

Red

Salty droplets, glistening, trickling, streaking against her pale skin. Unbidden, all-the-feelings simmered from somewhere deep within, bubbling up and over into hot, briny tears forming rivulets down her cheeks.

She hadn't expected the slam of the car door to reverberate through the early morning air. Yet, it did. She tensed, shoulders hunched, ready to run.

Even if she did run, there was nowhere to go.

Squatting behind the car, out of sight, maybe out of mind. She wasn't sure if even that was safe. The eruption of emotion staggered her usual sense of self; autopilot disrupted, she staggered, her gait wobbly like everything else.

When was the last time I slept?

As with so many other things, her memory failed her.

Probably too long, she mused, swatting her tears into submission.

Probably not since *before*.

Leaning cautiously back against the scratched, scarred bumper, she exhaled. A sigh? Maybe even a moan. It'd been only months, really. Yet, *before* was surely a lifetime ago. Her breath, forming frost patterns that danced against the early dawn, dissolved into mist as she watched. Slowly, slowly, her breathing slowed; her shoulders unclenched, and she uncurled her body from against the gravel, studying the scrapes her body left behind.

Still, she made a mark, somewhere in the world. Even if only on old gravel roads.

Somewhere, beyond the road, black cockatoos screeched and hollered, the sun erupting in a blaze of blinding colour beyond. Louder, louder, as they swooped overhead, dark shadows against a grey sky streaked with light. White tail feathers. Carnaby's, the rare ones. She'd always preferred the red-tailed ones, herself, with their flash of colour within their darkness.

Red.

It'd all started with red. She was tired, so tired that she wanted to puke. Did she? Maybe. She'd at least heaved over, trying, trying, maybe in the hope that purging whatever remained inside her would stop the nausea, stop the screaming, stop the ache that consumed her, like fire.

Blood used to be contained, *before*. As a child, she'd scratch the mozzie bites, scarring her limbs with half-formed scabs. Pick off the top, and the red would run, little, controlled rivulets that could be directed if you twisted your arm just so.

This...this was not that.

Now, the red clung to her, a dark streaky stickiness, clammy against her thighs. Blotches of colour, flashing against the ashen white-grey of her skin. Had she tried to wipe it off, clean it up, make it go away? Somehow, it'd coloured her hands as well. Maybe that was how.

And it kept coming, leaking or sometimes streaming from her exhausted body, puddling onto the floor beneath her, spreading as it mingled with whatever other liquids leached from her being.

She lay still, staring at the lights, motionless. As if dead.

Things being done to her body, in the unseen places, without sanction.

She closed her eyes.

It didn't stop.

Stop, she pleaded, voiceless in her desperation.

Fatigue stole her words, lost in unseen breaths rasped out amidst the noise.

Almost as if she wasn't even there.

Had her eyes been clenched shut? Adrift on the currents of memory, she'd lost herself again. Not for the first time, either.

Some moments replayed themselves, over and over, like an old record skipping on the spot. Without meaning to, she'd find herself *there* again, reliving the moment, the fingers prodding at her, the fatigue consuming her. And the blood, always the blood.

She opened her eyes cautiously, peering at her hands, half-expecting to see them smeared with red.

A calloused, worn white hand, littered with half-scratched bites, met her gaze.

Scabs maybe, a crusty brown against her once-ivory skin, but no blood on her hands.

Not this time.

An old woman's voice echoed in her mind. Her grandmother, a counsellor, prompting her, unbidden, to bring herself back to the present when she was lost to times past.

Five things you can see.

Trees. So many trees.

Good. Four more.

Little rocks. Like pebbles.

Keeping going.

The...the red eucalypt leaves uncurling, fresh to the world.

Two more.

Black birds. Red dashing against the night of their tails. Like...like blood in a dark room.

Like...

No! No, don't go back there.

One more thing.

Red dirt. Covering everything. Smearing it with its dust. Blood streaks, smearing everything, covering all the things.

The world turned red, once again.

Stop, she'd begged, words stuck inside her throat.

And they hadn't.

Like she wasn't even there.

Like she didn't even matter.

Would they at least let her wash? Even just her hands? Sticky, clammy, smearing the crisp white sheets with red.

When she was little, red had once been her favourite colour.

Her grandmother knitted her a jumper, red in all its shades. By the time it was ready to wear, she'd moved on.

Her new favourite colour had been turquoise.

A word found on a paint card as her parents trawled the hardware shop, their voices droning on as they made adult decisions that she quite frankly didn't give a damn about.

The blue-green, the colour of the ocean, the word that tasted like magic in her mouth?

So much better than red.

Turquoise.

Children could change, at whim.

Adults? Change was forced upon them.

She gritted her teeth, and closed her eyes again.

Pretending was one thing she'd always been good at.

She'd pretend none of this was happening.

Maybe that would make them stop.

Something faltered. Swaying slightly, she shivered against the coldness of the morning air. She hadn't thought to bring a jumper.

Breathe.

Good.

And again. In, and out.

In, and out.

Four things. What can you hear?

The wind. It's matching my breath, if you listen hard enough.

Three more.

Um...the cockatoos. Over the ridge now, out of sight. Their screeching carries on the wind.

That's it. Two more, now.

Crying. Someone sobbing. Oh, God...

Almost there. Hold on now. One more thing.

They're screaming now. Can't you hear them?

Can't they hear me?

A gloved hand shoves ice at her. Water.

They won't let her drink, let alone eat, but ice?

"Can you feel that?" a gruff voice demands. First time he's spoken to her.

Her words broken, she nods instead. Yes.

He gestures impatiently to a uniformed woman, bustling around in the corner.

"She'll need more."

They tell her it's five minutes later. She doesn't know if they're telling her the truth. Time has no meaning anymore, except for the brief moments of respite between the aches.

A clock ticks loudly on the wall. 9.32pm.

She's been awake for thirty-two hours straight.

Her head swims, and the gloved hand returns. More ice on the parts she cannot see.

No, I can't feel that.

Is he smiling beneath that mask?

He rummages in his black bag.

He rummages between her legs.

She didn't feel the ice. She did feel *that*.

"We had to cut you," he'll tell her, later.

Fire dances before her eyes, even as she squeezes them shut and wishes herself
anywhere but here.

She can't see it, but she feels it. Red, oozing, spurting, from her body.

And then...a piercing cry.

Someone pulls him from her, places his grey-blue body on her stomach. She reaches for
him, but he's gone. Off to the corner, with the bustling nurse and the doctor who forgets
to use his words with birthing women.

She sobs, silently she thinks, but the woman turns, one hand still on her newborn child.

"What are *you* crying about?" she hisses.

Finally, they heard her.

Three things now. It's going to be okay. Three things you can feel.

Cold. So cold, my hands even have goosebumps.

Good. Two more.

It was cold there, too. They took my socks away from me. Pulled them right off my feet.

Stay here. It's okay. Two more, remember?

The gravel. It's scratchy.

Well done. One more?

If I open the car door, I will feel his hand. The little fingers will clasp around my thumb.

That's it. Open the door.

Let him hold your hand.

In the early morning, just past dawn, a young woman with pale skin and curls tumbling out of her ponytail stands beside a gravel road in the middle of many trees. She sways, her little son on her hip, humming a tune from her childhood, lyrics long-forgotten.

Some things get lost in the past.

Some things remain with us, the past haunting our present.

The child chortles, adoring gaze fixed on his mother's face. His tiny fingers wrap around her thumb, clasping it tightly, as if he'll never let go.

Overhead, white-tailed cockatoos fly in the wake of their red-feathered cousins.

Peace, after the storm.