

MELANIE PRYOR

*Blood Land*

I am a salt-white alien in the red dust. An ant thumps over a thorn in the silence of the midday sun. There is no change here, only flatness scabbed with saltbush and buffel grass. There is no solace from the grit, from my loneliness. I suck in dryness, breath by breath.

My father and I are driving from Adelaide to Amata, a remote Indigenous community in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands. My father lives there, with the dogs that bite your ankles, the children who clamour for you with chainsaw voices, and where the ranges rise like water-colour shadows behind the town and watch, sacred and immutable, in the silence.

Our ears curve along the same line. I look at his jaw in profile as we drive, and wonder if my skin will take the same shape as his. He speaks Pitjantjatjara with an accent I haven't heard; with the dips and flicks of his voice, he is someone I don't know. I listen to the faint whine of the giant tyres tracking us across the map, and feel my feet curling up into themselves. My breaths are small. I do not belong here.

We sleep under a bloody eclipse the first night. Dad drinks a cup of hot, sweet, instant coffee, sets up the camera tripod to track the eclipse. I watch the moon rise, an eerie pink burnt red around the edges, and make myself tea in the darkness. It doesn't brew properly, and after a while I tip it down a deserted ants nest. Everything smells sharp and hot. I feel on edge, half throwing myself into this unknown place, half thrown. The tree I sleep under lets most of the stars through and I wake to a hot sun cracking open my eyelids; Dad is buttering some slices of bread for breakfast on the tailgate and already has the car packed. We eat quickly. I pick at the clumps of butter and drop them on the ground surreptitiously, remembering the sandwiches Dad made for school lunches. He cut them in precise triangular halves and wrapped them neatly in plastic, wiping the bench down behind him and chastising Mum for leaving her teabag in the sink, but there was always a smile in the corner of his mouth. The band of his wedding ring used to burrow into his finger, but the pale line where the ring was has tanned over now. We fold ourselves into the car again, striped with red dirt, hair on end. I turn my phone off. It will be useless out here.

At a petrol station that is like an oasis, I count the wheels on a road train. The beast is a hulking, powerful predator, metal-creaking, roaring dust. I am dwarfed before it, stretching my bare legs against the petrol pump, dirty-toed and wanting an ice-cream. The man who hops lightly down from the cab has small, dark eyes under a tightly-jammed cap, and a coiled spring to his walk that speaks of viciousness. This is a man who wears the destroyed animals on the front of his truck like some men wear a badge on their chest. He glances at me as he passes and I look away.

We leave the road that splits Australia like an artery and drive onto a different map. This one is signposted by dead cars lying rusted and belly-up, and pieces of flayed rubber like strange crabs crawled out of the sundried scrub. Wedge-tailed eagles hang in the colourless sky, thin-flanked cows chew plastic and watch us pass with fly-filled eyes. Dad stops somewhere on the red dust road and lets some air out of the tyres so we can navigate the craters in the track. For a moment I am thirteen years old, bumping down a dirt road on the back of Dad's scooter, clinging to his middle, my eyes squeezed closed. I take my shoes off and climb onto the bonnet of our four-wheel drive, squinting into the glare. Something leaves me, falls from my lungs, eases from my skin. A kind of emptiness blazes from the inside out, momentarily searing. I drop down to the sand, feet burning, melting into the land that rises around me.

The single food store in Amata is ripe with sweat and small children, plastic-wrapped kangaroo tails and bok choy, oranges, canned tongue, and frozen apple pies. I think of the Pied Piper as children trail behind me, hailing Dad with cries of "*Tjilpi, tjilpi!*" "Old man, old man." Perched on a bench with bikes thrown at their feet, a handful of boys watch us with cool eyes and the beginnings of smiles. They point and mutter "Blue eyes, same eyes." Someone asks if I am Dad's twin. Someone else, if I am his wife. A small girl, nose crusty and feet bare, wraps her arms around me, won't let go of my hand. Dad shows me the men's art building, and I peer through the glass at maroon waterholes and black footprints and pink dots like the countless flecks of quartz in the sand here. A gust of wind lifts my shirt and there is a shriek as my belly-button piercing is revealed: the girls converge upon me and tug at the jewel, asking if it is real. With my laughter they grow bolder, reaching up to pull on my nose ring. Their eyes are dark and clear like deep water, their hands gentle.

That night Dad and I drive up a hill overlooking Amata to watch the sun go down. There are no fences here. Dad leaves the track at what seems to be a random point and starts zigzagging slowly up the hill. At its peak we walk out to a stretch of flat rock, picking our way through tussocks of buffel grass. I pause a few times to dig out the three-cornered jacks burrowing into my socks. Dad is ahead of me, his face turned to the enormous expanse of plains stretching to the east in faded greens and pinks. A handful of dirt tracks thread like pale veins further away than I can see.

We stand in silence, the air warm and humming. The peak we are on sits about halfway up in the nest of hills; they rise around me with incomprehensible magnitude, riven with creases and thrumming with the last light, transforming as we watch from burning gold to deep pink to the secret colours of sea-deep shadows. They are more silent than anything I have ever known. How have I not felt what is under my feet until now? I am nothing more than breath, cell, muscle. Fleeting. Limitless.

Dad turns towards me, adjusting the sock guards over his boots. He looks up at me and his face is earthen, gentle and sweet like the colours of the distant horizon. There is a contentedness in the stance of his browned legs, an intangible rightness to his being here in this place that is so piercingly clear to me I am left without words. What I had vaguely sensed is so immediate before me now. I knew that he was lonely and that he missed us more than anything, and I had sometimes worried when he took himself off on long hikes in the heat, but now I understand. He is ingrained with this place, made of the red land, breathed in by the hills and held by the heart. I stand motionless, bearing witness.

In the car on the way back we sit in companionable silence, rattling together down the hillside, commenting occasionally on the twisted trees, agreeing that salad sandwiches are all right for dinner as well as lunch.

Elizabeth hammers on the door, calling for *tjilpi* to take her goanna hunting in his four-wheel drive. Dad turns to me and asks if I want to come. I look at him in apprehension. I don't like eating meat. I don't want to see a goanna having its head staved in. Dad sees something on my face and says, simply: "This is how things are done out here."

I am suddenly ashamed. Animal ethics, the words that had sprung to my mouth a second before, feel grossly inappropriate. In this moment, I am acutely aware of my privilege and softness: I have never known what it is to go out and gather food in order to not be hungry that night. My understanding of kindness and cruelty to animals, my fear of seeing a life cut short, is incongruous, shamefully out of place. I am in a different world. Here, being alive is immediate and dusty, blazing, beautiful. My body feels stripped. Raw, real, muscled. It strikes me that my thoughts are fearful in comparison. The nameless anxiety, numbing sadness. Fears that used not to be mine, but now make me unfamiliar to myself. When did I become like this?

I peel my legs off the couch. "Yes. I'll come."

Dad nods and throws me the sunscreen.

I don't think I can bear the harshness of this place. I don't want to see the valley of dried mud where over two hundred horses, camels and cows died, mired in the bog to lie, decomposing, until they were just stink and bone. I found a lollipop yesterday, intact in the dirt, and I am keeping it in my pocket to give to the girl with impossibly dark eyes, whose face is closed with a secret that makes my chest heavy. Her legs are skinny, her flyaway hair bleached at the ends, slightly kinked and frizzled in places like the hair of most of the girls her age. It makes my heart clench to know of what she has been forced to know. There is a great white aeroplane in the back of my mind, a room with ferns and piles of books that all belong to me; soft glowing fruit in baskets and silver shoes and someone I climb trees with, who kisses me like I'm the last water on earth. What is waiting in my life overwhelms me, here, leaning up against a shed wall that smells like piss and petrol, with mongrel puppies rolling in the dirt at my feet and the sound of absolutely nothing happening because nothing is happening here. We passed a boy about my age the other afternoon, walking slowly down the street, dragging his thongs. Dad greeted him with "*Palya*" from the car window and turned back to me. His eyes were heavy.

"Walking around is one of the only ways to fill the time here."

I looked back at the boy, my throat aching with something I didn't have words for. I think Dad felt it too. This lollipop is a kindness I'm guarding in my pocket. For a moment, hot tears swell at the thought of the distance between where my life waits and where I am now.

I fly home tomorrow. Dad will drive me to the airport at Yulara where we will wait together, talking occasionally, watching a man in a hi-vis vest wave a flag outside, bald head

shimmering in the heat. Dad will run his hand through his gossamer hair, wincing in sympathy and muttering about hats. He will hurry back to the car, his sturdy sandals flopping against the asphalt, and bring me a rescue-remedy lozenge for the flight. I will slip it into my pocket, touched by his sweetness. Dad is prepared for everything; his car is neatly organised with damp hand-wipes for lunches on the road, drink bottle coolers made from socks, a hand-made stylus – a ground-down toothbrush end – for the keys on his phone that he finds too small for his fingers. He will fold me in his arms as a bell sounds in the overhead speakers, and we will both get teary, holding tight for a few seconds longer, trying to smile and finding it hard to look at each other. Dad's voice will become gruff and he'll make sure my bag is buckled properly, that I've got my ticket, and I'll watch him and feel more love than I can voice.

Months after, there will be an evening I think back on often. Dad stands at the kitchen sink, his silvery hair freshly trimmed, a weathered tan-line now visible at the back of his neck. The pale skin is somehow delicate, reminds me that he was like me once. That he is vulnerable in places I don't see. He spoons baked beans into his mouth, neck thrust slightly forward above the vague swell of a middle-aged belly.

"I have baked beans for dinner about once a week. I really like them," he says as he contemplates the darkness beyond the window above the sink. Outside, unseen in the dark, a metal safety cage surrounds his small yard. Bougainvillea climbs all over the cage, its fuchsia flowers bright against the red sand background. He spoons the beans in at the same pace as I do, slightly too fast, getting the job done. After he has finished, he rinses the bowl and turns it upside-down on the dish rack, wrings out the cloth and hangs it over the tap.

"Want a cuppa, love?" He takes down the same cup he drinks from every time, squat, thin-rimmed.

"No thanks, I won't sleep."

He nods, brings his tea over to the table where I'm writing in my journal. We sit for a while, not needing to talk. Later, I lie in bed and listen as he turns off the lights, creaks down the corridor. It's quiet outside. I wonder if there is a moon. The hills would be dark now, the grass cool, the red sand waiting for the dawn.