

JOEY

Dad long dead now too, but I remember sitting in his lap out on the wraparound porch and shining a flashlight out into the dark of the paddock. Dozens of kangaroos stood taxidermy-still in the beam, stuffed with cotton and their insides somewhere long gone or ground into dogfood. Behind them the glowing ovum of the moon breaching the tall grass and spinning dislike in the fluid-gloom. Dad ruffling my hair in his fingers. The joeys wriggling lumpish in their mumma's pouches.

it must be so comfy in there

maybe i'll trade you

i bet a joey's got less attitude

what's an attitude

it's what you've got

no i don't

see, right there

Then it was usually dinner and it was usually in front of the TV. We watched free-to-air and ate chicken and green beans. From outside we could hear the demonsong of the mating possums, the shrieking and the hissing. The cricket's crying metronome. There was a dog snoring at my feet. He was a mutt but must've been mostly cattedog on account of the blueish coat and the big sad head. He was skinny for an old boy and covered in warts. He was called Skink, cuz he was always eating little lizards he found. I remember pushing my toes through his fur, poking them into his soft warm belly.

When dinner was done I liked to go right back to the porch. Over the years it had started to slump over so anything you dropped would roll away from you. I gripped the flashlight tight. Dad came and ruffled my hair. He let me sip his beer but I didn't like it.

yuck

beer's like back pain
you'll only get it when you're older

I stared out into the field, holding my eyes open with my fingers, trying to resist closing them. The flashlight balanced in my lap. I was looking at a roo. It was looking back at me.

why aren't you blinking
it's a staring contest
you're gonna lose that game
roos don't blink

My eyes dried out in the Summernight heat. I had to blink. Then everything was blurry and wet. Smudged stars floating in black water. The cardiac moon pulsing and the glow like blood flowing in the pale veins of the milky way and dripping down into the world and pooling silver in the eyes of the kangaroos. But they kept staring. They never blinked.

In the morning we drove into town with Skink in the backseat. I hung my head out the passenger window. Beside the tarmac there was always kangaroo roadkill in various states of decomposition. Some just looking like they were sleeping funny. Some with their stomachs eaten away and their jagged ribs clawing upward. Once, I saw a roo splayed out Christlike

and its guts hanging limp out its opened belly. Blood hissed and congealed on the boiled
blacktop. Other roos stood around with their heads down like some strange roadside funeral.

do animals get sad when
somebody dies

of course

is that why Skink
is so sad

how do you mean

cause he misses Mum

Skink's always been a sook

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I remember one night better than some others. For dinner Dad roasted potatoes and carrots
and a big hunk of beef. By the time Dad finished his food, I had barely touched mine.

eat up

i'm not hungry

you're always hungry

why don't kangaroos blink

i'm not sure of

the science of it exactly

is it cuz they don't wanna miss anything

go on

eat up

When the dishes were done I went right back out to the porch and flicked on the flashlight.

But there was nothing out there. Dad came and ruffled my hair.

is the flashlight broken

no

then where did all the roos go

i dunno sweetheart

probably got sick of you

shining that thing in their eyes

I moved the flashlight's beam slowly across the paddock. Nothing out there, nothing at all.

Then Dad grabbed my hand and held it still. It took a moment, but I saw it. There was a roo laying on its side, facing away from us. Dad sighed and kissed me on the forehead.

its sleeping

no

roos are nocturnal baby

what does that mean

they only sleep in the daytime

like you sometimes

sure

can we go look at it

it's dead baby

can we go look at it

sure

Skink came with us. The dead roo in the flashlight's blinding halo, getting closer and closer. Its fur was matted and wet and winestained. Skink sniffed the corpse then prostrated beside it in mourning. Dad kept his hand on my head. The flashlight making the blood sparkle like the deepred starry sky of another world. Dad took me around to the front side of the roo, where it lay facing toward the moon. Its eyes were wide open and empty. Bulging belly slick with blackblood and something else; the sticky sheen of saliva. There was a strange growth on the lower stomach, just below the pouch. This palepink lump, the size of a little-toe. But the lump was moving. I knelt down to get a closer look. The lump shivered and crawled toward the pouch. In the flashlight's beam it became transparent. Golden veins woven throughout its blank body. A shrunken heart thumping darkly like a shivering pebble. It had no eyes, no ears, nothing at all but new flesh and the beginnings of bones thinner than hairs.

poor thing

what is it

newborn

what's it doing

trying to get to the pouch

don't move

where are you running to

I ran back to the house and grabbed one of my t-shirts. When I returned, I reached down to where the newborn clung to its mother. It resisted with the little strength it had, but it was no use; I pried it away like peeling a scab.

baby

don't do that

I laid the newborn down inside the shirt and then bundled it up, doing my best to create a pouch. The creature was shuddering. I hurried back inside and sat by the radiator with the pouch in my lap, trying to keep the newborn warm. Dad was shaking his head, ruffling my hair.

it's not gonna work like that, sweetie

it's too young

it needs a mother

no it doesn't

let's take it to the vet

if you really want to give it a go

i can do it

i'm gonna call it Bunny

cuz kangaroos look like

big rabbits

darling

don't do that

go away

sweetheart

leave me alone

Dad sighed and watched me for a minute. Then he went to his room. I sat there by the radiator with the pouch in my lap. Now and then I peeked inside, just to check that the newborn was still wriggling around. Skink was curled up beside me and snoring or whining. I knew he was dreaming about her. I knew cuz of the way his eyelids moved.

I tried to stay awake, tried to fight off the dreams, but they got me in the end. I dozed off with the shirt in my lap, the newborn shivering within. I dreamt that I was deforming. My hair uprooting and drifting away like the florets of a dandelion. My skin peeling back, revealing a pure, clammy substance beneath. Eyelids closing slow, then becoming sealed shut. Ears like spools of flesh furling inward until they had degenerated entirely, until they were just two holes either side of my featureless head. I was a newborn roo. Eyeless and glossy pink. Blue heart the size of a babytooth. Warm and safe in my mother's pouch. Asleep, deep asleep.

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When I woke up, I rubbed my eyes till they started to hurt, to make sure they were still there. Then I peeked into the pouch. The newborn had stopped shivering. It had turned white. I don't know when it died, could've been anytime during the night. Only seeing it perfectly still did I realise how much it had been quaking and contorting when it was alive; now it was limp and shapeless, like a substance that a cat might vomit up. I shone the flashlight on it. Glowing veins spiderwebbing through its pale body, leading mazelike to the tiny blue heart now unbeating. I sat there staring at that stagnated heart for I dunno how long.

Eventually Dad woke up and he kissed me on the forehead and took the pouch from my arms. He disappeared outside for some time. Then he came back and sat with me. Kissed me on the top of the head and whispered into my hair.

it's okay baby

I was crying. I looked into the pouch, where it hung half-open in his grip. It was empty.

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I got Dad to teach me how to use the sewing machine. He took great care with it, cuz he was afraid I would stitch my fingers together on accident or something.

i know someone
who got her hair stuck
in a sewing machine
can you guess who

I spent my days stitching together blankets with red-flanelettes from the kitchen and Dad's T-shirts and Mum's old dresses. Dad asked me what I was doing. I never answered him. I started not talking much at all.

sweetheart
this isn't like you
please tell me what's going on

When I wasn't at the sewing machine I was sitting with Skink amongst the kangaroos, all of us lazing about in the sun. I looked closely at the joey's poking their heads out their mum's pouches. Some were hairless with fresh eyes only just opened, red-irised with shiny oilslick pupils and a cloudy blueish film. Some without eyes at all, only dark spheres developing under a thick, half-transparent pinkish membrane. I cried watching them and I didn't know why.

One morning, Dad drove us into town to visit Mum. I sat with my head out the window. Sky above was blue forever, like how it must've looked before clouds ever first gathered. The

farmland was all wrong, though. Everything deeply tanned, burnt, waiting to burn. This motherless expanse of brown or yellow grass, sheep standing in ritual formation trying to summon just a drop of rain, black horses hooded with flymasks and the midges swarming locustlike.

The roadside was littered with kangaroo corpses festering in the jaundiced sunlight. Too many to count. And the living gathered around and leaning back on their tails with their ears down and their arms hanging forward with hands almost folded together. The dead with concaving flesh and their bones crushed. I wondered if there were joeys in their bleeding pouches. Dad was talking.

need to take Skink to the vet

cuz he's got a lump

and it feels funny

We left flowers on her grave and stood a while staring into the ground. On a hill overlooking the cemetery a mob of kangaroos were grazing. Butcherbirds were perched upon headstones like small spirits in monochrome. Sunshine came down as a fall of bright white rain and gathered blindingly in reflective surfaces, carmirrors going by in flashes of light and streetsigns flickering candlelike. I felt Dad squeeze the back of my neck gently. He knelt down and turned me to look at him. There were tears painting dark trails down his face.

it's just you and me

we won't make it

if you don't talk to me

But I didn't know what to say. I didn't have the words for it yet. On the drive home Dad wouldn't let me turn on the radio.

if you're not gonna say anything
then you'll have to deal with the silence

The world out the car window was bright and sickly. The harsh sunlight seemed to make it featureless, flat and blank. The trees and the hills shrouded in glare. The blacktop twinkling and bubbling, slick with bonedry glow. Dad's face painted by the sun pouring through the windshield, his nose and eyes and mouth vanishing in a tide of blinding light. I longed for somewhere dark, far away from the sun, somewhere small and comfortable where the light can't get in. I closed my eyes and imagined I was there.

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Dawn came just as I finished up at the sewing machine. I'd used up two blankets, four flanelettes, three of dad's shirts, six of mum's dresses, three pairs of my socks, and the insoles from a pair of Mum's gumboots. They were stitched together haphazardly in a shape like a big sleeping bag; a rounded space that I could crawl into. I dragged it outside to the porch. It had a strange weight to it, despite being made up of things which were soft and thin. Skink came with me. Dad wasn't awake yet. There was a mob of roos in the field. I went toward them.

A joey was hopping circles around its mother. It was still hairless but had eyes and ears and everything else. When it saw me coming over, it climbed into its mother's pouch. She stood, watching me with these big black eyes like spheres of harvested night. The joey poking its

tiny head out and squinting. I laid it on the ground. This hollow I had sewn together from so many gentle things. I crawled inside. Skink came in too.

Pitchblack, and swimming with a kind of organic heat. This membrane I had built for myself. I knew the kangaroos were gathered around, but I couldn't feel their staring. I was in my own edgeless reality, far away from them. Skink liked it. He could smell Mum in her clothes. I could as well, if I focused. But I didn't know what the smell was called. I just called it Mum.

Felt a hand pressing through the fabric of the pouch and caressing me. I wriggled around, trying to shake off reality, but the hand found me no matter where I moved within the darkness. It stroked my hair through the coarse material of a tea-towel.

baby

what're you doing

i'm a joey

I heard a rumble, a sound like the sky cracking open, the omen of lightning. In the world beyond the pouch there was a storm brewing, the first there'd been for a long time.

is Skink in there with you

i can't hear you

yes you can

i don't have ears or eyes yet

yes you do

Then the rain came, the wet stampede. Dad sighed. The green smell of damp soil found its way into the pouch. I blocked my nose to it.

can i come in

i'm getting soaked out here

I didn't say anything. Dad sighed again and lifted the pouch open. Grey light spilled inside and gathered palely. Dad's silhouetted portraited in a circular dark. Beyond him were dusk clouds bubbling like raw petroleum, the black rain coming down tarry and heavy. Some found its way into the pouch.

Dad crawled in. Once the opening fell shut behind him, the warm darkness obscured everything once more. I felt him wriggling around, trying to get between me and Skink. He wrapped me in his arms and scratched my head.

don't touch my hair

i don't have hair

you do have hair

you have beautiful hair

no i don't

i'm a joey

in my mummy's pouch

i don't have eyes

i don't have hair

i barely have a heart

of my own

oh darling

i miss her too

We didn't talk for a while. Just the sound of the rain, the many strange whines of Skink's sleep, the thunder here and there. The fabric of the pouch had soaked through. It stuck against me, seemed to fuse coldly with my face. As if it was sewing itself to my skin.

why don't we get out of this thing

it's getting stuffy in here

i'm not ready

i'm still sad

oh sweetheart

it'll always make you sad

but you'll be alright

Skink was the first to leave the pouch. Then I let Dad carry me out. The rain was coming down hard. There were kangaroos stood like statues all around. They had merged with the night, lightless against the burgeoning moonglow besides the soft shimmer of their eyes and the wet sparkle of their dripping fur. Slippery eyes like dark mirrors. They didn't blink. But it was alright.

The pouch was weighed down by the rain it had absorbed. Dad helped me drag it through the field. The kangaroos sinking away into the gloom. Too dark even to see their eyes. Too dark even to see the rain which was falling now with such weight and frequency that it seemed the

entire black sky was melting and dripping its cold renderings. We threw the waterlogged pouch over the hills-hoist. Then we went inside.

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The rain stopped in the middle of the night and by late morning the pouch was already dry. Dad pulled it down from the clothesline. Together we took apart my shoddy work, separated the blankets from the shirts and the dresses and the tea-towels. We put Mum's clothes back in the cupboard. Some of them were torn up but Dad said it was okay.

I sat on his lap out on the porch, the flashlight sun over the world and all of us hypnotised in its beam and dreaming this strange world where mothers die and roos never blink. There was a mob of them out in the field, laying down or grazing lazily. Skink doddered over and laid down with them. Dad kissed me on the head.

when Skink dies

we should feed him to the kangaroos

he would like that

kangaroos are herbivores baby

what's that mean

vegetarian

oh

and anyway

when Skink dies

we'll dress him in human clothes

and bury him next to Mummy

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