

HETTIE ASHWIN

*Roadkill*

It would be so easy to just close my eyes. But I can't.

I should be crying or screaming until my throat is raw and my tears cut canyons into my cheeks, but I'm not. I feel ... scared, although this word doesn't seem enough. Fragile? Broken? I think I feel broken.

My eye is level with the gritty, pale brown dirt. Every tiny little pebble, every minuscule stone is there, mocking my short life. They probably have been on the earth for a couple of millennia and I've only been here for fifty years. A mere squib. If I make my eye turn and try to focus, it hurts, but I can see the roo that hit me. Smack across my chest at the speed limit. We slewed across the road, the bike flipping onto our tangled lives, thumping, rolling, crashing over and over, bruising, burning, breaking until the inertia petered out, the energy spent.

We are linked, he and I. He is breathing. I am breathing and we are broken bodies, colliding through space. An accident in time. Of all the places in the world, the universe, the cosmos, we came together. It's almost a miracle.

I know this road. I have ridden this black strip thinking I had a purpose. Going places, on the move. It's been a theme of my life. Don't stop, or you will see the truth. Keep travelling. There are cars that travel this highway. People with a destination, a sense of an idea, a usefulness.

A car will be along and I'll be taken to hospital, patched up, flowers, well wishes and I'll go on with my life. All I need is someone to see me. Just one person. One person in the whole world who will be on the road going somewhere – and see me.

I know I will be alright, because ... I just know it. Hope is all I have and I can't let it go, not yet.

I want to move, and my mind commands my body, but there is something in revolt. The chain that links who I am to what I can be has snapped and all I can do is think and look and listen. The roo is thinking too. He is looking at me, I can feel it. He knows we are dying. We have each other and that is all. He knows there will be no rescue. No flashing lights. No sirens wailing their lament as they race along the bitumen ribbon, the white lines counting the minutes until a life is spent. There will be silence, and dreams.

A warm trickle is working its way down my leg. I try to believe it's my blood, my life leaking onto the ground, but I would be lying to myself, because I know it is the last vestige of civilised life letting go. It is too steady, too insistent and hot to be anything but piss. Then it stops and my degradation is complete. When the blood does come it is from my neck. Primordial ooze that seeps along the ground picking up the earth, bits of sticks, stones and carries them along in a trail that leads to nowhere. It congeals and slows its journey, turning dark red in the sun. My life is that trail. I raced out to see life, and then people and things attached themselves to me along the way. I had a vigour that was bright red and insistent. A desire to move beyond my confines and reach out. But I was caught in the sun and began to slow. Began to congeal and set boundaries until I was just a dry withered track. A trail blazed that no-one wanted to follow.

People just don't die on the side of the road. It doesn't happen like that. I will be missed. Someone might miss me. I should have made friends more easily. I should have let people in my life. Things can get so complicated with others, but I should have tried. I'm not a bad person just because I don't have friends. Relationships are complex, demanding, thorny, like three corner jacks.

The roo is rasping. Small gulps of life that spark and fade, spark and fade. With each laboured breath he knows he is closer to death. I don't think he will struggle. I wonder if I should. I'm just another animal, like him and why should I think different. I hope he doesn't suffer. My breath sounds like bubbling water. Does he know I'm dying? Does he feel any empathy for me?

I want to comfort him, but I can't move. I'll watch over him until he's gone. A lone sentinel to his passing. He is big. Probably two metres. Thick back legs, a strong tail. His body is still, just a faint rise and fall from his chest. I can just hear him and so I close my eyes against the inevitable, just for a moment, when there is a scream. A howling from the depths of his soul. A cry against all the injustice of the world to be caught on a road, in the middle of the bush, against the odds and smashed to the ground. For what? A bellow of pain and misery

at the inadequacy of his body to heal, to mend, to own the land once more. He spasms and turns his head to look at me. A look of understanding. A look of compassion. I want to howl, to cry, to beat my chest, but all I can do is blink. My throat croaks, my lungs are washed with blood and all I can do is blink.

I hear a car. It is so real I can see the passengers inside, air con on, radio on. They are going somewhere and are having a good time. I can see them look out the window and notice me. See the roo and my bike, broken. They will stop and call on their mobile phones. I'll be put in an ambulance and I'll be saved. It's close and I'm breathing hard, expectant.

I know if they had seen me they would have stopped. I might be in a ditch or behind a bush. Stinging tears of hope scold my wishful thinking. I squeeze me eyes shut and curse my optimism through gritted teeth.

Nature is all around me. If I'd only taken the time to look, to feel, to enjoy. Now I can see ants, bugs, tiny insects and flies. The flies are drawn to my blood. They scurry over the sticky pool, greedy for nourishment, not realizing I have to die to give them life. It's the natural order of things, but somehow I feel cheated. I feel I have more of a right to life than the flies, the ants and the insects. How can they profit from my life? It isn't fair. The roo can see that as he watches his own battle with the flies around his eyes.

"Close your eyes," I say to him from my mind, but I know he wants to face death head on, eyes wide open. He doesn't want to be blind to the inevitable.

The ants are methodical. Their scouts have found a source and it's like a gold rush. They are no different to us. Deplete the resource and move on. I can feel an ant on my face. It is looking for a way in, a way to the mother lode. All I can do is close my eyes.

It's hot. The sun is burning through my eyelids and I can hear feet. I can't help it, but I'm excited. Now I do want to live. I want to go on, to see things, to have a second chance at everything. I could make some friends. I might try to be open to love, to drink the cup of life. I can only open one eye, the one nearest the ground and so I search for salvation.

It is a crow.

It's pecking at the roo. He can't move, his eyes are fixed on me and he is pleading. I feel so totally helpless. So useless. It's been the story of my life. His last request and I can't accede. If I only do one thing in my life, this has to be it.

My mouth is dry. My tongue is cracked. My lips are blisters of raw meat. I know I have to think it to do it. So I begin to imagine how I can call out. How I can spit, cry out, move. It seemed so simple as a child. I used to do it without a care in the world. The action starts in my lungs. They are popping now. Big vomits of blood and air gurgle up my wind pipe and threaten to choke me. I don't want to think what they look like. So I imagine they are sprinter's lungs, bursting with life, oxygen and youth. They fill to capacity and the air travels up to my voice box. Those tremulous cords ready to sing at my command. Strings eager to vibrate with defiance. I open my mouth; the corners tight like dove-tail joints, and imagine I can shout to that devil in black. Get away, we're not done living yet.

I can feel life coming up and I look over to the roo.

I thought I made a noise. I felt I did, but the crow remained. I want to try again, but the disappointment of my attempt breaks my heart. I failed. I always fail. My eye is stinging and I know there are tears. Who am I crying for? The roo, or myself?

I'd like to believe in God. Perhaps that was missing in my life. Perhaps that's why no one will come. I don't believe. Would it seem opportunistic if I started now? Would my conceit let me? Even now I have to hold onto my pride. The roo has no notions of purpose. He sees life as it comes. I look at him and know we are not so different. No-one will mourn his passing. No-one will grieve for me. To the crow, the ants, the ground, we are nothing more than a way to survive. A nourishment to the cycle of life.

How long have I been dying? Perhaps my whole short life. The roo's breaths are shallow now, whispered, quiet as he waits. He's holding onto life by our connection. There is a thin line, a thread of life that we share, but it will be broken when he closes his eyes. If I am rescued, he will be left behind. Life isn't fair and he knows this truth, we all do.

I can feel a rumble from the ground. It's a low vibration that feels like the earth is getting ready to embrace us.

It's a truck.

Hope wells in my throat, my lungs, my broken heart and I try to temper the feeling. He won't see me. I'm too far in the bush. I think I'd rather die out here, nobly, silent, with pride, than be rescued and know no-one thought about me, no-one cared.

The truck is stopping. Air brakes hissing their protest as the rig comes to a halt. I try to be angry, but I'm grasping, greedy for life. Someone is running through the bush, blundering, cursing, thrashing to get to me. I can hear them breathing, panting, then nothing.

My mind is playing a cruel trick and the despair is a weight crushing my very soul. I can't even cry.

A voice.

I can hear a voice and I want to wallow in the joy, the moment of hope. A boot appears in my field of vision and it has stepped in my blood. We have made a connection. I can see the roo and he knows what I now know. Would I swap my life for his?

There is running and then I have a moment alone with the roo. It's never fair, I tell him in my thoughts. The boot returns and I know what I hear, but refuse to acknowledge it.

The roo grabs my gaze.

I care, I tell him. He holds me with his eyes and a single shot rings out.

His ordeal is over, mine has just begun.