

Ngank

There are six cars and a caravan in the front yard of the Tetleys' house. The humble Tetleys, who don't get too many visitors. If they had neighbours, they'd be craning their necks over fences. But they haven't had neighbours in years, nor very good fences, for that matter.

From above there's no order to the picture. People pile out of cars. Some clutching flowers, others holding plates stacked with almond biscuits and cream-filled cannoli. The sound of wailing drifts over the tin roof. Your sister gets her hands stuck in her pearls as she waves them about. Pearls ping down the garden path, roll in the gutter, fall down the drain. Your niece slips on them, your dad tries to grab her elbow. Down they go, into the orange gravel-dust.

Some of the visitors are inside now. Flapping those hands and filling the kitchen with noise. Your children climb out of corners, peer around doorframes, and one climbs right out of the living room window.

Your sister, Lisa, is holding shortbread biscuits to their lips, but they blink at her with tight shut mouths. You watch your father hug your daughter close. He never seemed that tender, back when you were young. The only language he spoke was botany, and so you learned. Fast. A small child, reciting scientific names.

Rose is thinking about how you didn't stick around for this bit, nicked off before your own family arrived from Perth.

This is the part no one considers. When the life has ended, but the chaos continues.

You drift up above the karris and turn, look back down.

Your husband, Eddie, is making a noise that makes everyone else close

their eyes. You remember when you first saw him, crouched over a bucket at Emu Point. A boy in a blue flannelette shirt. He was calling out to his friend over on the rocks. You heard his mate shout something back, and the boy in blue stuck his head in the bucket.

‘Got about a dozen whiting and a coupla herring.’ His voice echoed round the red plastic.

‘Hi,’ you said.

He looked up then, smiled shyly. His eyes were the same colour as his shirt. You reckon you knew, even then. Just as you held your hand out, the other fisherman plonked his bucket down on the jetty. He was wearing a red flanno in the same chequered print.

‘Hey, lady, I’m Bert,’ he said, and he took your hand and shook it. You’d never been touched by a Noongar before.

‘Elena,’ you said, and he winked.

Blue shirt bit his lip. Chuckled softly and elbowed his mate out of the way. ‘Eddie.’

You remember his hand was calloused, tacky with salt and fish bits.

Those calloused hands were heavy and warm, made of the earth. Hands that grounded you, held you. Tickled your children, lifted their chins to the stars, traced your lips. Shook the soft, cold hands of doctors. Trembled as they held your test results, did their best to keep you here. Were laid gently on your heart as it beat its final dance.

Now, those hands are clenched.

Open.

Shut.

Open.

Shut.

Open shut open shut open *shut*.

Chest heaving and knees wobbling.

There are Christmas carols playing faintly on the radio. Your eldest, Steve, is smacking Eddie’s back as if the grief-sound is a cough that can be

beaten away. He's brown and square as the paddocks and his hair carries licks of sunshine. Steve filled your belly when you were young and times were different. When you, Eddie and Bert rented a room in a fishing shack by the sea from an old lady who told you, 'God speaks louder on the waves than from the altar.' You studied for your teaching certificate at an old wooden desk, with second-hand books and scratchy pens, while Eddie and Bert stood knee-deep in water casting line after line. They came home with buckets of fish, and salt in their hair. Your belly grew, and your family shook their heads, looked down their noses at you, a long highway and five hours drive away. When times were hard, you heeded the old woman. You sat beside Eddie in his little boat and you found God on the waves.

Is that where you will find him now?

Joe is dunking teabags in scalding water. A different cut, this one. The peace and calm inside a storm of Tetley kids. He came not long after you moved to the farm, to the cottage still smelling of fresh paint, unpacked boxes. The bees told you he was coming. You were out at the hive with Aunty, collecting honey. They'd never been as flighty as they were that day, buzzing at your wrists, getting in your ears. *Today, today, today*, they seemed to hum. The bees chased you back to the house, bumping into your back and tapping at your ankles. Aunty washed honey from her hands, held them to your forehead, rubbed your temples. An ache, a pulse, a funny feeling in your belly that he'd be joining you soon. And then there he was, without a fuss, you on your back in the bath and his head landing neatly in Eddie's hands. The three of you in the warm water, steam and blood and love.

Then Frank, your lovable little villain. He came on the eve of a hot summer storm. Late, grizzly after a seven-hour labour. Aunty sang songs while the lightning lit the sky. The worst pregnancy, and yet the most beautiful baby. Unpredictable, from tantrum to tender love, his hand gripping your finger or locks of his own dark curls. Always jumping off things, breaking things, loud and temperamental like the storm that brought him in. But the giver of laughs, and the bravest of the lot. That

kid won every race he ever ran, could do anything he put his mind to. But losing you has stopped him believing.

Rose is standing with your father. They're leaning on each other, wordlessly taking in all the noise around them. She came exactly one year after Frank, another summer storm. The tin roof cracked with the heat, and rain beat the windows. Eddie had the record player in the bathroom. Hours and hours he flipped the vinyl, dropped the needle. Aunty sang sweetly while you clenched and relaxed, clenched and relaxed. Just as Billie Holiday's 'Moonglow' began to spin, Rose started to crown. Right from the beginning, she talked. Softly, to herself, as if she was figuring everything out. Humming and da-da-dumming, tapping her fingers on her knees. Frank was glued to her, his almost-twin-sister with eyes and hair like him. They grew up leaning towards each other, partners in crime.

Your littlest one was a miracle. Born when you were told you had two years left. Well, you squeezed out another five. Alby took his first breath in hospital, under those fluorescent lights. Too risky at home, with the potential complications. And, without the help of Aunty. The anxiety of sickness was born into him, disguised by the light of hope. He cried whenever away from your bosom, was clingy and colicky. But the sweet, caring soul in him. He did his best. They all did. Look at them now.

Your sister is walking down the hallway towards your door, but your kids won't have a bar of it. They aren't ready to share what's left of you. It's Rose who notices first. She's down the hallway in a flash, arms folded, chin jutting out.

'No.'

'Rose, love, out of the way.' Lisa's not messing around. You can see the grief in the squint of her eyes. She always got mean when she was sad.

'No.'

'Move.'

'No.'

Suddenly Frank's beside her, hooking his elbows out defensively.

‘You can’t go in,’ he says with a voice that wants to sound strong but cracks in the middle. Rose leans her back against the door, folds her arms across her chest. Screams for Eddie. Screams and screams and screams for him. Then there’s Joe, scurrying down the hallway with his glasses slipping down his nose, Steve barrelling through like he’s in a rugby match, throwing your dad and brother-in-law out of his path, and Eddie, walking as if the hallway is made of shards of glass, wincing with every step. He sees the kids, a human barricade against your bedroom door.

‘You can’t go in,’ he says, in a voice hoarse from grief-sounds. It’s a surprise to hear him speak up. He was always quiet with your family. Up above the treetops, you smile.

‘Don’t you be so self—’ Lisa starts.

‘No,’ repeats Eddie. ‘Not yet.’

Everything is hushed, except the sound of your mother, wailing in the lounge room.

Elena. Elena.

Elenaaaaaaaaaa.

A nearby pink-and-grey starts up a screech along with her.

There’s a silent moment, sucked in breaths. Then—

‘Fuck off,’ says Frank.

Your sister slaps him. The sound echoes into the evening, startling the pink-and-grey overlooking the scene alongside you. The sun is setting low over the paddocks. And now you have to turn away. Because the moment unfolds and caves in on itself, the endless tug-of-war of time. Down there, they’re hurting, wailing, hitting, crying. Shouting, struggling, silent. It’s about you, but it’s also about them. About everything that has ever led them to this moment, everything they’re carrying on their backs and in their hearts. You touch them gently, one by one. Each of them hurting from different places. All of them loving you. Then, just as Eddie stands at the kitchen sink, holds a glass of water to his lips and catches your reflection in the window, you’re gone.

1. Rose

the morning before you left i cooked eggs
in the kitchen with lemon oil, the way you liked.
i thought the smell of buttered toast might make you stay.
you couldn't eat it and neither

could i

so it sat on your dresser for a while until the smell
made us sick and dad threw it off the verandah
to the chooks.

i sat beside you gripping your hand, my nails
making crescent moons in your paper skin.

i tried to hold your eyes in mine but you
drifted, already leaving, beside me.

outside the boys kicked the soccer ball against the wall
it thudded over and over again, an angry little denial
that today was any different. they wanted you to come
to tell them to stop, to say lunch was ready
but instead after an hour dad came and screamed
at them and

alby cried so then dad cried too

and they all came and piled on the bed
sweaty and smelling of grass and desperation.

you stroked alby's forehead with your eyes closed.

'my beautiful boys,'

you murmured, your hands searching for dad's face and
wiping the tears you found there.

'my beautiful rose.'

i didn't want you to touch me in case it was goodbye and yet
i couldn't let go of your hand.

outside the chickens ate the lemon eggs.

strange, how they didn't recognise them as their own.

2. Frank

one thousand nine hundred and
thirty-seven days since the final diagnosis
the doctor said you might leave us
today.

between then and now,
one thousand nine hundred and
thirty-seven goodnight kisses
three hundred and eight days in hospital
hundreds of beers pinched from the fridge
seventy-two beach trips
fifty-seven potato bakes
five birthday cakes
and you,
slowly slipping.

the house felt different
once we knew you were leaving.
we spoke in whispers
our fingertips traced the wallpaper
absently searching for something
to hold onto as we walked
down the hallway towards your door.
we were already breaking.
you were already leaving
cracked open, light pouring out of our chimney.

you argued about it.
one final argument.
you wanted to die at home.
dad thought it would be better in hospital.
'i don't want one more tube up my nose,' you said.
'i want to be in my house, with my people.'
dad, kneeling beside you, closed his eyes.
'i'll see if a doctor can come to be here when it happens—'
you took his words from his mouth; 'no doctor.'
'what if i—'
'nope.'
'i'll make us some toast,' dad said.
'yes, good,' you replied.
we hovered, rotating ourselves from hallway,
bedside, patch of carpet near the door, kitchen to make tea
i even picked you flowers, ripped them from the earth
roots and all.
i stumbled on the others a few times in the laundry
tears dripping down their noses.
something about the hum of the washing machine
the smell of laundry liquid
undid us more than the glare of hospital lights.
dad cleaned spew and piss and shit
made cup after cup of your favourite rosehip tea.
he blew on it softly to cool it
took it away a few hours later, still full.
his eyes were full of you.
and you, you just lay there
the late sun warming your face
weighing your eyes closed.

it was a brief moment

a flutter of eyelids
while the sun made shadow pictures
on the bedroom wall
and your heart
stopped
beating.

3. Rose

I don't remember sleeping. Only the moment the sun rose, and there we were, crammed into the lounge room, aching eyeballs and throbbing heads, cups of tea gone cold. An empty bottle of Nonna's limoncello on the coffee table, a plate of shortbread biscuits decorated with glacé cherries beside it, crumbs in the folds of the couch.

'Merry Christmas,' says Joe.

No one responds.

Alby pads over to the window, looks out into the garden. 'I forgot to leave carrots for the reindeer.'

Nonna reaches out, draws him to her. Speaks in Italian. She does that when she's upset. Like she can't translate her grief.

Steve pushes himself upright, goes to unpack the cars. Comes back with armfuls of food, some of it spoiled from the heat. Plates of fish, jars of tomato sauce, bowls of olives. Boxes of vegetables, loaves of bread. Aunt Lisa throws her arms in the air, runs laps around the kitchen, trying to save what would have been our Christmas feast.

Dad disappears down the hallway, closes the bedroom door.

There's no Christmas tree.

A few presents sit on the mantle, brought down from Perth. Grandpa hands one to Alby, who shakes his head, places it carefully back down.

I lock myself in the bathroom, splash cold water over my face. Sit on the edge of the bathtub, stick the heels of my hands into my sore eyes. Time has stopped. I might be in there for days, or just minutes. When I come out, the door to the kitchen is closed. I sit cross-legged in the hallway, watching through the knothole in the door.

Dad wants to bury you on the farm. Under one of the ancient eucalypts you loved to sit beneath with a book. Or scatter your ashes in your garden. I can hear his voice at the table, not much more than a whisper, as the others rise and fall above. Grandpa isn't having a bar of it and he's getting pretty mean. He's wearing a polo shirt with the collar ironed, ready for business. Hands clasped and moustache set in a firm line. Dad's still got his jammies on and he's running his hand through his hair. His face has wrinkles where once there were smile lines. Every now and then Aunt Lisa walks past the knothole, like she's stepping on and off set.

'Let her be in her garden,' Dad is saying. 'It's all I ask.'

We did up the garden after your first diagnosis. With the diagnosis came a note, in your handwriting, stuck to the fridge.

Less have to, more want to.

Us—in the garden. The years you were raising us kids, the flowers had wilted and drooped, the weeds and grass growing wild and tall. We went to the nursery in Albany, walked along the aisles smelling mint, rosemary and thyme, softly stroking the leaves of furry lamb's ear. I stepped my feet in your boot prints, sometimes I rode in the trolley. You made friends with one of the gardeners, Peter, who must have noticed the way you picked things up and gently put them back down. Mainly we were dreaming, not buying. Doctors are expensive. One day Peter came out with a tray of plants, and some packets of seeds. He lifted a bag of soil onto your empty trolley.

'You'll be needing this.' He laid his gift carefully on top. He wheeled the trolley out to the car, even though you tried to stop him, shaking your head, laughing. Peter gave us a long list of specific planting instructions.

'You let me know which ones are your favourite,' he said to me with a wink.

You cried on the way home.

The next day when I got home from school, you were in the garden with dirt up your forearms and peppered across your cheeks.

‘I need a helper,’ you called, straw sunhat falling over your eyes.

We planted daisies and lavender, sunflowers, poppies and cornflowers. That was the first year our old rosebush blossomed, thriving in the fresh soil we dug around its roots. The flower was a deep red, Papa Meilland, it was called. I would talk to it on my way up the driveway to the bus each day, ‘Good morning, Papa M.’ In the afternoon, ‘How nice you are, Papa M.’ One day I came home from school and the deep red flower was gone. I was heartbroken. Papa M’s petals had fallen all over the grass and you took me outside to collect them in a hat. You made them into potpourri by drying them out and adding cinnamon sticks and aniseed stars, then you put everything in a little silk bag.

‘Even death can be beautiful,’ you told me.

Nothing about yours is.

A bang hushes the voices at the table and I smack my head on the door handle in shock. Out the window I see Frank on the driveway. He’s throwing pinecones on the roof. They land like gunshots and the hot tin cracks and creaks. There’s a shout from inside after the first one hits, but no one comes out.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

The banging is what it sounds like in my own head. Temples pounding, almost aching for an explosion, a release. Eventually, Steve marches out there and shouts at him.

‘Get in here.’

In here, they’ve moved on to talking about the funeral. I keep watching the shitstorm through the knothole. Dad, Nonna, Grandpa, Aunt Lisa, Uncle Nic, Steve, Joe. They’re crowded round the table and Dad’s still speaking softly, gazing into the fruit bowl like the apricots might know what to do with your body. My cousins are sitting on the floor in the corner, fighting over a Barbie doll.

Nonna starts wailing and takes Dad's hands. Aunt Lisa pushes back from the table and bangs around in the kitchen. I can't bear it anymore, I creak the door open. Stand near the sink and start washing the cups. Frank's leaning against the pantry door and catches my eye for a second.

'The kids will just have to come to Perth to visit the cemetery,' Aunt Lisa is saying. She's shoving her hands up a chicken's bum, and her bangles clang against each other. 'Can't bury my sister in the garden, it's not the bloody nineteen twenties. What happens if the Russells kick you out? We going to dig her up?' She speaks too loudly, for the hushed kitchen. Pushes her sleeves up with her wrists, greasy hands held out in front.

Frank slams himself out of the kitchen.

Aunt Lisa pokes breadcrumbs, thyme and garlic into the poor old chook. Bile rises in my throat. I gotta get out of here. Soapy water drips from my hands, leaving splotches down the hallway.

Frank's in his bedroom, staring blankly upwards from the bottom bunk. I sag against the wall, knees bending, sliding down to the floor. We all shared this room when we were small, back when we could build a wall of Lego around us and live in our own world for a while. Back when we'd use the bath as a jump for our toy cars and make them fly through the air, and you would come and sit on the edge of the old tub and laugh. Our room was a crowded mess of bunks, but to us they were boats at sea and the sound of sheep outside the window was the foghorn of a faraway ship. Sometimes, Frank and I would pinch the salt shaker, lick our hands and stick salt to our bodies. Stand in front of the fan for a full-blown ocean effect. Steve and Joe would be sailors and we were pirates, stealing their stashes of marbles, footy trophies and cereal box toys.

Sometimes the room felt too small for all the growing and pushing and shoving my brothers were doing, especially when Alby came along. I would curl up into a ball under one of the bunks, like a pebble holding tight as waves crashed overhead. Punches were thrown and book pages torn, names shouted and fingers pointed.

Occasionally, I was the puncher, the finger pointer, the breaker.

Once I spat in Joe's Sea-Monkeys because no one would listen to me.

They all died. He cried, but I cried more.

I pick myself up off the floor. Without looking at Frank, I climb onto the mattress next to him. His name is carved in jagged letters on the bottom of the top bunk, where I used to sleep. I close my eyes, turn my face into his shoulder. I expect him to push me away, but he doesn't. I hold my breath and count to ten. Then twenty. Thirty. Forty. We drift into sleep while everything keeps changing around us.

father christmas doesn't come
but the doctor does
and someone else
with shoes that click
and a smile that says
sorry.

dad gets us to wait outside
and we sit in a line
on the dead grass.
i know the cicadas are singing
but i can't hear them.

then dad comes to the door
'rose,' he says and he looks at his hands.

in your bedroom he has laid three dresses on the bed.

the blue one with wooden buttons
*you—standing with the other parents
at the school assembly.
me—holding my certificate finding
your eyes
in the crowd. you let me skip afternoon maths
and we ate ice-creams from the petrol station
peters vanilla dripping on our legs.*

the red one with the bow at the back
*you—eating spaghetti at the italian restaurant
your curls in a low bun, a few strands around your face*

us—fighting over the last piece of garlic bread
me—hoping i look like you one day.

the ugly brown one from aunt lisa
big white spots
a sticky-outy skirt
you—nodding, smiling, twirling
then winking just for me.

in the wardrobe i find your green one
threadbare, sunlight spilling
through the holes.
you—in the garden
weeding singing pruning
you—next to dad on a grassy riverbank
you—holding my head to your heart
you—living.

the nurse has washed your body
gently closed your eyes.
i hover by the bed while she
dresses you
it is not pretty, nor graceful
your tiny body looks
heavy.

i kiss your cheek and go

back outside
i know
i'll never see you again.