. That monster he mis-shot and lost sight of and then found later by the dam, its muzzle bubbling blood. Always, the look in its glassy eyes as he placed his foot firmly on its skull. What was it? Terror? Defiance? Rage? Those eyes shone keenly. They looked and Luke looked back. He saw that the dog saw him. He saw the dog thinking something – *something* – as it stared up at him till the very second he jammed his great weight downwards and shut its gurgled whining up forever.

Worse, even, than these images is the surge of feelings that come with them. Feelings he thought he'd left on the farm. Feelings he thought two decades in a dozen kitchens had quelled. Those sickening, electrifying feelings that flooded him with all the revenge and mercy that made up the everyday of his father's work. Luke had hated it – and he had loved it – how they were gods out there. Perhaps that's why he left. Once the dogs took possession of the landscape – so that even his dad got nervous in the back paddocks, sure that the dogs or their ghosts were hunting *him* – Luke realised they would never, ever be gods again.

The black dog stalked Luke for nearly a week before it re-emerged from the shrubs. At first, Luke tried to face it off. He yelled, kicked stones, lunged as if to strike. At first, the dog braced and bristled. Flared its hackles. Growled and snarled and snapped at the air before disappearing back into the bushes. But they soon sensed each other's bluff. Curiosity surpassed fear. The dog increasingly replied to Luke's charades with little more than a cartoonish tilt of its big-eared head and a slow, low swipe of its tail. That swipe became a wag and that wag has become a whole body wiggle that launches the dog at

Luke's face, no matter how often he tries to knee it away. Once the dog greets Luke like this, it trots calmly by his side, occasionally nose-butting his leg or nipping at his fingertips and always, always looking up at him with its clear, amber eyes.

Once they began walking together, Luke found himself distracted at the café: every time he threw out food he saw the dog's laddered ribs. Though he knew it was his chips – the dog's hunger – that had lured it from the darkness on that first night, he didn't want to feed it. Didn't want to make a pet of it. And so he didn't understand why, one afternoon, he began wrapping up scraps of meat at the end of his shift. He took that greasy package straight to the lake, butterflies turning in him as he drove. The dog appeared within minutes. For once, it forgot its jolly jumped greeting. Instead, it walked straight up to him, head-on. Luke tried to keep walking, but the dog wouldn't let him pass. It stood right in front of him, wide-eyed and agitated. It stared intensely at his face. It rose up onto its hind legs and sniffed the air. 'Okay,' Luke muttered. 'Okay!' But he didn't feel okay as he reached for his jacket pocket. Didn't feel okay as he noticed, again, the genetic triumph of muscle that knotted through the dog's neck and shoulders despite the skin and sinew and bone of its ribs and legs. As he unwrapped the meat, the dog began to pace. Its eyes flickered between Luke's hands and face. Here, Luke said. He flicked a strip of fat at the dog's feet. The dog leapt. Grabbed it. Scuttled back. Dropped it. Sniffed it. Scoffed it, staring at Luke the entire time. Here, Luke said, throwing another strip. Repeatedly, the dog grabbed, retreated, dropped, sniffed, scoffed, stared. One scrap left. Luke placed the meat on his palm. He squatted down. Held out his hand. He had no idea what he was doing. Or why.

The animal stared long and hard at that final scrap of food. Only once did its yellow eyes flick up at Luke's face before returning, again, to the meat. In those stretched seconds Luke felt every cell in the dog's body as if they were his own. He recognised the deepness of its yearning. The painfulness of its longing.

A white flash of canines in a black velvet face.

The blur of large clawed paws.

A violent knock backwards.

A flurry of vision and sensation – strength and softness all at once – as the dog grabbed the meat and disappeared into the scrub.

Just a dog. Just a dog. Yet, driven by its desire – its need – as powerful as any man.

Finally, Luke picked himself up off the ground. He was furious at himself for his carelessness, and furious at the dog for leaving him sprawled in the dirt. But as he walked back to his car, his anger turned in on itself. For what, exactly, had he expected? The dog had only done what he'd provoked it to do. And it had done so without leaving a scratch or slobber upon him. If the dog was a starved ball of muscle, it was also a master of restraint.

Tonight is the first time Luke has seen the dog before it has seen him. He gazes across the lake at it poised on the rock wall. Watches it sniff the air. Watches it pivot and begin to run towards the far bank. He has never seen the dog from a distance like this. He has never seen it run. He cannot look away. He suddenly recognises the perfection of its mongrel body. Suddenly sees what it is made for. As the dog gathers speed its paws blur into a sprint. It's a bird, a black bird, a raven, a crow, a bat swooping long and low and smooth into the thick wooded shadows of the quarry's gut. Luke starts walking in the same direction. He begins to run, suddenly eager to find the animal before it finds him, but as he speeds up pain darts through his shin. He tries to ignore it. It gets worse. He's torn something. Twisted something. Idiot, he thinks, wincing and stopping. Idiot, to have run so hard. Stupid, to think a body can outrun its brain, outpace its pain.

Luke wanders back to his bench. He stares up into the clear night. Picks out the few constellations that his dad taught him. Orion's Belt. The Cross, of course. He struggles to find any other. He misses country skies. Skies where there's as much light as dark. Skies that make you small, your problems smaller. Though the pain in his shin has dulled, Luke's whole body aches from kneeling with Quang on the cold wet concrete. The prospect of walking up to his car only makes him slump. For the thousandth time he tells himself to get a grip. Get a grip. Get a grip. Then he senses it. The dog. He listens. He tries to work out where it is. He can't. It's as if the animal's gaze surrounds him. As if the dog itself is the lake, the dirt, the scrub and the rough-cut cliffs of the quarry's encircling paths. He waits. Soon enough the

dog slinks out from the bushes near the water's edge, just as it did on that first night. It wiggle-wags up to him, head lowered. It nose-butts his folded arms, nuzzles his pockets. Luke holds up his empty hands. The dog sniffs and licks his fingers. When it realises that there's no food, it doesn't wander away as it normally would. Instead, after a pause, it steps in closer to him. It sits on the dirt between his feet. It just sits there, staring up at him, its warm, muscular body gently leaning into his sore leg. Luke slowly raises one of his hands. Their eyes remain locked as Luke's fingers move up and over its bony brow and lowers onto its soft, soft skull.

This is the first time that Luke has initiated contact with the dog. This is the first time he's wanted to touch the animal simply for the sake of touching it. And the dog lets him. It lets him scratch the base of its ears. Lets his hand move under its chest and knead the muscles of its broad shoulders and neck. Lets his hand rest on the jarring corrugations of its ribs. All the while, it stares into Luke's eyes. He feels the dog lean heavier into his leg until, suddenly, it collapses onto the dirt, belly up. It holds its front paws close to its chest – keeping its balance – while its back legs spread out, loose and floppy. Luke suddenly realises that it is a she. How could he not have noticed? Not have cared?

She's not worried. It's not she who flinches as he leans down to pat her thin-haired belly. It's not she who's stupidly embarrassed by her blatant genital exposure. He pats her tummy and looks elsewhere. At her ridiculous, thrown-back grin. At the huge white canines and massive neck that once made him so nervous. He strokes her like this until she flips herself upright and trots away into the quarry's dark. Off she goes, leaving him alone with the ache of his legs and the tickle of his scars and the too-familiar sound of Quang's screams.

LUKE STOPS WHEN he sees them. Quietly, he moves to one side of the path and stands behind a tree. It's late. It's dark. He's not sure if he should carry on past them or turn back.

He's spent hours, tonight, looping around the lake. Spent hours hoping the cold will sooth his burning scars because, since Quang's accident last week, they have prickled back to life. He's already tried to calm himself in his usual way. He stood on the rock wall at dusk. Shut his eyes. Begged the music of the water and the birds and gums to fill him, hold him up. But tonight

the world just shrank away from him. Eyes screwed shut, he felt the sounds recede instead of come close. Felt the lake begin to circle him. Faster. Faster. Thousands of litres of black ice spinning around him. Transforming him. A blind dot in the heart of a whirlpool. Opened his eyes. Regained his balance. Continued walking his loops. He went around once. Then again. And now his third loop has been interrupted by three utes parked right where his path crosses the gravel road.

Their open trays point towards the sparkling water. Seven or eight guys lounge against the cars. Talking. Drinking. Even though it's cold enough for ribbons of steam to ghost up from the centre of the lake, most of the kids are wearing T-shirts and jeans. One of the guys wraps his massive arm around the only girl who's there. They've lit a bonfire, and the girl's blonde hair and shiny pink jacket glow in the flames' flicker. Blonder than blonde. Pinker than pink. Her bare feet swing back and forth over the edge of the ute's tray. Two boys, much younger than the rest, sit on the ground next to the fire. Both hug their knees. One pokes a stick into the flames, prodding the wood until a sharp crack silences the group. They watch as a thousand sparks Catherine-wheel into the night, curling up with the smoke. They're just kids, Luke tells himself. Just kids.

Something silver suddenly arcs from one of the utes to the fire. Luke freezes. The boy with the stick swears and falls to one side. Clumsily, he sits himself up, rubbing his hooded head. He looks over at the others. 'Fuck off,' he says. He grabs the can and hurls it back. It disappears into the dark behind the ute. The men laugh. One of them runs at the kid. The boy flinches, covering his head with his arms. The man grabs his elbows and jerks him backwards. The kid's legs kick forwards, into the fire, scuffing up more sparks and smoke. The man drags the boy away. Jumps on top of him. Rips off his own T-shirt. Beats his hard and hairless chest. Yodels. Lays into the kid's stomach.

Luke retreats further into the shadows. Stops when he notices the girl whisper something to her guy. Watches her take his hand and put it up her skirt. Watches her grab at his crotch with her free hand. Watches her yank roughly. Luke flinches. Flinches and goes hard. The man hits her arm away, laughing. Then, suddenly, he isn't laughing. He's pushing himself off the tray. He's turning to her, throwing her backwards. Everyone freezes with that

muted thud. Silence. He climbs back onto the tray and pins the girl down. One of his hands presses her wrists to the metal floor above her head. He shoves his knee between her legs. The others move away. One of them wolf-whistles and gropes the man in front of him. Pretends to hump his arse. More laughter and swearing. They gather around the two who are wrestling, again, by the fire. Someone grabs the other kid and drags him into the scrum. Everyone laughs and begins laying into each other, the fire flaring and dimming as they move back and forth from its flames.

Again, Luke steps back. He watches the guy in the ute fumble with his jeans. Watches his big, golden-lit arse shove into the girl. Watches her legs swing up, her ankles locking behind his waist, rocking back and forth in time with his shoving rhythm, her hips bare and braced and wrenched up to meet him.

It's only when Luke turns away that he notices the black dog. She stands on the other side of the path, her coat catching snatches of firelight. She stares up at him for a moment, her long tail swinging its usual, casual hello. Then she turns back to the kids and the fucking and the fire, nosing the cool air, her huge ears mapping the scene. That's the last thing he sees as he hurries away. The dog, perfectly outlined against the fire-lit glow of the cutting.

It's not until much later, in bed, that he makes the connection. It's not until then, when he's hot and sticky and feeling, as he always does afterwards, exposed and pathetic and so damn alone, that he realises who she is. The girl fucking – being fucked – in the ute (the same girl who's just grabbed his cock and pulled him into her and wrapped her legs around him, around *him*) is the girl with the kite. The girl who could fly. The girl with the night sky tattooed across her feet.

AS FAR AS Luke knows, no one has asked about Quang. When Cane appeared earlier this week, he was in a rare good mood, banging on about his imminent overseas trip as he worked alongside Luke through lunch. He didn't even notice the sour old shit at the sink. Dave's been as oblivious as usual, and when Charlie saw the new guy she'd simply shaken her head. 'Fucking dishies,' she'd said. 'Fucking *useless*.' The old man had just stared at her, grey-faced, bored as hell. All Luke knows is that Miriam gave Sarah an

envelope the day after the accident. Help money. Or hush money. Probably both. Seeing that, he'd felt an absurd joust of jealousy. Had to remind himself: she's just a waitress, just a workmate. I'm nothing to her, nothing.

Miriam stops by the servery window. Sarah appears next to her, proclaiming, 'Freedom!' Everyone laughs. It's hard to ignore the relief – the lightness – that permeates the café now that Cane is finally off on his trip to Europe. Charlie is singing under her breath, despite seeming subdued and troubled all week. Dave is whistling as he sorts through the salad mix. He's trying to ignore Sarah and Miriam who are teasing him about his new girlfriend. Dave turns redder and redder. His whistling becomes breathy, stops. He disappears into the cool room, but there's only so long he can hide in there. When he reappears they immediately resume their attack. 'Okay!' he says, sounding mad but unable to keep the smile off his face as he takes out his phone to show everyone a photo. When Luke sees it, Dave transforms into a stranger. He is no longer the quiet incompetent kid he and Charlie have been struggling to train all year. The girl in the picture is young. Pretty in the way that all kids are pretty, though from the way she is wrapped up in Dave she is clearly extraordinary to him. And he to her. Dave holds the phone out for Luke, assuming correctly that he won't stop his work to study it closely like everyone else. Luke glimpses the photo. Feels the tightness of his own smile. Turns quickly away, overwhelmed by Dave's shy pride and his obvious desire for approval.

Luke knows Dave likes him. But that doesn't count for much. The young ones always do. After their initial shock at the sight of him, they learn to trust him. They see that he'll answer their questions without making them feel stupid. That he won't yell at them. That he doesn't push people around. That he'll take whatever bullets are flying around the kitchen because he and they both know that a man with scars like his can't get hurt the way they still can. Anyhow, it's easy to like someone who's not a threat, isn't it? For who feels threatened by someone they pity? 'Freak,' he heard one waitress say a long, long time ago. 'Poor freak,' she'd said then giggled with her friend. 'When d'you reckon was the last time *he* got laid?' Luke had wanted to kill her. And himself. Back then, his wounds were still raw with healing and the torment of 'never getting laid' consumed him totally. But even though he wanted to hurt

her, or flee, he recognised the odd mix of pity and affection in her voice. The same mix in Miriam's voice when he first started at the café, when he heard her whisper to Sarah, 'What's his story, poor guy?' They could have asked him. They didn't. They haven't. No one ever does. Not that he blames them. And he sure can't blame Dave for showing off his new girl. And so, forced to face that photo, Luke does his best to nod and smile and ignore the silent seconds that begin to grow. He says nothing. He just keeps working until their unasked question – 'You gotta girl, Luke?' – merges into jokes about dick warts and HIV, G-spots and Brazilians, marriage and babies.

Soon, Miriam and Sarah disappear back into the café. Everyone in the kitchen gets busy with the first lunch orders. As Luke works, their unasked question pursues him. You gotta girl, Luke? You hadda girl, Luke? What will he reply if anyone asks him? Must he point to his face, his arm, his size? To his fucked-up body? A body that even grown men flinch at the sight of? No one in the world, except bloody Sarah, can hold his gaze. They either stare at his mauled eyelid as if, underneath, his eye's as blind as a marble, or they look quickly away and never look back. And even if someone did want him, the idea of a girl crooked in his shredded arm makes him sick. Imagine a clear smooth cheek against his skin's knitted warps. Horrible. Imagine, soft plump lips – anyone's lips – pressed into his gnarled face. Disgusting. But worse than these imaginings is knowing that no one had ever wanted him anyway, even before he got wrecked. He was always too big. Too awkward. Too quiet. A country kid. Always one of the boys. Never one with the girls. And the few times he'd had a chance, he fucked everything up. He didn't know what to do. The girls laughed at him. They fled from him. They froze him out. Somehow it was his fault when things went wrong, though all they ever did was lie there and do nothing. *Nothing!* But expected everything! He still has no idea what to do, and all the sordid shit he's filled his body's void with has just made it worse. Made it impossible. The fact is, he's almost grateful that cunt ruined him all those years ago. At least now he can blame his scars for why he hasn't, can't, won't. And it's too late now, he tells himself for the millionth time. It's too late. I've left everything for too damn long.

Wednesday is always busy, and by the end of the lunchtime rush Charlie is in a good mood. Perhaps it's the adrenaline of trying to keep up, or the relief

of Cane's absence, or simply time's distance from whatever's been hanging over her this week. Whatever it is, Luke knows she's feeling better when she flicks on the radio and starts jiving her hard little body around the kitchen. Soon, she's chatting about her boxing and her renovations and shopping for another of her sisters' weddings. Luke can't stand being around Charlie when she's on one of her weird, anxious highs. Can't stand how her babbling snowballs with the radio's blare. Whenever she leaves the kitchen, he flicks the blasted thing off though he knows she'll immediately yell out from wherever she is in the café, 'Hey, Luke, leave that *on* man!' Today he turns the radio off when she goes out back for a smoko. After a few minutes of peace, she returns, dumps a pile of eggplants onto the stainless steel bench, flicks the radio back on and starts chopping.

And it begins. 'Fucking men,' she mutters. This is her usual reply to the news report. 'Fucking men.' Luke feels Dave bristle. Charlie carries on, oblivious as usual to Dave's anger. Luke tries to ignore the spiking atmosphere but can't help wondering, as he always does, why he isn't angry too. As Dave's fury pulses into the kitchen Luke realises that he *is* bristling, but his anger is different. It's inside of him, and blighted by confusion for he agrees with her. 'Fucking men,' Charlie says. 'Fucking men,' Luke repeats, inside. 'Fucking men,' she says. 'Fucking men,' he replies, hating them, hating men, thinking, it *is* fucking men fucking everything up for most people most of the fucking time. On he works, horrified he has anything in common with Charlie's screwed-up head. Horrified, more so, by the substance of what unites them. He feels a sudden and claustrophobic panic. Can't breathe. Can't swallow. Tries to rein his panic in. Tells himself to be still. Be calm. But his mind is racing ahead. I'm a man, aren't I? How can I hate men? And if I do, what the hell does *that* mean?

Luke carries on, as if these questions might dissolve under the pressure of his work. They don't. The news blasts on and on. A murder-suicide out west. Fucking men. Another bombing in Syria. Fucking men. A spate of acid attacks in Pakistan. *Fucking men!*

All the while, Dave's fury seeps into the kitchen. When the radio reports that a woman in Hobart has prostituted her nine-year-old daughter Dave goes straight for Charlie's throat. 'Fucking women!' he yells. '*Fucking women!*'

Luke freezes. His instinct is to grab Charlie: he's seen her fight on TV, when she won the state finals, and they've all seen her go nuts in the kitchen. Somehow, he holds steady. Keeps his head averted. Continues prepping, each of his senses straining to read the situation.

Hears Charlie stop slicing her eggplants. Feels her turn towards Dave. Sidelong, sees her knife held loose in her hand. Senses them face each other down. Feels her realise, perhaps for the first time ever, that her 'fucking men' spiel has sounded outside of her head. Into a room full of men. Forever, the dull heartbeat of Luke's chopping. The clink and clatter of the old dishie. The muted chatter of the café. Suddenly, the room heaves as Charlie's anger rears up in her. Luke sees her tiny brown hand re-grip the knife. Sees that arm shake with tension. Listens to her low, jaw-clenched voice say, 'It's not *women* fucking the kid. It's not *women*, who want to fuck fucking *children*.' Senses her raise her knife. Senses her gesture with it, slicing the air. Luke glances up then. He has to see what's happening. Has to assess what might happen.

Dave's face is white. Pearled with sweat. Frozen and freezing. Again, Luke sees who Dave is to his girl, his friends, his family. To himself. Not just a dreamy, awkward kid, but a kid who desperately wants to be a man. Luke watches as Dave refuses to submit. Refuses to let Charlie tell him that he is doomed because all men are doomed, doomed always to be men. 'I don't want to fuck kids,' Dave says. He steps closer to her. Luke watches the tip of Charlie's knife press lightly into the starched white front of Dave's apron. Realises that Dave is also armed. '*I don't want to fuck kids*,' Dave repeats. Again, he steps closer. Luke watches Charlie's knife slide up and along the fabric, till the length of its blade rests gently against the white, its tip pointed at Dave's chin. Luke realises that Charlie has loosened her grip.

Suddenly, Dave smashes his cleaver onto the steel bench. Everyone jumps. Charlie's knife thuds onto the rubber matting. Luke forces himself to return to his prepping. He glances up every couple of seconds, monitoring them as he tries to work out what to do. Dave suddenly directs his chilling voice at him. '*Luke* doesn't want to fuck kids, do you, Luke?' Luke only hesitates for a second. He hears the old alco stop in his dishwashing. Meets the dishie's amused gaze. Turns back to his chopping board. Carries on. Says nothing. The silence stretches, excruciating.

Finally, Luke senses Dave step back from Charlie. When Dave speaks again it is in his usual voice. ‘And I’ll be a *great* dad!’ he says, randomly, suddenly embarrassed. Then he turns and stumbles to the door. There, he pauses. Turns around. ‘We’re not *all* pigs!’ The quiver in his voice jerks Luke’s face up again. He looks across the kitchen. Sees a boy’s face veering between anger and tears. Sees a boy unsure if he’s throwing a final punch or asking a question.

Luke returns to his work. Listens to Dave disappear out the back. Hears Charlie breathe again. Listens to her hurry, suddenly, into the cool room. Hears her return empty-handed. Thanks Christ for the distraction of the lunchtime rush.

As Miriam and Sarah appear and disappear at the server window, they each notice that something is wrong for, though Charlie works with her usual manic efficiency, her fingers keep flicking up to her eyes. Miriam frowns an accusation at Luke. He shrugs. Sees her register Dave’s absence. When the rush eases, Miriam returns with coffees for them. Silently squeezes Charlie’s shoulder. Disappears out the back with a milkshake. As they finish up the final orders, Luke hears Charlie mumbling. In a low flat voice, she mutters, ‘Every night.’ She says it again, ‘Every night. Every fucking night.’

Luke senses her stop in her work. Feels her pull herself up, as if realising, once again, that her thoughts are sounding outside of her head. Feels her look at him. Senses her desire, her need for him to look back at her. To answer her. To show her that he’s heard her.

He ignores her. Keeps working.

Finally, she takes her coffee and cigarettes out the back to fix things up with Dave. Luke carries on alone then, finishing the few remaining orders while their words war inside of him.

Fucking men.

Fucking women.

Fucking men.

Fucking women.

Fucking men fucking women.

Fucking men and fucking women fucking everything up for everyone forever.

LUKE WAS THROWN awake last night. Woke sitting up. Didn't know if he'd screamed out loud or in his head. Seconds of confusion as his face and hand seared. That old terror assailing him. That queer, banal terror, as real as hell and yet trained and contained by his brain's immediate, well-practised reply: It's not real, it's ok, it's just the skin dreaming. He lay awake for hours after that. At dawn, he stopped trying to sleep, got up, got dressed and walked down to the quarry. The black dog met him at the gate, as if she'd been waiting for him. Together, they walked down to his bench and watched the sky ease open above the lake. Now, they are walking loops in the damp morning light. The dog trots ahead of him. Every minute or so, she stops and turns and waits, looking back as if to check he's following her. And he is. Head sore with sleeplessness, he's letting her lead the way.

It's another dreaded Sunday. As Luke wanders he realises it's probably this fact that kept him awake last night. He's used to night terrors, but he'll never get used to these time-warping days off. At the restaurant he'd work fourteen-, fifteen-, even sixteen-hour shifts, seven days a week. He didn't want days off, and he wasn't offered them. So, why, suddenly, had he thought those hours were doing him harm? Why did he think a crappy day job at a crappy café would be better? Normal hours. Normal life. Naive idiot. All normal hours have done for him is rub his abnormality in his face. At the restaurant he lived at night. Now he understands why that mattered: night sits more gently on him than these endless, cool-lit Sundays ever will.

The dog trots across the rock wall ahead of him. She stops halfway, turns around, waits. He picks over the boulders, taking his time. He wonders what Dave is doing right now. Sunday morning, he'll be in bed with his new girl in their new rental on the other side of the highway. They'll be looking forward to breakfast and papers and a long lazy day of nothing more than each other. A long day of nothing, of everything. Sunday. A day made for couples. For families. Sunday. A gaping black hole. A crushing, endless torment that Luke's sure he'll never get a handle on. He wonders if Charlie is in bed with that pig of hers. Wonders if the pig is wanting it and taking it right now. Wonders what Miriam is doing in her unit. Does she have someone? He doubts it. Wonders if Jamie is staying with her this weekend or if he's away with his friends, or his dad, whoever that is. Maybe Jamie has a girl too. Luke tries to

picture Sarah. Imagines her lying asleep in some man's arms, for surely she must be. Wonders what kind of a guy he is. Not, Luke thinks, a guy like me. A young guy. Good-looking. Smart. Funny. Kind. Knows what he's doing. Knows what to do. Isn't fucked up. Isn't going to fuck *her* up.

Luke steps over the granite, trying to imagine waking up next to Sarah on a Sunday morning. He can't. He can imagine fucking her brains out. He does. All the time. And the more he tries not to, the more he does it. He can imagine doing a thousand sick things to her, things he couldn't do in real life, even if he wanted to. But he can't imagine kissing her. Can't imagine being kissed by her. Can't imagine just being with her. On a couch. Watching TV. Eating dinner. Driving somewhere. Walking through a supermarket and arguing about things that don't matter like which cereal or coffee or milk to buy. He can't imagine doing any of these things that so many people do so naturally every single day.

God. How he hates them! These idiots who just go about their lives, casual as can be, clueless as to what they've got. So many of them complaining, shitting all over everything they have, tearing each other to pieces for no good reason at all. Why? Don't they see it, the randomness, the sheer miracle of their lives together? For the hundredth time, Luke tries to imagine lying in the darkness of his bedroom with Sarah. Tries to feel her skin on his skin. Her breath in his breath. But he can't, he can't. Like words on the tip of a tongue, his memory of her face and body and smell and voice slip from him as soon as he tries to clutch her and pull her close.

Luke looks ahead at the dog. She is poised in the middle of the lake, gazing at him. Her tail swings its usual slow hello. When he reaches her, he sits next to her and it's like this, side by side, that they watch the night-glimmer of the refinery fade into the rising day.

LUKE HEADS FOR the office. He's early, but he's hurrying. He wants to get to the quarry before dark. He grabs his jacket, turns to go, and there she is, standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. Sarah. Bloody Sarah. She looks strange. Intense. Shy and wicked all at once. She smiles. Knows she's cornered him. Has cornered him on purpose. His gut clenches as her weird eyes laugh and hold him right where he is. She doesn't ask him to come to

her gig. She *tells* him to. She's already written down the details. Does she know he can't refuse her? He mutters something about having plans, but he's taking the scrawled napkin from her. She nods, smiles, steps aside, releases him. As he passes her in the doorway he feels it, the radiant warmth of her skin searing his.

He drives straight to the quarry. He has hours to fill before her show begins. As he drives, he's stunned by what washes through him. There's the dread he expects. A dread as real as the napkin shoved into his pocket. But there's something else. Something alien. Excitement. Hope. In the tiny office, under those brutal white lights, he'd seen that Sarah wanted him to come to her gig. That behind her smile was her anxiety – *her* anxiety – that he'd say no. He saw that she felt she was taking a risk. Saw that, to her, he was worth taking a risk for. Luke drives and recites the fact of it: Sarah wants me to come to her gig; Sarah wants me to come to her gig; *Sarah* wants *me*.

At the quarry, Luke hardly notices when the black dog appears and jumps her hellos at him. She nose-butts his empty hands and pockets, then trots ahead of him. Together they stride their usual rounds. Luke half-heartedly argues with himself about whether or not he should go, but by the time he reaches the gate he's stopped his pretence. Of course he'll go. He has to. Just this once, he tells himself, just in case. In case *what?* He doesn't dare put words to his hope. To his fear. He just drives home. Showers. Puts on clean clothes. Avoids the mirror. Leaves for the station.

When he steps into the busy carriage his excitement and hope immediately morph into a pure and perfect terror. As he realises his mistake the doors close behind him. He can't retreat. Instead, he puts his head down and shoves his bad hand into his pocket. He finds an empty seat in the middle of the carriage. He stares at the floor and counts the minutes and tries not to notice as, one by one, the people closest to him get up and move away. Of course, he can't ignore what's happening. He's in a hall of mirrors. The train's night-black windows multiply his image all around him: a huge deformed man, circled by a moat of empty seats on a busy train. How can he have forgotten? The terrible sight of him. The immutable, horrible fact of him. His image. His prison. Has it really been so long since he's been out? That old hurt and anger trickle through him, dammed only by the darkest parts of him that

laugh and laugh at the absurdity of the scene. All these strangers, scared of *me!* They have no idea how terrified *I* am, of them and me both.

When Luke finally makes it to the city, he keeps getting lost. Sarah's directions don't help. Everything has changed. Whole buildings are missing. Whole buildings have appeared. The streets seem to have moved. To have grown wider. Or narrower. Some even seem to have disappeared. He eventually finds the bar. It's at the end of a laneway full of garbage. He hesitates at the heavy wooden door. For the hundredth time, he checks her directions. He can't believe she's going to introduce her voice to the world in such a dump. But that's not why he's paralysed. He simply doesn't want to be here anymore. Not after that train ride. Not now that his excitement and hope have disappeared on him. Luke stares at the closed door, unable to act in any direction at all. He doesn't want to be here. Doesn't want to go home. Doesn't want to be anywhere at all. He turns to leave, but before he can an army of very loud, very drunk and very jolly middle-aged women stampede down the alley towards him. One of them yells at him to get his big arse outa the way. The others laugh and shove him inside ahead of them.

At first, he's relieved. The bar is large, low lit and busy. No one notices him. He moves through the crowd. He spots a tiny platform in the corner of the room. It's empty. As his eyes adjust to the dark, he sees Sarah rummaging in the curtained shadows. He stops. She moves so that the single bulb above the stage lights her up, exaggerating her every feature. Her skin is too white. Her cheekbones too large. Her brows too thick and black. She is beautiful, but more severe and stranger than ever. The only thing that softens her image is her hair. It hangs loose around her face, shimmering halfway down her waist. It's much longer than he's ever imagined it, and he's imagined it often. Imagined unclasping it from its tight, daily knot. Imagined it tumbling over her sharp collarbones and her small, white breasts. Her arms and legs and feet are bare. She wears a loose black dress, gathered in a straight line above her chest like a kid's dress. She looks like something from a magazine. From a movie. A fairy tale. She looks like a model. Like a child.

He feels sick. Humiliated. Devastated. All at once he understands fully the sheer stupidity of his hopes. This Sarah is beyond him. Above him. Nothing like the girl he works with by day and fantasises about at night.

When this hits him, he turns and makes for the door. Too slow. Miriam materialises by his side. ‘Luke!’ she says. ‘You came!’ She grabs his gnarled arm and drags him back to the bar. Baffled, and suddenly exhausted, he submits. He lets her lead him, his mind slowly registering just how different *she* seems. Her frizzy curls have somehow straightened into a burnt orange cascade that pours over her bare shoulders. She wears a tight dress, sparkly, completely unlike the baggy T-shirts and jeans she submerges herself in at the café. He watches every curve and contour of her plump little body as she struts ahead of him on her stocky legs. So fleshy. So twinkly. So energetic. So *different*.

Miriam shoves him into a seat next to her at the bar. As she looks for Sarah, who’s disappeared, Luke studies her. He’s so used to evading her evasiveness, so used to damning her face’s ugly, tear-puffed misery, that he’s never looked at her properly. Covertly, he watches her turn and order them drinks. Sees that it isn’t just her appearance that’s different. Not just her dress and her hair and the way she’s made up her face. It’s something inside of her. She’s shining into the room. He watches her laugh and flirt with the barman. Notices the barman laugh and flirt with her. Watches her turn and smile as she hands him his beer. Meets her raised glass with his own. Watches her swivel to face the stage, her elbows propping her up on the bar. Feels how every part of her body and mind is open to this room, to its people, to the night, to him. She can’t stop smiling! She smiles so much that he feels himself smiling too, irresistibly, momentarily forgetting the sickening slap of Sarah’s otherworldliness.

As he smiles at Miriam’s smiles, and feels the first warm flush of his drink, Luke is overcome by confusion. What the hell is going on? Who is who? Which version of these women is real? And what about him? With a shock he realises he likes being seen at a bar with a woman. Is that it? That he likes being seen with a woman? Or that he likes being seen with Miriam? Even as Luke savours this pleasure he tastes its taint. Miriam is different in this place. Sarah has transformed too. Has he? Or is he merely a thousand times more himself – a thousand times more freakish – next to their glittering strangeness?

Sarah finally reappears. She steps onto the stage. Luke feels her fear spin out across the room. It silences everyone. The crowd stares up at her. He senses

them judge her unusual and extreme beauty. Feels them poised, ready to judge her voice. He is shocked by their hostility. By how her fear seems to feed it. He feels Miriam next to him, doing just as he is. Together, they will Sarah to move. To begin. To flee. To do something, anything. As Sarah's mute terror fills the room, he is struck again by how much he's overestimated her age. She really does look like a teenager. A kid. And maybe, he thinks, that's all she is. Worse, he realises, it's not that he's overestimated her age, but that he's underestimated his own. There is Sarah, as vulnerable as a child. And here he is, realising for the first time that he is well and truly middle-aged. Old enough to be her father. He recoils, but nothing can stop Dave's pained cries resounding across the silent, judging bar. *I don't want to fuck kids, Charlie! Luke doesn't want to fuck kids, do you, Luke?* Luke cowers into his beer. Dave had begged him for affirmation. Dave had needed truth as affirmation, but the most honest answer Luke could give him was silence. And, as Luke stares up at Sarah, that alien and beautiful girl-woman on the stage, he still cannot answer. Or will not. So he tries to forget Dave and Charlie. Tries to focus on willing Sarah's fear away for her.

When it gets too hard to look at her, Luke turns to Miriam instead. But there is no relief there. Free from the fear and worry she bears around the café, he sees that she too is a good deal younger than he is. With a stab of something sharp and bitter – pity? anger? and if it's anger, anger at whom? – he realises she must have had Jamie when she was just a kid herself. Why hasn't he realised this before? Where has he been this past year at the café? Where has he been these past two decades? *Two decades.*

Suddenly, Sarah stops staring. She adjusts the microphone. She sits down and strums a couple of chords. Luke feels another wave of expectation surge towards her, palpable, terrifying. She doesn't look up. Doesn't introduce herself. She just crosses one leg over the other, positions her guitar across her knee and begins to play. She taps a slow rhythm with her foot and begins to sing in her low husky voice. Slowly, the tension dissolves. People's quiet talk resumes, faltering to silence each time Sarah's voice rises, higher and clearer than Luke has ever heard it at the café. It's horrible to listen to. Excruciating. These are songs he's never heard before. As he listens he realises these songs are her own. No. Worse. These tragic songs *are* her.

On he drinks. Tries to blind and deafen himself to her nakedness. Why is she doing this to herself? To everyone else? Why is she doing this to *him*? He remembers the first time the black dog let him pat her. How she'd collapsed to the ground, belly up, limbs loose, offering herself to him in total trusting submission. Stupid dog. Stupid Sarah. Luke drinks and looks everywhere except at the stage. He half watches Miriam beside him. Glimpses the faces around them. Sees his embarrassment and pain multiplied across the room. Recognises the crowd's flinch-frozen posture. Sees how everyone is again transfixed upon Sarah as she tells them everything that has ever happened to her. Everything they had never known. Nothing, nothing anyone could ever have imagined.

Sarah keeps singing. Luke keeps drinking. Soon, the people around him begin to pitch and sway. He tries to focus on the floor, but people's shoes and legs blur around him, coming close, moving back. There, a pair of men's legs, ugly in tight patterned jeans. Luke wants to punch him. There, a pair of women's feet in strappy shoes, toenails as shiny and black as beetles. Disgusting. Teeth gleam in red mouths, eyes roll in sweaty faces, hands shape up the air.

And then, two bandaged, sandalled feet. It's Quang. Shy and smiling, he's turned up with three beers. He gives one to Luke and then shuffles over to sit on the other side of Miriam. They sit there together, three in a row, listening to Sarah strip herself bare. As they watch her, she looks up for the first time. Luke sees her notice Quang. Sees – no, feels – their eyes lock. She gives Quang the slightest nod and smile. That smile. How it springs to her lips. She can't help it. She can't stop it as it reshapes her voice so that her words stop ripping out of her and instead begin to arc up, up and away from her. The whole room ripples as her smile-shaped voice begins to tell a different story from its own words. Drunkenly, stupidly, Luke makes the connection. Quang's Sarah's guy. Sarah's Quang's girl. How did *that* happen? When did that happen?

Luke remembers Sarah's mute rage when Miriam refused to call Quang an ambulance. Who was Sarah angry at then? He remembers her taking the envelope from Miriam the next day. Was that the beginning of it? Or had Sarah and Quang led their secret life for longer? Sarah and Quang. It doesn't sound right. He repeats it to himself. Sarah and Quang. Quang and Sarah.

It will never sound right to him, but as he watches their eyes meet across the dim-lit bar, he knows that, to each other, they are the rightest, truest thing in the world. Just like the photo of Dave's girlfriend, Sarah and Quang's locked eyes force Luke to glimpse that world – that home – so many people manage to build for each other, out of each other. A world as whole and separate and impenetrable as the one he's built for himself. All that stuff in his head – his stupid adolescent hopes, his fucked-up fantasies, his moronic belief that Sarah would ever want *him* – that's the wrong thing. Luke and Sarah? Luke and anyone? *He* is the wrong thing, again, still, always.

After Quang's arrival everything speeds up, disconnects. There's a stop-gapped image of Miriam and Quang laughing, trying to dance around his mummified feet. A flash of Miriam's waterfall of red hair, rippling with her movement under the orange lights. A close-up of Sarah next to him at the bar. Big-eyed. Flushed-faced. Asking him without asking him what he thinks of her songs. What does he say? He mumbles something. She doesn't understand. He raises his bottle to her. Salutes her but can barely meet her blazing eyes after all that she's exposed and, especially, after seeing her as Quang's, Quang as hers. There's Quang and Sarah dancing together on a half-empty dance floor. They move slowly, pressed close except where they tiptoe around his wounded feet.

And there's his own slow panic, slugging through him. He's drunk too much. He can't stop drinking. He tries to stand. Sits straight back down. It isn't just his liquid legs that have him reeling. It's how unreal everyone looks. Intensified. Their faces and their bodies. Their lines and their limbs. Their lights and their darks. Everything exaggerated. Grotesque. Beautiful. He spins and sits. Sits and keeps spinning. Watches them all and tries to work out, again, what is real and what is not. He feels as if he is seeing everyone for the first time. Feels this and wonders again if they see him anew. And if they do, does he seem more like them outside of the café's white-lit kitchen? Or even more monstrous? His body answers him, needling his scars with the sixth-sense knowledge that, while he is watching them, for once no one is watching him. Relief at that. Relief, and an ache of grief.

Later, when Sarah and Miriam dance together on the empty floor, Luke tries to stand again. Looks at his feet. Watches his shoes move everywhere,

go nowhere. Is he dancing too? He feels the urge to laugh. No, no, it's not laughter. It's the drink heaving in him. Chokes it back. Feels the ground rush at him. Something smacks into his head. Then, he's out in the lane. The stink of rotting rubbish. Heat in his face. Cold in his body. A crowd of laughing girls. Sudden silence. They scatter around him like colourful birds. He walks on. Bare legs everywhere, luminous against the bitumen. Legs and heels. Legs and heels. A group of guys hanging around a doorway. One yells at him. The others laugh. He keeps going. The neon glow of shop signs. The hard white rhythm of streetlights. The red and white and amber flicker of cars coming and going along the city streets. Then, the icy dark silence of the suburbs. Wide empty streets. No footpaths. Cold. Walking. Cold. Walking. Cold. Blackness.

Then one crisp, clear moment in the middle of the night. Luke opens his eyes. Sees the Milky Way. Doesn't know where he is. For a second, he thinks he's at the farm. Can't be. Doesn't know the time. Just looks up and thinks, beautiful. Looks up and thinks, Sarah has no friends. We were the only people she knew at her first-ever show. The dark shivers. The Milky Way dips and slips above him. Wrapped in this one warm thought – I am Sarah's friend; I can love her too – Luke sinks back into his poisoned sleep.

LUKE WAKES UP on his bench. He lies there, staring up at the glaring grey. It might be dawn. It might be dusk. He has no idea what day it is. When he tries to sit up, dizziness thrusts him down again. His brain crashes into his skull with his every movement. He's numb with cold. Frozen, except for his hot and clammy face. Though sick and confused, he knows enough to damn himself for being so stupid. If his dad taught him anything, it was that drinking and sleeping out are as good a way as any to kill yourself. Is that why he's here? Was he meant to wake up? He rolls onto his side. Bile pours out of him onto the dirt. Hot and bitter. His whole body rails against whatever it is that he's done to it. Slowly, he tries to sit up again. He puts his head between his knees. Waits for the shocks of nausea to take on a regular beat. Makes himself stand. The lake and its granite belt staggers and swings. He waits. Breathes. Studies the biggest rock in the middle of the wall until his vertigo passes. Then he heads off on his usual loop.

Did he *walk* here? He can't remember catching the train home. But he also can't remember the hours it would have taken him to walk from the city. Can't remember entering the quarry. Does remember, finally and only, waking to that singular moment in the depths of the night. I am Sarah's friend. As he circles the lake, the sky begins to merge from silver to white. He's relieved it's early and not late. Relieved that the daytime hasn't witnessed whatever mess got him here in the first place. He keeps walking. Lets the air cool his burning face. Lets his arms and legs swing warmth back into his frozen core. As his nausea begins to ease, images of last night begin to replay in his mind. That's it. He was out with people. He was drinking at a bar. He was doing what normal people do on a Friday night. And if yesterday was Friday, today is Saturday. With a weary, sickening pang he remembers Charlie has her sister's wedding today. That he has to be at the café in an hour or so, getting the place ready for breakfast. That he'll have to manage Dave on their busiest morning of the week. Luke ups his stride, hoping his pace will thin the muck in his blood before he arrives at the café.

By the time he comes to the clearing where the road meets the lake, his nausea is shifting. He stops. Surveys the crushed cans and plastic bags scattered everywhere. He tries to remember how many weeks since he last saw the kids here. Two? Three? There are fresh tyre marks grooved into the mud, crisscrossing older marks that have been fossilised by the frost. He walks over to the dead campfire. Squats next to it. Pokes one of its charred logs. Even though the fire is cold, his hands hover above it, palms down. He closes his eyes and lets the dawn blast of the birds and the crisp and creak of the gums soothe his drumming head. It's crouched like this that Luke suddenly feels her. He opens his eyes. Looks around. Nothing. He clicks his dry and sour tongue, making that sharp sound she's come to respond to, the sound that stops her in her tracks so that she turns and gazes at him, her eyes bright and questioning. He listens for her. Again, clicks his tongue. Nothing. Slowly, he stands. Silently, he waits. He can feel her. He can feel her like she's his own skin.

Then he hears it. Barely distinguishable from the breeze that carries it, the faintest of cries.

Adrenaline ices his blood. His nausea and dizziness shoot away. He stands still, his skin stinging. Again, he hears her. He begins to trace the edge of

the clearing. Stops every few paces to listen. To lean down. To peer into the scrubby undergrowth. He finds himself jogging, suddenly desperate to find her. Forces himself to slow down. Walk. Search properly. Listen harder. He's poised on the edge of panic. Another soft, whining cry. The breeze seems to carry her to him from every direction. On he goes, crouched over, searching. Moving and stopping. Clicking his tongue, begging for and dreading her reply.

He reaches the water's edge. As his feet sink into the tarry silt, he suddenly hears her heavy gurgled breaths close to him.

She is there, lying on her side. She is half hidden under a waterlogged shrub. Her back legs are submerged in the cold water. The front half of her body is on the bank, dry. Her head rests in the mud. The gurgling comes from within her. The eye that should look up at him – that clear, amber eye – is closed. The eye that should look up at him, that should see him as it has always seen him, is swollen and shut and crusted with blood. He cannot tell if there is an eye there at all. Dizziness spins through him. Slowly, quietly, he steps closer to her. He doesn't want to see this. He can't bear to see this. Can't stand to hear her breath gasp like that, and the only thing worse than her gurgled cry is recognising it. With every step he tries to remember how he ended up at the quarry last night. With every stomach-clenched reply to the bloody storm of her breathing, the words throb in his head. How did I get here last night? Why did I come here? Did I do this? Did I do this?

He stands over her. Torpor numbs him, just as it did when he was faced with Quang's boiling feet. He gazes down at the dog. She is dying. She has been lying here dying and crying for hours. She tries to tilt her lovely, ruined face up at him. She cannot lift her head. He feels the slick of mud pull at his feet. The mud is eating her, he thinks. There is mud on her other eye, stuck in her lids. He looks again at her waterlogged legs. At her submerged tail uncurled on the bed of the lake.

He stares at that silent tail. Then his body begins to act. He kneels in the water next to her. Hears his voice making soft, low noises. Sees his disgusting hand offer itself to her nose, his skin telling her, it's me, it's just me. His skin begging her to answer the terrible questions unreeling inside of him. The dog sniffs the air between her nose and his skin. She shudders. Another gurgled gasp. He cannot read her. Her body no longer talks. She does not move as he

strokes his hand across her lean, satin lengths, looking for where she hurts. The low sounds keep rolling from his mouth, as foreign to him as Sarah's voice last night. His hands search gently for the hurt. The black dog continues to cry in the same choked rhythm. She hurts everywhere, everywhere. Even though his mind recoils from her agony and from itself – not knowing what to do, not knowing what he's done – his body is calm. His hands move into the freezing water. His fingers slide into the slime beneath her. She does not struggle. With one swift and strong movement he heaves her up from the suck of mud. He braces against the thought of her pain. She gasps and gurgles, gasps and gurgles. Slowly, holding her firm and close to his broad chest, Luke begins to walk.

He feels one of the black dog's lean and muscled legs – one of the legs that made her fly – swing like a pendulum as he walks. A dead leg. Did I do this? Hears the hot bubble of her breath. Her lungs filling with blood. Did I do this? Looks at her velvet face pressed into his chest. Except for where it crusts with blood, it is the softest, blackest little face he has ever known. He looks over her ridiculous ears at the eye that lay in the silt. It is muddied but open and whole. Her lid flutters. Her eye wanders lazily. Looks everywhere. Looks nowhere. Did I do this? He walks on along the dirt path. Looks out across the lake. Listens as her breaths come fewer and further between, hurting her, drowning her. Hugs her. Pulls her closer to his chest as if his lungs can breathe for her. Grips her with his good and bad arms. Grips her tighter and tighter. Embraces her, like this, till she is quiet. Still. Stopped. Safe.

Finally, he reaches his bench. He sits. Carefully arranges her on his lap. Makes a warm cave for her with his chest and shoulders and arms and bent head. Presses his face into her icy wet neck. Breathes her. Damp fur and soil and silt and leaf litter. The lake, the quarry, the sky, the dirt, the refinery. Breathes all of her, all of her.

For a long time, Luke sits in the dawn, clutching the soft and sodden weight of the black dog's beautiful, mongrel body. He cannot let her go. He cannot stop crying. And he cannot stop the words roaring through him: Did I do this? Did I do this? Did I do this?

LUKE CAN HARDLY remember burying the black dog at the quarry. Knows only that he laid her somewhere near the lake, near the bench where

he first saw her. He remembers feeling cold as he walked away. Remembers how, when he got home, he went straight to the phone and called the café. It must have been about lunchtime. He knew Dave would be panicking. Knew it wasn't fair to leave him to manage the Saturday rush alone. But he didn't care. He rang and, as soon as the phone picked up, said, 'It's Luke. I'm not coming in.' He hung up before anyone could reply. Then he went and sat in his living room. Wet and muddy and bloody, he sat there feeling nothing other than a mild and distant anger each time the phone rang. It rang all day. He assumed it was Miriam. She didn't give up until late in the afternoon. Then, when the static grey silence of dusk filled the unit, Luke finally stood. He walked outside to his tiny grassed yard. He undressed. Dumped his stain-hardened clothes in the bin. Went back inside, to the bathroom. Showered. Got into bed. Fell asleep immediately. Slept until late the next morning. Woke. Slowly realised it was Sunday. Showered again and found himself walking to the quarry. All day, he wandered its gravelled tracks. He turned sharply any time someone came in his direction. Had no direction himself. Was just walking that long, long day away. Didn't head for home till it was dark. Till he was dizzy with hunger and cold. When he got back to his unit, he showered again. Got into bed. Slept.

Now, it's been a week since the black dog died. Still, Luke wanders the cleaved lake morning and night. Still, he begins loops without ending them. Turns one way, then the other. A dozen times he crosses the rock wall. Closes his eyes. Begs the quarry's music to fill him and hold him upright like it used to. It doesn't. It won't. It can't, for those four terrifying words still chain-react inside of him, deafening him to everything else. Did I do it? Did I do it? Did I do it?

Perhaps he shouldn't come here anymore. This is her place. Was her place. Not his, never his. Perhaps coming here, like this, will kill him too. For his body hasn't understood what's happened. It still listens for the paw-press and twig-snap of her playful stalking. Still longs for her to be there, trotting next to him, looking up at him. Trotting ahead of him, gazing back at him, waiting for him. Still searches for her gleam speeding through the shadows. It's just a dog, he tells himself. It's just a dog, just a dog. But every time he forgets and remembers that she's dead, every time he forgets and remembers

how she died, he wants to walk himself into that flooded tip and sink himself forever. And it's not just her absence that draws him to the lake's ashen filth. It's his mind's unrelenting struggle against its own accusations. Did I do it? Of course I didn't. But I've done it before. I've done it before.

On the farm, they could justify killing anything they named a pest. Not that they justified anything back then. And nothing explains all the other stuff they did. Why did they do it? Because they could? No. It was more than that. It was worse than that. The fact was, it felt great. More exciting than busting up the dust around the dam in their cars. More gratifying than any time he'd ever spent with a girl. Was that it? He'd found something he was good at? Something he was the *best* at? Something he knew how to do? The hunt. The torture. The shot and slit and slap of the kill.

Luke continues his aimless rounds of the lake. Stares at the ghostly gums. Sees the masterpieces of his dog trees. They were stunning. Stark. Something like art. He remembers the excitement that stirred inside him as he drove towards them. As he watched the eerie fact of the dogs' dense bodies emerge from the long strips of bark that blew back and forth around them, as light as lace. On he walks. Remembers, suddenly, the one time he'd spotted the black dog before she spotted him. Sees her, poised on the rock wall in the middle of the lake. Watches her pivot and fly along the boulders. The envy that flooded him then! How totally and completely she knew what she was made for. How she revelled in it. On he walks, bracing himself against these punches of memory and the terrible questions they drag with them. What am I made for? What have I revelled in?

For a week he's walked the lake like this, tormented. For a week, he's damned and forgiven himself a thousand times. Told himself that, no matter what he's done in the past, no matter what he'd once loved to do, he'd stopped doing it. It had stopped exciting him, hadn't it? It had started to sicken him, hadn't it? What was it that changed everything? Was it his dad, surrendering to the dogs and the drink? Was it the fact that the dogs were winning? What *was* it about that brindle beast that threw him off the farm forever? When he jammed his heel into its face, that had been an act of mercy. Hadn't it? That was the least cruel thing he could do. Wasn't it? But whose torture was he ending?

For a week, Luke has stared into the black dog's single muddied eye as she tried to look up at him while she died in his arms. For a week, he has stared into the stoic gaze of the wild dog he'd crushed to silence so long ago. Perhaps that was it. That feral was the first animal whose eyes had locked onto his, looked at him, seen him, and demanded to be seen.

ON MONDAY, LUKE wakes with a start. It isn't yet light. His pillow is wet. He's disoriented. Searches his mind for echoes of the usual nightmares. Nothing. Realises it isn't a night-sweat that's woken him. It's tears. Bloody tears. Furious, he throws himself out of bed. Goes to the quarry. Walks until it's time to go home and get ready for work. Drives to the café. Strides into the kitchen as if it's right and reasonable for him to disappear for a week and then reappear without explanation. Head down, he puts his apron on and returns to his usual spot between Charlie and Dave. Tries to act normal. Realises, quickly, that he isn't the only one acting. Everyone is tiptoeing around him. As the day wears on, he gets more and more nervous. What's going on? What do they know? Surely no one could have seen him with the dog? Seen him carrying her. Seen him burying her. And all Miriam could have known is that he bailed on a week's work without notice or explanation. Yet everyone seems to sense that something has happened to him.

All week, Miriam and Sarah hover over him. Their mute concern is suffocating. A dozen times Luke endures Dave's self-conscious, back-slapped hellos. Even Charlie sits on her tempers and her tantrums. By the end of the week, Luke is certain that something is going on. Forget the black dog. Perhaps he is about to get sacked for disappearing as he did. Or worse. Maybe something happened that night at the bar. That was the last time he'd seen them before everything changed. What the hell did he do that night?

Now it is Saturday. The café is packed. Luke is trying to quell his growing sense of portent by making eight breakfast bagels at once. He's so immersed in this, so desperate to immerse, that he's the last to notice when the cheerful buzz of the customers dips. It's Charlie and Dave who make him stop. They suddenly freeze in their work, listening.

Of course, none of them are ready: Cane's meant to be overseas. But here he is at lunchtime, storming through the café in a rage. Something must

have happened to him too. Something bad enough to send him home early, alone, and in a blazing fury. Seconds later Cane and Miriam march past the server window. Cane's face is red and sweating. Miriam's is ashen, her eyes ugly and small. The office door slams shut. Charlie's and Dave's hands begin to stumble in time with the rise and fall of Cane's assault. Luke puts his head down and keeps working. Tries to ignore their panic. Tries to do the work they suddenly can't. Tries to avoid Sarah's bright-eyed anger as she runs from the kitchen to the café, managing the floor on her own. But the diatribe goes on and on, pouring into the hallway like sewage. Soon, even the customers grow quiet, and it's their silence – that shared, shocked silence – that finally makes Luke act.

He doesn't think or plan any of it. He simply feels the silence stop the movement of his mauled hand. Feels the silence remove the cool and heavy knife from his grip. Feels it walk him out of the kitchen and push his great weight against the boiling wake of Cane's words.

Luke doesn't hesitate at the office door. Doesn't knock. He simply opens it. Sees Miriam cowed into a corner. Feels his old and cruel anger towards her. Pathetic, he thinks. You stupid pathetic bitch. Sees Cane standing over her. Short and hard and pumped. Sees his fists shaking on their own clenched tension. Sees gobs of spit curdling at the corners of his mouth. Cane glares at him. His eyes, all pupil, spark madly. 'What do you fucking want, you fucking *freak*?' Luke just stands where he is, solid and tall and quiet. Wonders, vaguely, why he feels such disgust at Miriam but feels nothing at all for Cane. Watches Cane's face flare and wince, flushing and blanching as if his blood can't keep up with the tides of anger coursing through him. As Luke watches this, he suddenly understands. There is nothing on the planet that can stop Cane doing what he is doing. His frenzy and his foulness aren't coming from him, but happening to him.

As Luke realises this, he notices Cane's glazed eyes shift so that he is looking into the hallway. Luke feels Sarah behind him, her anger a wall of fire that awakens his own. Feels her body telling his that he isn't feeling nothing for Cane. He's just feeling something new. A different kind of rage. As pure and simple as any element. Free from the confusion of other emotions. From the contortions of being directed at any particular person. A

brittle crystalline rage aimed at the whole blasted world. At all the thousands of things that happen to people. At all the inextricable threads that knot and warp and matt and tear at an animal's body and makes what is happening in that office – in the kitchen, in the café, in the street, in his unit, on the farm, in the quarry, everywhere, *everywhere* – possible. Luke feels Sarah's identical feeling. And he feels her beg silently for the same thing that he is, that Miriam is, that Charlie and Dave and the rest of the damned café is. The same thing that Cane is begging for. For it to stop, to stop, to *stop*.

Though registering Luke and Sarah's presence – their protest – Cane turns around and keeps screaming at Miriam. Luke steps into the office then. He steps right between them: his back towards Miriam; his chest facing Cane. But Cane keeps on at her. Just keeps on at her as if no one else is there. When he calls her 'a dumb fucking cunt', Luke swiftly shoves him through the open door. Sarah jumps out of the way. Cane falls hard, cracks his head loudly on hall tiles. Luke slams the office door shut. For a second, pure silence. Just him and Miriam, in the office, listening. Just the kitchen and the café and the rest of the world, listening. Then, the muffled torrent of Sarah's voice through the door, low and sharp and fast. A thump. And another. Moaning. Then the stomping fury of Cane as he stumbles down the hallway, kicking the skirting boards and bellowing. Luke listens to all of this with his back turned to Miriam. So what if she's crying? When isn't she crying? He waits until he hears the metallic crash of the back gate opening and bouncing shut again. Then he stares at the closed door for a while. Waits for the café's chat to resume, but when it finally does it is muted. Then he returns to the kitchen.

Though no one looks up when he enters, the room is buzzing. Charlie can't keep the big fat smirk out of her voice as she bosses Dave about. She turns up the radio and begins her usual hyper happy dance, bouncing around the kitchen. Dave hums along, massacring a cake that he isn't meant to be icing. Even the dishie whistles and nods at Luke as he resumes his place at the bench. Luke ignores them. He collects the backlog of dockets that Charlie and Dave have completely forgotten about. He ploughs through them alone and tries to feel what they feel. The victory of it. The justice of it. But he only feels sick.

What just happened? What has he seen? Luke tries to focus on his work. The buttery crisp of pastry. The vivid rainbow of a salad. The oily black silk

of an olive. He tries to ignore the hopelessness tugging at him, but the harder he tries the more he feels the caverns inside of him gape and billow, as huge and dark and empty as ever.

THAT AFTERNOON, ON her way out the door, Charlie stuns everyone by leaping up and smacking a kiss onto Luke's ruined cheek. She then just stands there, staring straight into his eyes, steady and unembarrassed and oblivious to the tragedy of her own face: her grin and childish glee; her cut lip and puffy, bruised eye; her make-up smeared everywhere, hiding nothing, pointing to everything. Luke can barely return her gaze. Dave soon follows her out the door, grabbing Luke's bad hand and shaking it with both of his own, bashful as a kid. Once they're gone, Luke lingers in the kitchen. He's killing time. He isn't just waiting for Miriam to count the till and leave. He's putting off the new torment of his nights. Both his unit and the lake are intolerable to him now, and so he keeps pottering around the kitchen until long after the café is silent. Eventually, he wanders to the office to get his things.

And there she is. Miriam hasn't gone home at all. Instead, she's sitting there, tucked into her jacket with her bag on her lap. Her tears and her smiles fight their usual war across her face as she looks up at him. He stumbles back. She stands, no doubt remembering the last time he fled from her. She stops him with his name. 'Luke?' she says. 'Luke?' He nods at her, frozen. Stares at her mouth as she repeats his name. 'Luke?' She is caught on his name, his name as a question. Panic flares inside of him. What is this? What does she want? Again, the desire to hit her. What does he care what her damn problems are? What does he care about her, or Cane, or any of them? He only wanted to make Cane shut up. Only wanted to stop Cane ruining the one thing that he, Luke, was good at. Making food. Making good food. Finally Miriam stops repeating his name. She pulls herself up to her full height. He refuses to meet her eyes. Stares over her shoulder. 'The thing is Luke...' Her voice trails off. She takes a deep breath. Irritation ripples through him.

When she finally speaks again, her voice drifts up from a cooler, drier place than her tears. Luke hears this shift. Feels it. Suddenly knows that whatever it is she is about to say *he doesn't want to hear it*. She locks him again with his name and her eyes. She says, 'The thing is, Luke, he's his dad.'

Luke realises he is shaking his head. That he looks like he is gesturing incomprehension. That he doesn't understand. Can't understand. Won't.

She keeps her eyes fixed on his. Keeps her tear-ruddy face set. 'Luke,' she says. 'Cane's Jamie's dad.'

ONLY NOW, HOURS later, as he sits on the rock wall with the clear night sky sparkling above him, does Luke see it. It was pride that hammered her soft, round features into stone. It was pride that stared him down. That dared him to ignore or deny what she had to say. Three tiny words. *Cane's Jamie's dad*. Words that Luke didn't want to hear. Words that she recoiled from even as she spoke them. But though she flinched, she refused to turn away. Her eyes shone. Grasped at him. Forced him to look back at her and see all the mess and struggle that was her life. He did as she wanted. He looked. He saw. And when she quietly asked him not to tell anyone because nobody knew, except Cane, he nodded. And, when her defiant, desperate eyes held him as she explained that she just wanted him to know how things were, he nodded again.

Luke stares across the water and wonders if any of it really happened. So strange. And incredible, that he did not hesitate. For even as a part of him froze both for and at her, cruelly repelled, he walked straight into the office. It had felt like *déjà vu*, as if a long-forgotten memory had re-awoken inside of him. Something deeper than his scars. Something both of and older than himself. Something built into his very DNA. Whatever it was, it heard her, and it knew to move him straight to her. It knew to make him grab her and pull her roughly into his arms. It knew to press her close to him. To wrap her in his body, as if his blood and bone could shield her from the brutal fact of those three words. As if, after all that had happened he could protect her, just as he'd held the black dog and tried to protect her from the irrevocable fact of her torture.

Luke hugs his knees. Guards himself from the cold black air. And he damns himself. For his stupidity. For his years of fear. Avoidance. Anger. Because it was unlike anything he could ever have imagined. There was nothing humiliating in it. Nothing fucked up, nothing sordid about it. It was its own thing. It wasn't just his scars, but hers. Not just his fears, his

loneliness, his hopes and needs and screwed-up past, but hers too, *hers too*. Not just the terrible things he's done and had done to him, but her whole life's worth of struggle laid bare.

As Miriam had burrowed into him he felt his lifetime of thinking and feeling heave up inside of him. Felt something huge and brittle buckle and break. Felt something new form. Something that sliced and shimmered – like water, like light – making his core roar out in sorrow and joy: You idiot! You fool! It's not what you think that matters, it's what you *do*. Hold her. Hold her. Hold her.

IT'S ONLY WHEN he hears their cars across the lake that he realises he's been pacing. A wolf in a cage, waiting. Waiting, and trying to work things out.

There's the shock and joy of discovering Miriam. The terror of knowing things can be different. The torment of the gap-stopped memory of that drunken night when he woke and found the dying dog: How did he get from the city to the quarry? There's the image of the kids fighting and fucking around the fire, weeks before then. The memory of the black dog next to him, watching them. He's tried to imagine her entering the clearing after he ran away. Wondered if she already knew them. And why not? They had food too. And warmth. Again, the memory of her jutting ribs. Her thin satin fur. Her bald belly. She was only trying to survive like anyone else. And maybe he'd gotten her used to people. Gotten her to trust people. But why would they hurt her? Luke sees the brindle-coated dog, gasping and staring and asking him the same question. No answer then. No answer now. That's why he'd left the farm. There were too many questions and not enough answers out there.

Luke hears their cars screech to a stop. He begins to jog towards the clearing. Though he has no idea what he's doing or how he's going to do it, he's already pumped with adrenaline. He must find out for certain that he didn't hurt her. (I couldn't have. But I've done it before. How can I be so sure? *And what do I do if it was me?*) He can make out some of their words as he draws closer. Fuck. Cunt. Fuck. Cunt. Laughter. Hears music playing from their cars. Slows down when he sees the glow of their fire. Keeps to the edge of the track till he's standing where he and the black dog once stood together.

It could be the same scene. Despite the late-winter freeze, the kite-surfing girl is swinging her long bare legs off the end of the ute. Again, she is tucked into the arm of her guy. There's three kids around the fire. Two of them are huddled together, talking. The third sits by himself, poking the fire with a stick, his face hidden under his hood. The others mill around, talking and joking, swearing and laughing. Luke suddenly isn't sure – as he wasn't with Sarah – just how old they are. Just how old *he* is. He stands in the shadows and watches the fire warp their pale, laughing faces. Remembers the rocks he rolled over the black dog's grave, as if it weren't too late to stop the world from getting at her.

Luke watches from the dark. He can hardly believe it when the girl and guy begin to muck around exactly as they did the last time. Again, she grabs at him. Again, he hits her back, returns to her. Again, Luke can't look away from their ritual for he sees, now, that it is a ritual. So violent. So public. Why? Who are they doing this for? As the couple begin to kiss and grope, the others wolf whistle and scatter, just as before. Luke sees what he didn't see then. Their embarrassment. Their anger submerged into jokes and bluster. How could he have missed the mix of rage and envy in their arse-humping carry-on? He watches them as they begin to tease the kids by the fire. Realises they're not bullying. They're just desperate for distraction. Tonight, nobody is hauled into a wrestle. After a few head cuffs and kicks, the boys and men just sit and squat and stand around the fire, staring at its lashing flames. Waiting for it to be over. Why do they stay? If they hate it, why do they stay? Again, he looks at the couple in the ute. How, he wonders, can two people rule over so many so easily?

Luke steps towards the group. At first, no one notices him. The fire only intensifies the darkness of the shadows. Now, he is the black dog. A patch of black in the blackness. A shadow stalking light. For a second, he wavers. He still has time to turn and leave without anyone noticing. I need to know. He steps forwards. I need to know. He steps into the circle of light. Steps into the circle of men. The fire is behind him. He pulls himself up. Pushes his shoulders back, his arms relaxed by his side. He will *not* look down and away tonight. He will *not* press his ruined arm in, close to his body, out of sight. Not tonight, not tonight. Let them be scared, disgusted, horrified. Let them see a freak, a monster. Let them be terrified.

He walks straight past the silent group. Walks to the ute.

Locked into each other, the guy and the girl are the last to realise that something has shifted around them. As the others' silence seeps into the clearing, they suddenly stop. 'What the *fuck?*' the man says, glancing at Luke and then over Luke's shoulder at the others. The girl pulls away, tugs down her skirt, scuttles to the back of the tray. She crouches there, her arms crossed in front of her, as if she's about to get hit. And maybe you are, Luke thinks. Maybe you are.

The man in the ute scowls. Struggles to do up his pants. Keeps glancing at the others. Again, Luke senses the paralysis behind him. Feels their fear swell through him like a transfusion. Again, Luke looks at the kite surfer. Sees her lips tremble. Knows she remembers him. What was it he'd said to her back then? 'It's not safe. It's not safe.' Luke sees she is shaking. Stupefied with fear. Because of me, because of *me*. Excitement floods through him, delicious. He takes that electric surge and directs it at the thug in front of him. Stares down and waits for something to happen.

Suddenly, the man jumps off the tray so he's standing chest to chest with Luke. He's more than a head shorter, and probably half his weight. Though he stands tall and squared and ready, his eyes keep darting over Luke's shoulder. But still, no one moves by the fire. Fear quivers across his face. When Luke recognises this – the child in the man – he wants to destroy him. Instead, in a calm and low voice, he asks: 'Have you seen a dog?' The words ripple around the clearing. Something changes in the thug's eyes. It might be recognition. It might be confusion. He says, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' He tries to snarl the words, but his voice is unsteady. Luke can't read his face or the air around him. Relief and fury alternate within him as he tries to find the answer. Recognition or confusion? Was it me or was it them? He knows he can't have done it. He can't have. And yet, if these kids didn't do it, who did?

As Luke's body moves into the other man's, he sees the black dog's knotted muscles move under her satin fur. Hard and soft. Hard and soft. As Luke throws the man back onto the tray – again, that dull thud of a skull hitting metal – he sees the white glint of the black dog's canines. White against black. White against black. As Luke clasps the man's struggling wrists in one of his massive hands, he remembers the dog snapping and

growling when he'd first tried to scare her off. She was never aggressive, Luke realises, gazing at the man pinned under him. She was just scared, scared for her life.

Carefully, Luke clamps his free hand across the man's throat. Feels rough stubble. The buoyant hardness of his Adam's apple. Presses his palm down onto the warm damp skin. The man spits and gurgles. Luke lets him. Lets him taste suffocation. Lets him fall towards unconsciousness. Luke lifts his hand. Waits for him to get his breath back, to return fully to his ordeal. Luke watches his ruined thumb hover over a pale, darting eye. Sees the shut and crusted eye of the black dog. Presses downwards. The man begins to chant, 'No, no, no.' The girl begins to whisper, 'God, oh God, oh God.' Again, Luke feels excitement power through him. She's right, he thinks, she's right. I can blind this man. I can press his eye into the thicks of his skull. I can kill him. I can thump her and fuck her and then fuck her again. The man begins to whisper, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.' Luke watches. Listens. Still, he cannot tell if the man beneath him is making a confession or begging for his life. Quietly, Luke asks, 'Sorry for what?' He keeps the pressure of his thumb even and balanced. The man's eye is his new centre of gravity. 'For everything,' the man gasps. 'Everything. *Everything.*' Suddenly, the man stops begging and bracing. Stops struggling. Nothing moves except for his tears.

Luke thinks of Miriam, crying eternally over her till in the office. Thinks of little Charlie, with all her bruises and bravado, crying over her cooking. Thinks of Quang, crying over his ruined feet. Thinks, with a blister of pain, of the black dog crying into the mud, crying into his chest, crying herself to death. Luke stares down at the thug's face and presses harder. He looks down and sees Miriam's Jamie – her son, her nephew – paralysed with shyness. Sees Dave choking on his loves and his hates. Sees Cane destroying everything around him, unstoppable. Luke presses harder. Sees himself hunting with his dad and his mates around the farm. Sees how they cared for the animals they bred to kill, and killed the animals that preyed to live. Feels, again, the scalps of the foxes and feral dogs, wet and warm in his hand. Presses harder. Sees his dad's downcast eyes as Luke saluted him that final, scorching morning when he left for the city. Left him to kill himself, by himself. Goddamn you, Luke thinks. Goddamn you, Dad, you coward. You coward.

Luke presses the hot, hard eye. Harder, harder. Sees, again, the terrified face of the chef who'd watched as – in a split second, with merely the flick of his wrist – the oil in his pan fried off Luke's skin. For the first time Luke understands what the expression on that face was. Not spite. Not anger. Not pleasure. But horror. Disbelief. It was a face swamped by an instant and complete grief. Luke presses down, harder. Sees all of the people who couldn't face him afterwards. Sees Sarah, the one person who dared look at him. Sees her seeing him, just as the brindle and black dogs looked at him and saw him and demanded he look back. Luke presses harder. Sees himself alone in his unit, walking circles between the TV and the computer, doing nothing except all of the pointless toxic things he can't stop himself doing. Presses harder. Looks down. In the thug's one exposed eye he recognises the glassy stare of the brindle-coated dog. Senses the same silent question travelling the air between them. What did I do? What did I do wrong?

Luke stares. Sees that his thumb is about to blind another man's eye. Lifts his hand away. Stands and turns and walks through the petrified forest of the others. Looks at the kids in the dirt by the fire. Sees that they are crying like babies. Sees that they *are* babies. Walks on. Disappears into the quarry's shadows. Leaves all of them, all of it, behind. Walks up the path. Again, he expects the dog to appear by his side. Again, he falls into that agonising gap between habit and remembrance. And again, the heart-stab of those unanswered questions. Who did it? Was it me? Of course not. (But I've done it before. I've done it before.) Was it them? Does it matter? *Does it matter?*

Luke walks along the edge of the lake. Looks out at the rocky wall dividing the glittering dark. Remembers the soft warmth and breathing silence of the dog sitting next to him out there. Keeps walking. Tries to stop his stupid body calling out for her. Begging her to come back. Begging her to forgive him if it was him. On he walks. Sees Cane and Miriam, gripped and driven by things they could not – cannot – control. Luke tries to shake off the feeling he had in the office with them. He can't bear it. The idea that there's no pattern to any of it. No meaning. No sense. That none of them are anything more than specks of sand in a dust storm. What does it matter! (Does it matter? Does it matter?) This chaos burned off my skin, created Cane and all the other bastards like him. But it also created the lake, brought me the

black dog and gave me Miriam. Luke remembers those first seconds when she was in his arms. Still, the idea of it seems as unlikely and ugly as any of his imaginings with Sarah. But I didn't imagine it. And it wasn't ugly. It was its own thing. It is our own thing. It is her body and mine, meeting in their own way. It is her body telling mine: It's not what you think that matters, it's what you do. *Hold me.*

He walks past his old bench. Wanders up the overgrown, looping track to the gate. Anger and fear shiver through him. Of course it matters who tortured the black dog. But I'll never know. And no matter what I did to her – no matter what I've done in the past – tonight, I didn't do it.

I didn't do what I could have done.

Didn't do what every cell in my body wanted me to do.

Didn't do what I once would have relished as my right.

I didn't do it. I didn't do it.

And I'll never do it again. Because that's not me. Not anymore.

LUKE SITS ON the bench, collar up, arms crossed against the bluster and looks out across the grey. He's watching her struggle with her board and her huge red kite. He sees her yanked under the chopped surface. Sees her thrashing and sinking. Sees her wetsuit becoming heavier, slicker, blacker, bloated. Sees her motionless and then rising up again, halting, floating like a human balloon in the toxic grey silence, the ropes and pullies of her harness tangled forever in the forests of trash below. Right where she belongs.

Later, when he walks up to the gate along the overgrown gravel path, he sees her again. Sees her muscles move under the smooth skin of her long legs. Counts the knobbls of her spine through her thin top. Doesn't cough to warn her of his approach. Not this time. Instead, he comes up suddenly, right next to her on the path. She jerks to a stop. Gasps. Again, her face flushes with recognition and fear. He stares into her pale, sandy-lashed eyes. Stares into her until she – not he, this time, *not he* – looks away. 'It's not safe,' he'd said, months ago, trying to warn her of the lake's dangers. Today, he says nothing.

As he watches the girl shrink, he does not feel that old and sick twist of pleasure and pain as he did the first time they met. He just wonders if she

shrinks out of fear or shame. If they were the ones who did it, was she there? And if she was, did she try to stop them? Or did she get off on it too?

Luke lets her cower. He sees her grabbing at her guy, fucking and being fucked while the other boys and men wander off in anger and embarrassment and envy. Sees her sitting on the end of the ute. A princess. A queen. Her arms and legs locked with her man's. Her prince. Their bastard king. He looks down at the stars tattooed across her feet. No, he thinks. You're no sky walker. You can't fly. They're not stars, just scars, written in ink, flecked with dirt.

He walks on. Leaves her alone on the track. They were never my thoughts, he thinks. They were never my words.

When he reaches the gate he pauses. For the hundredth time habit makes him turn and look back to see if the dog is there, watching him go. The black dog. Not his dog. Not the lake's. Not the quarry's. Nobody's dog. Her own dog. Always and forever her own dog, hunting him through the dark, stalking him into friendship.

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Helen Gildfind lives in Melbourne and has been published in Australia and overseas. 'Quarry' was completed as part of a short-story collection with the generous support of an Australia Council Grant. This collection is seeking publication, and was recently a finalist in the St Lawrence (unpublished) book award run by Black Lawrence Press (New York). Helen is currently working on her first novel, which she began under the mentorship of Andrea Goldsmith, whose insightful feedback on 'Quarry' was gratefully received. Helen's story 'Morning Song' was published in *Griffith Review 40: Women & Power*.