

Father and Child

The boy lies flat on his stomach.

He lingers in the doorway, caught between the darkness of his son's room and the light from the halogen bulb in the hall. He closes the door behind him, letting the shadows swallow the picture books scattered across the floor, the shade of egg shell blue he chose for the walls, the stains on the carpet, and, placing a hand on his son's chest, he kneels and waits for the child to exhale.

It is three in the morning.

Outside the night air is heavy and thick. Melbourne is being smothered by a heat wave. Summer weather in this city follows a pattern: day after day of oppressive heat. And then, without warning, the spell is broken. The wind changes. A cold breeze arrives. Rain falls.

Rain fell the morning years ago when he found his daughter lying face down in her cot.

Still. Her skin cold to the touch.

She had had a fever the evening before and had fallen asleep in his arms, just like she used to in the first few weeks after they had taken her home from the hospital. They stroked her hair and rubbed her back to try and soothe her. They sang to her and kissed her on her forehead. They did everything that good parents were supposed to do. People told them that they were good parents.

A sick child.

Nothing unusual about that.

Something you expect to happen. Like Christmas or an electricity bill.

They buried her in the family plot about a mile from his father-in-law's property under a cloudless autumn sky. The land flat and dry and still covered in yellow stalks from last summer's harvest. A flock of corellas patrolled the horizon. Foxes, rabbits and kangaroos lurked within the scrub.

The gravesite lies at the end of a narrow strip of unsealed road encompassed by a thicket of bulokes and yellow gums. Here whole generations of local families are interred beneath sandy loam. A small village of elderly couples, young women who died in childbirth, and, of course, children.

Death would have been familiar to the parents of these children. They lived through war, depression, drought and hardship. Their intimate awareness of the isolation and the austerity of farming life would have yielded an intimate awareness of mortality. They knew that the land signified both abundance and peril. They knew that blood had been spilt to take the land from its indigenous inhabitants. They knew that everything and everyone that comes from the land returns to it.

I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord.

He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live...

...cut down, like a flower...

...he fleeth as it were a shadow...

Their confused friends and ashen-faced family placed flowers on his daughter's tiny coffin. After everyone had left they packed the car and drove back down the highway into suburbia. He spoke to a psychologist. His wife returned to work, and spent her evenings watching television. They both slept through the night without being woken by the cry of a small child. When they returned to the gravesite in spring the creeks had flooded and the fields had turned green. His father-in-law worried that the late rain would rot the crops.

Some nights he dreams that he is walking across a cold, treeless plain covered in morning fog. His life, it turns out, is merely a remote landscape that needs to be traversed. He presses on like a pilgrim in a foreign land trying to reach his destination without remembering where he is headed or where he is coming from. Memories are fragile, meagre things, he has discovered. And when he remembers the colours bleed into one another until he cannot separate the grief from the memory, as if he is pulling on the thread of a fraying garment.

Yet the memories endure.

His wife's scream ringing out like a siren.

The haggard, grey look on the face of the middle aged paramedic.

The cold, limp arm lying silently on the mattress.

And, what is worse is what lies beyond both grief and memory. Beyond what he feels and what he knows is what he can never know.

Did she feel any pain?

Did she feel any fear?

Did she cry out for them?

And then, when they didn't come, did she wonder why they had abandoned her?

It is too much to hope that it will pass one day, like a dream from the night before or a bad headache. He knows that the parents that buried their children at that rural gravesite did not bury their grief as well. Their grief was buried many years later when they were buried themselves.

Instead he sticks to the trail of grief and bears the burden of memory as best he can. And, as he watches his son's chest gently expand and contract on a warm summer night years after his daughter's death, the clearest memory he has of her emerges.

He is holding her in his arms for the first time. The room is empty. There are clean, white sheets on the bed; patches of dry blood on her scalp. Through the window he can see the street lights below and a dark velvet sky studded with silver stars.

He is waiting for his wife to be wheeled out of surgery. She has suffered a tear during labour. Just outside the door is the reception of the maternity ward where the nurse on duty for the evening fills out a report under a desk lamp. His daughter is curled up into a little ball. She is so silent and still that every now and then he will place his hand on her heart to check that it is still beating.

Hours pass. He should feel safe. Yet, as he waits for his wife to be brought back to him, as he absorbs the fragility of his daughter's new life, the shadows of much darker thoughts lurk at the back of his mind. Thoughts that as he remembers them years later feel like cold rain on a barren landscape.