

JASPER CLIFF

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Toby presses deeper into the shade cast by the minni ritchi tree. He has seen few lush as this one, outstretching so many shiraz-coloured limbs. Usually, they are gaunt and spindly. He tries to imagine the tree's taproot, plunging metres down into some hidden aquifer deep in hot rock.

He peers down at the broken granite outcrop. Little can be known of what came before by standing here now. These were scraps by which only snatches of other lives could be gleaned. Mostly, they had left behind damage. Where the ochre rock has been chipped by tools blunted back to stone themselves by now. The only evidence of their passing is how they've wounded the earth.

He peels the faded black cap from his head to paw at the sweat on his brow and turns his eyes to the fierce sky, as if this could be the source of his sustenance. Some heavy, pitiless aquifer above; his taproot always reaching but never gaining hold. Toby wants to escape all this damage but now it's too hot to move.

The giddiness whacks him out of nowhere. He's got the heat-dizzies. Pushed it too far, been out here too long. The car becomes

something to aim for, the only thing to hold his path true; the only thing to stop him trailblazing into a perpetuity of wattle scurf.

Once back in the cab, he twists his key in the ignition and redirects the fan so the aircon hits him right in the face. He smiles as the blood throbs in both ears. Then peers out at the world baking through the windshield and he can pretend it was never so close to claiming him, body and soul. He's never experienced heat like this before. It would be so easy to just give over to it.

Toby listens to the engine lurch back to life and he loops around in the dirt to make for the station road. Now he's roused himself from the watery world of mirage outside, he does wonder what keeps him fixed in place; he wonders what keeps him from leaving the cold cab of the car behind and cutting a line out into the mulga.

The answer is simple. Mum and Dad, he thinks. *Hell, even Lachlan*. His family has always been his taproot.

This late in the day, he can't believe it isn't cooling down yet. This coming summer might cook the earth like a roast chicken but perhaps this country can endure whatever awaits. After all, it's survived so much already. The planet's tectonic tantrums, broiling summers and ice ages, and the whitefellas – its greatest challenge of all. Whitefellas like himself searching for what can only be found in the clutch of mulga.

Toby goes vacant and the country streams all sides and before him, and it fills him up. It reaves whatever he might've been before and he becomes only the magnitude of *it*. This baked-dry thing which has endured the volcanic rupturing of the planet settling itself into place, shouldering hungrily from a primordial ocean, just so it can see the sun.

Hardly aware he's smiling again, bright as the scalding earth out there, he looks back down at the station road and sees the perentie just a few metres ahead. Toby gasps with surprise and plants the brake. All happening so fast, he wonders if he's still a bit heat-slugged because now he's seeing everything happen in slow motion.

The perentie blinks at the Prado screaming towards it through a carmine-red curtain of dust but doesn't move. When in danger, it roots itself to the baking dirt road. Realising he's not going to straddle the goanna but plough its head into the gravel, Toby pulls on the steering wheel too hard. The cab tilts ever so slightly but he doesn't feel the world tip off its axis. Instead, he watches a falcon swing in and claw at the perentie.

The two lock claws for the briefest moment. Falcon and goanna. As the Prado swings out of control, Toby's relieved to see he'll miss them both, and he wonders how long this battle has been playing out. How far these skirmishes can be traced across the country's itchy, rumpled skin.

Toby's sweating so much he can feel any purchase he once had on the steering wheel loosen. Watches the wattle blossom sprinkle the windshield. The car clumps to a halt on the roadside, nudging a gaunt minni ritchi tree.

He laughs so hard it sounds like a shrieking stranger is hiding in the back seat. He quickly rests the engine, cracks open the driver's side door and steps out. Checks the sky but the falcon is nowhere to be seen, having coasted away. The perentie is watching him from the middle of the road after narrowly escaping the falcon's claws, still hasn't budged, not even after the Prado nearly hit it and then skidded up against the scrub in a rampage of pink chalk dust.

The goanna finally turns away from the beaming stranger – just another whitefella passing through – and drags itself, over a metre long, off into the rock litter. Toby trails after it, the air so hot it's like drawing in breath just millimetres above a campfire. With the sun in decline, the perentie leads Toby across primeval ground lit red but capped with black stones.

He loses sight of the goanna only when he looks up and sees the granite outcrop snuggled between stands of minni ritchi. These rocks too have been chipped at, battered and cracked and hewn. Refolded for purpose. The Chinese prospectors were all through this country, only thirty kilometres west of Cue. As prolific gardeners, they often sought shade to foster their crops. Sought shade in country where there was so little. And then took full advantage of it.

But now there's only ruins, same as the last lot he visited. A still-standing stone wall, pieced together from granite bits, fetched from the land all about. Toby kneels and stares at it. How might a visitor pass through without leaving a scar like this?

He's just stood to go, not hearing the scuttle of the goanna as it returns to the liquid hot heart of the country, like water trailing back to the boiling aquifer below, possibly preparing for its next Herculean battle with the falcon, when something catches Toby's eye. Away from the dreck of the garden granites is a lone orange boulder. It's enormous, bigger than the Prado. A lonely moon having crashed to earth. A sole shrub fingering from its shoulder.

'Check you out,' Toby says.

When he approaches, his gaiters crunching in the stony litter, he sees there's a hole in the side of the lone rock. From back

here, it looks like a mouth. Looks like it might say something to the visitor if it could string any words together.

Despite the heat bearing down, Toby presses up against the weight of the orange granite. He kneels slowly, can feel the sweat forming a wet outline of his sunglasses where they sit unsteadily on his face. He peers into the mouth.

Something alive. It shifts around, swaddled within, at having the intrusive human stink fill its burrow. He can't imagine what might live inside this huge block of cooking rock and it's too dark in there to make out. So he peels off his sunnies and presses deeper, closer.

'Knock, knock.'

Whatever it is shuffles around restlessly now.

'Who's there?'

At first, he suspects it's one of his seizures. *Oh fuck no, not now.* But then realises this is different. Can't blame it on his epilepsy. Not this time.

He's been so good lately with keeping on top of his medication. Still, the edges of his vision crackle with static. Can't see it right because his body has started to spasm. Surprised spit jettisons from his mouth. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a shape knife from the aperture of orange rock, what looks like something emerging and resting its scaly hand on his chest and—

It's night now. After the heat of the day, the cold is unbearable, though the fat boy battles his way through the mulga. The voices of others so close, Cantonese by the sounds of it. The fat boy tries to be quiet. Can't bark out in agony though the pain is blinding. He weaves his way through leafless wattles, clutching at the enormous weight through his droopy cotton shirt.

He collapses here, at the base of the granite outcrop, and the fat boy knows he can flee no further. The pain-sweat has already soaked through the felt hat on his head and he flings it off into the scrub and only now lets out a growl of despair.

The boy breathes hard, whimpering intakes of starlight, and looks up at the folds of moon-hot granite looking back down at him. For the briefest moment, all of the boy's fears are dispelled, as if forming some wordless covenant with the watching rocks. The boy rubs both hands over his massively distended belly and it's apparent the boy isn't just fat, but his stomach has swollen like an infected limb which needs amputating.

He gives one last cry of horror before his long johns darken with blood. The soft granite absorbs his pain, laves the sweat on his brow with a breath of wind. The fat, crying boy can almost hear the rock's gentle voice telling him he is safe, that there is nothing to fear in this place. Telling him he should not resist what is happening, only that he should let it happen.

And he does. At first there's no sound in the boy's gory long johns. He reaches with fresh alarm through the muddy stuff below and finally shows the granite outcrop the infant which just emerged.

Not a boy but a girl. Girl and child still joined by a sausage link of flesh and yet one is much quieter than the other.

Too quiet.

It's only when the girl peers back at the moonlit granite, eyes beseeching, that another rush of breeze stirs the wattles and, finally, the baby cries out. The girl whimpers back with relief and clutches the slimy child to the chest of her cotton shirt.

It won't be long now before the others hear the baby's wailing, too loud to stifle in the cold night, so the girl with the cropped hair just lounges back in the rocks, in this her child's birthplace, and peers up

at the curves of the granite outcrop, thinking this would be an ideal and shady spot for her family's next crop.

Toby senses the back of his head clapping viciously against the ground but can barely feel it. Finally, the vision fades from his mind's eye and now there's only the orange boulder towering above him. Its mouth or anus or all-seeing eye peering back down at him, sympathetic.

Toby glares up into the boiling sky and rakes his elbow across the saliva which has heaped across his chin and neck. Then scuttles back from the hole, in case it shows him some other truth, buried in the deep shelving of granite.

Once back to his feet, he hangs there staring, and can't be sure he didn't imagine the whole thing. But when he looks back at the garden granites, he sees everything is almost the same as his vision; perhaps only a century has passed since the Chinese girl gave birth here.

Toby's momentary fear, mindless as it is, passes with the hot wind which wends off the baked ground. It's a gift, he realises slowly, suddenly ebullient. To have been shown what he was shown. He returns to the eye in the boulder now and leans against the cooking surface of granite and lounges there.

From here he can see a nest of mulga all interlocked to form a high eyrie above the soft bedding of purple everlastings. He watches the falcon swing back to its place up there, possibly just returned from its latest conflict with the perentie. The bird of prey's periscopic eye able to see so much and so far, but perhaps not as much as Toby has just seen.

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