

P.G. Condliffe

Myxomatosis Dreams

MY MOTHER LIKED TO TELL STORIES. I loved my mother. I loved her novels. I loved her stories. I remember when I was young and she used to just make them up, just like that—on the fly. She'd just start talking and this delicate world would ramble out of her lips, coming to rest in my imagination like seeds in loam. It was magic. One minute I'd be a small girl in bed, posters of Winnie the Pooh, Iron Man, and the White Rabbit on my pale blue bedroom walls, The Hulk angry on my doona cover, a Ghostbusters light plug casting its reassuring glow over the two of us while we imagined—and in the next minute I'd be in another place altogether. Much like the traditions of fire-light, my Ghostbusters plug set my Mum's fiery, curly mane into burning undulations while she spoke. I'd close my eyes and fall into those worlds for a few minutes, conscious of forgetting her as she spoke. That was her gift.

Mum believed in totems, you know, those little idols that cultures worship as family or gods or divine entities? But they were more to her than even that. Our house is full of them; they drip into rooms and hallways and flood our living room. They represent a collection of too many people, and beings for one house—possibly, no *probably*, too many for our whole family, deluging our spaces as they do. Our backyard is a forest of them; short and tall, they erupt around our Hills-Hoist as if in some corroboree that outsiders cannot and should not understand. Other stragglers sprout like weeds around our outhouse. Most guests find it unsettling. I can understand that; sometimes it creeps me out. They always watch you, talk about you, tell stories about you, and bring your life and past in parallel to their present. Sometimes I get momentarily confused and feel like one of their fictions, and no longer one of my own.

When I was a young girl and she would prepare to make up a story for me, Mum would always have a totem with her. Sometimes it was a small one, plucked from one of the windowsills; other times, it would be a great carved thing. She'd lumber it in with heaves and sweat, putting about the general fear that she was going to birth an expletive-laden hernia rather than a third child. Some were scary and some were just silly. Either way, she had to have them around to write, or to "tell." That's what she'd call it: "telling."

Mum's study is full of more totems than any other room in our house. It's a large room with an inset floor that is tiered up like one of the medical lecture theatres you see on TV. Instead of a metal slab for cadavers or operations, though, there is a desk made of pine. It's a plain desk, unvarnished and barely-finished, one that was evidently spat out half-formed and yet whole by some peculiar tree. It certainly doesn't look purposefully made. It looks odd, even more so in the midst of that room where the floor descends in great wide steps.

The steps themselves are full of rough carved figures, all of them animals, and some barely crawling out from lumps of rock or wood. The carvers must have seen something in the stone or the wood or the bone that gave them pause, or scared them, or terrified them into stopping, into only leaving a half-carving, a half-creature, trapped inside the material, to remain there until the universe finally cools and stills.

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I REMEMBER THE NIGHT WELL, ALTHOUGH not the when, but the what. I was about nine, perhaps ten; it was a summer's night and I was still in my Batman pyjamas. It was a few hours before the strangeness of dawn would chase down night's certitude. The rain had finished and the humidity was dragging its warm odour into the house. The windows in her study were open and the post-storm cloy groped blindly in. But the spectral moon was not enough lit, so I pulled the cord by the door. The bauble on the end of the pull was a brass trinket, a grotesque trifle that looked, in that moment, as if somebody had taken a shrunken head—a lonely cannibal's head—and cast it in bronze. Time had rubbed and wearied the metal into a distorted and worn visage, a sneering, coldly commanding memory of itself.

I let the door snick softly into its latch as I descended the tiers to the desk. I felt closely observed by all those animal apostles arranged round the room on their perches. It seemed that they were divided along tribal divisions.

I pulled out the chair and clambered up onto it. It was difficult. The chair wasn't quite right; it was uneven, and seemed to have been designed to be uncomfortable. The intervening spaces between me and the walls—those tiers—were cast in a shadow that disfigured the statues and totems.

Directly before me was my mother's old typewriter. She still cherishes it, the Underwood Universal Portable, and won't consider typing a word on anything else. The keys are worn to blindness. A blank sheet slept in the embrace of the machine's paper fingers. It had been always loaded and waiting for her. I remember looking at the audience of miniatures staring bemusedly at me, a child, and had commanded them from the chair. Although now I'm not sure that was how it worked.

I imagine I am my mother and, for a couple of minutes, I am her. Not her exactly—that's not possible, or at least I don't believe it is, not quite. Yet, in that chair, with her subjects around me, I felt like her, like more than simply my imaginary projection of her. I am not above the totems, but amongst them and, in a peculiar manner, I am here for their benefit. But then the chair bit into my supple arse, forcing me to hear. The shadows hid the figures in the darkness and forced me to see the stories that they seemed to want to tell me.

"Tell me your stories. I want to hear them. I want to tell them," I mumbled, scared to rouse the house from its quiet.

I'd heard my mum say that before, muffled as it was through the dampening of the thick oak door, when I'd press my ear to its knots and inhale the wonderful smell of its antique carpentry.

And it started in that moment, when the wind from outside had died down and a whisper of it had snuck into the room and careened off the walls. I closed my eyes, just as I would when my mother would "tell." And the statues spoke to me in a roaring cascade of whispers and gurgled breaths.

They told of places much older than me, of the majestic ancient palaces they'd known. They whispered of places and times before the cities and farms and tribes. I strained to hear of the civilisations they described, all of them now buried by aeons of dirt. Some saw Gilgamesh fight terrible angels; others had seen the sword leave and return to the lake; and one had even witnessed, from his place around a neck, the coming of the metal gods from the ocean. Amidst this cacophony of voices and history, I opened my eyes. I was typing, dreaming of my fingers flying over the keys and massaging fractured sentences and half-formed clauses out of the old machine. Afterwards I scanned the page of what writing my pudgy fingers had bashed out, labouring, as my schoolmates often did, over difficult clause constructions. But these were more difficult than what we had cov-

ered in school then—these seemed impossible. I understood them, but the stories the sentences told were unfinished, portals to silences.

And then, half glimpsing over the top of the page, I saw things move. The shadows shifted, and the murmurs began again. They sounded like streams, conversing in trickles and gurgles. Only it was the totems, the rows of animal totems that were all around me. And it seemed that they were jostling me, pushing in front of each other so as to be better heard, and yet unwilling to set foot within the radiance of the overhead light, and unwilling or unable to clamour over each other. I didn't get scared; it seemed odd, but natural. I knew then that the past needed a voice and in that moment and in that chair I knew that I was it. And they lulled me to sleep.

I awoke in the warm morning-light embrace of the open curtains, somehow back in my bed, but my doona cast off. It was the evidence of a fitful night's sleep. My sheets were wet like I'd been feverish. All I could remember for sure was at one point seeing through half-closed lids something regarding me curiously, as if that something was interested in me—and as interested in me as my juvenile mind was interested in it. At breakfast, still in the same pyjamas, I mentioned my night's experiment to Dad. He laughed and said I'd been busy. My brother, Ryder, heard over my shoulder, and snickered.

My brother was older than me, and my father and he both ribbed me for sleepwalking all the time. The running joke was that next time they'd find me asleep on a golf course or in a cinema. I didn't tell them I hadn't been sleepwalking, that I was no somnambulist. After breakfast, Mum called me into the study, her space. The lights weren't on, but it was bright. The sun intruded from all eight of the high, wide windows that framed the room. The figures in the space were silent and still and secretive as my mother hauled me up onto her hip.

In the sunlight, the totems merely looked like cheap antiques, too rough and shabby even for the dusty shops my parents frequented. In the daylight they had no lustre; they needed not only a good clean but, many of them, some repair, or perhaps should have found a new home in the trash. The desk drawer squealed as Mum opened it. And what did she retrieve from the darkness of that misshapen coffer? Pages and pages of convoluted gibberish. It took me several minutes to realise that it was my gibberish of the previous night. I was proud of it, and Mum praised me for it. I was set to become a writer, like her, she told me. I had the imagination for it, she said, and I could picture history as it wanted to be, could understand it as

it wanted to be told. I remember sitting on her lap for a while, the scent of her thyme and coriander deodorant soothing my mood as it enveloped me.

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IT WASN'T AS IF MY writing was a secret between me and Mum, but she seemed disappointed that I'd shared it with others, especially with Dad and Ryder. It's not like we weren't a loving family who all got along. We were. Right up until the accident. But they never understood the writing. Dad always found Mum's stories strange, perhaps threatening in their intensity, like they would overwhelm him. Though Dad related to Mum, I don't think he could ever relate to her writing. And while Ryder had enjoyed the stories he went to sleep with until he was a teenager, he got over them or grew out of them, I'm not sure which. I can't recall the period when Mum stopped going into his room to recount to him such tales after she'd left mine. I think Ryder just lost interest. I never saw him reading Mum's books or stories.

Unenthused by books, Ryder preferred films and sports. By the time I'd had my adventure in the "lair," I think Ryder had given up on telly as well, instead relying on rugby clashes for entertainment.

But Ryder became curious. There must have been fervour in my voice, in the way that I recounted my adventure. After all, boys are curious in the strangest ways. He started visiting the "lair" at night, lurking around when he thought everyone else was asleep. While I was burning Mum's fantasies and worlds into my mind till the early hours from her books, Ryder was communing with her muses. So, for a while, my brother and I were always tired-eyed in the morning. My parents, I think, chalked it up to the nascent rumblings of my puberty and to the peak of Ryder's. Our thunderous arrival at the gates of maturity had caught them off guard. To them it was "The Teens." So I'd pad quietly to the door of the study, and I'd crack the door and watch my brother. He'd always leave the lights off. And he never typed, never wrote. It wasn't his thing, his passion; he'd just stare at the shadows as they jostled for his attention. I used to think he was categorising the totems, trying to discern patterns among their jumbled communities and alliances. I don't think he knew I used to watch him, and for some reason I now imagine that if he had known, he'd have been ashamed.

And so the story continued into Ryder's adolescence, the last vestiges of his boyhood shedding violently as his body threatened us all with the

knowledge that he was bludgeoning the door of manhood. And then his attention wavered and faded, possibly from the lack of sleep.

While I was entering into the rich vein of knowledge that was my second year of high school, my brother started getting into trouble. He'd knock round with the wrong crowd during the day, skip school—the usual things.

Dad was always gruff. He tried to be the gentle giant, bearded and gruff and strong. But his hands were too coarse; he couldn't hold the fragility of his son's adolescence in his sandpaper palms. Dad understood wood: he could build cabinets, fashioning his tenderness into a bed or a table. I remember how loving he was when he taught me how to sand. The gentle motions were like petting something soft and small. It was a touch of tenderness, but it was limited to the stuff of trees.

He must have known adolescence. Somewhere, buried beneath his ink and his hair and his undulating muscles, there must have been interred a memory of that change. If it was there, though, he couldn't find it. And so the hands that used to pick us up and carry us and cuddle us were helplessly balled into fists. And then he began to obsess.

Dad's obsession would have begun like Ryder's, I guess—but I can't ever actually know. The statues won't tell me. Maybe he sought to understand through mimicry. Maybe he did it to quell his fears, or to feel less threatened, as if it were possible for a gruff-bearded lumber of tattoos to be afraid. The late nights of his stalking after Ryder, taking him to his bed after he had snuck out of it, and lying in the warmth and cloy of his son's room, achieved something. Some connection was made, and there they found something in the sphere of their sorrows.

Mum thought it was because he couldn't control their son that he became distant and withdrawn, disappearing from the marital boudoir after midnight, and fading first from conversations and then from the family, just like the boy. But I thought it was because I couldn't solve the puzzling configuration that was my "Big Bro" that they both went.

And then, one night, there was that mid-conversation interruption, that brring brring brring of the old phones, the ones that once littered the house, anchoring it in a different age, and in that moment they, through those phones, had forever invaded the peace and the stillness of the place. Brring brringing now meant bad news. And then, returned to its cradle, the phone left us only with silence. After Mum got off the phone she was ashen, and I was cold and damp. I was suddenly aware that the house that should have been full was only half full. It was still packed to the rafters

with totems of various shapes and sizes, but aside from that there was only Mum, myself, and the neighbour's one-eyed cat, Tamora.

Mum's car was in the garage. Me and Ryder had always planned to go on a road trip in it, an old beaten Suzuki Sierra. Dad labelled it an unecological death-trap, an ironic description when one knew that he rode a petrol-guzzling Triumph. But mostly Dad drove his three-year-old Prius—and it was in that car that Mum and Dad had gone to Sydney Park.

On the way, my mind wandered over peculiar things. From Kutz Avenue to Sydney Park, the Prius, I calculated, wouldn't have even used petrol. By contrast, the Sierra over the same distance probably digested several barrels of fuel—and it didn't give a shit about seatbelts. I thought of these differences while we drove to St Peters, from the brick pit to the brick works, from quarry to furnace. Mum said nothing.

The chimney stacks, hulking brick figures, loomed among flashing blue and red lights. We slowed cautiously as we neared the park. There had been a fire in one of the stacks, and it still smoked and smouldered. The chimney and half of the southbound lanes of the Princess Highway had been cordoned off.

Out of the base of the unstable tower protruded the blackened mass of an automobile; it looked like some giant had failed to properly stoke its fire. There was still a yellow slash amongst the char and flames—Dad's yellow car. I recognised his vanity plates, and felt hollow at the pun. His car had swung off at the start of the highway and into one of the fenced-off kilns in the old brick factory. The Prius must have been going pretty fast when it hit the fencing, having entirely sealed the base of the kiln. It had almost gone clean through the bricks on the other side. The chimney looked like it could collapse at any moment. The chimney is still there. I don't know how they got the car out. And at some point the kiln had fired up for one final burn.

Way back when the chimney was used to fire terracotta tiles and bricks, the raw materials were carried from a large quarry near our home in Newington. The clay was dug and shaped and set by weary and dying convicts first, and then, later, by proud and impoverished labourers. Perhaps that is why the bodies burned so well: the kiln shaped the heat. Dad and Ryder burned all the way to a charcoal, to a colour so dark that it seemed the fire had combusted all the colour from them.

The coroner, at the inquest, called it an accident. That was a nice platitude, but it was a false one—as false as any. Mum and I called it what it was: a suicide. There is no way to say it nicely. You can't say it happily. Social workers, stiffened with too much starch, prodded me with both benign and insidious questions, offering their embarrassing condolences. They

wondered if Mum had something to do with it—an affair perhaps. In time they left us alone.

At the funeral, with the two closed and near-empty caskets going into the fire for (irony upon irony) a cremation, we eulogised it as tragedy. It was Aristotle, I think, who is thought to have perfected the art of speaking only good of the dead. We tried our best.

We went for coffee after the wake. I had to escape the claustrophobia of the house, which was so full of friends and relatives, but still so empty. Her name was Milena, and she was Filipino. She was friendly enough, and one of Ryder's circle from school. She dragged me to a café only moments after I had been besieged by so many condoling faces. She could sense it was too much. She was so composed, in control, and her dress had been the only colour at the funeral.

We remembered his ups and his downs, his concerns and selfishness. We cried a lot. And we'd smile when our fingers touched by chance, and when they did not. Mostly over coffee we spoke about him, sister and almost-lover—or perhaps actual lover. I never asked. She was older than my brother, and he used to chase after her. He used to try and beg kisses from her in our garden among the gathering totems.

And that's where we first made love, under the Hills Hoist, while it was draped with drying sheets, on a February afternoon. It rained that afternoon, a thunderous summer southerly. I thought of Gilgamesh. There I was, drowning in us and that moment, and picturing the two of us floating off in some archaic construction—four hundred cubits of love. Instead of animals, we would take all the totems and statues from the house as our precious cargo, and would repopulate the world, just her and me and the totems, and what they remembered. And for the whole time while we fucked in that downpour, trying to find something secret between us, I was lost in a fantasy. I existed in a world of the possible that I had once known, but had completely forgotten. On that wet afternoon, only a week after scattering the ashes of my brother and father, I grieved for the first time. Later, Milena told me I had howled, like something primal was escaping. And then she fell in love with me. And then she fell away from me as I changed.

I abandoned my mother for five years. When she needed her daughter, I ran. But after what? Drugs. Sex. Boys. Girls. The rush, any rush. Life. Unlife. In hindsight, I can see I was trying to be my brother when my mum needed her daughter, a friend, just an ear. Even while we lived in the same house as each other, we rarely talked over all those thousand-and-a-half days and nights. As long as we didn't talk about loss or grief or before, then it was always fine. But those nights and days were too brief, and too few

There were two other kinds of remains in the wreck apart from the charred corpses of my father and brother. One was stone and the other already carbon before the fire had lovingly welcomed it back. Both had been smaller idols from Mum's study. They had taken one each but, after the police were done with them, Mum fetched them back, returning them to their multi-cultural village.

The stone one Mum had cleaned as best she could. It was a tiger, or some other great cat, suckling its young, its teats all sagging and chipped. Somehow it had escaped the wreck and evaded the fire's touch, emerging almost as it once must have appeared from its stone womb. The other was not back on the steps. The fire had damaged it too much, and it now stood pride of place on mother's desk, a black shapeless lump, twice damaged but not discarded.

Then, I don't know why, but for the first time in years I went back into the study. It was night, long after Mum had retired to bed, and in the winter, when the room was cold. I was rugged up heavily, appalled in an old navy sweater, nursing an angry belly full of white rum and psilocybin. The lights were on and the windows open, yet the freezing cold outside had been reduced to a mere chill inside. And suddenly I was enveloped by that silent whispering that had waited, mute, for me to return. The once familiar smell came back and seeped through my pores, as if I could smell, not just through my nose, but my skin. The murmurs massaged the tension from my limbs. I was completely relaxed and, even though I was high, I was more in control than I'd ever been before the accident.

This time, before I took my mother's chair and sat before her mystical writing apparatus, I tip-toed the circumference of the room like the delicate little girl I once had been, carefully making my way up those wide tiers and delicately stepping around and between the sculptures and carvings that called them home. I wanted to see the room from their perspective. I needed to understand how the light seemed to project a thousand shiny mirrors from the shoddy fixtures. Walking amidst that jumbled illumination, it was difficult to discern the floor. With each step a congregation of dust motes would rise up; disturbed, they would float before me, levitating like little refugees from Freud or Barrie, in a neighbourhood of children's dreams.

Nobody had stepped among the figures for a long time. When I had made my way up to the walls, I looked down at the desk in the centre and again realised that the effect of the room wasn't like a lecture theatre as I had thought; no, it looked more like the desk down below was a conduit, a transceiver for the collection of knowledge. Walking around the walls, I

noted the uneven lighting and saw that no electrician had wired the room. I was surprised she had managed to wire the place herself, and from that surprise sprang a sense of charm to realise how intimate the space had been for her. It wasn't just her "lair" or her study, but something she'd built, and long contributed to. It was a part of Mum, and Mum a part of it. I made my way round the corners, trailing my fingers along the walls.

I walked behind the ranks of sculptures and realised that they lingered just out of reach of the light, nesting in shadows, perhaps moving to avoid the light. I reached down and picked one up. It was a weightless stone. Possibly it was pumice, or something volcanic; dark and glittering, it stole the dreams of precious minerals. Turning it in my hands, under one of the lights, I strained at it, my eyes boring through its age and wear. I had to trace it with my fingers. It was smooth in parts, and almost soft, like basalt or velvet, but sharp in other sections, with chips and ragged patches as coarse as sandstone or hessian. It felt like the unremembered past. I decided it was meant to be a bear. It was curled and sleeping. Its snout was chipped, its bulk had been worn down in places, and it was missing a paw, or part of one. I put it down and made my way down to the desk and sat, regarding the menagerie before me. One of the figures on the bottom step was just caught by the light. It was the one they'd pulled from the clenched grip of the incinerated remains that the coroner had determined was my father's body. It was just in the light, and close to the edge of the step. It looked like it was burrowing slowly through the shadows, journeying slowly to the desk where Mum would write.

Sitting in the chair and looking at her Underwood, I began to type. I don't know what prompted me. But I decided it was them.

I had them write my term paper.

I had dreams of books and half whispers and breeze-tossed murmurs. In that conch-shell roar of whispers, it was that indistinguishable, misshapen hunk of charcoal, sitting pride of place on mother's desk, wanted me to imagine loudest.

I awoke in there at dawn, the cold fingers of winter sun starting me to alertness. My head hurt and the walls still breathed faintly. I could hear a padding, scratching sound nearby. Disoriented and sluggish, I initially thought it was Tamora, the neighbour's cat, but this scurrying and the scratching wasn't like a cat's sound. It was up by the walls, white and furry, with pink eyes that seemed, well, resentful, but also knowledgeable. Even its little fluffy tail had something of the non-conformist about it, like it should have been tattooed or blue and undercut. I lumbered up the tiers and collected it. Once I'd scooped it up, I fed the Underwood a blank sheaf

and collected my pile of essay. I never read it, and I can't claim to have written it—not really. I just stumbled to the submissions box and scrawled my name, student number, and page numbers on the top of each page, and dropped it in to the slot.

At first, I didn't know what to do with the rabbit. I dumped it in my room and showered my hangover away. Then we went to uni. The rabbit seemed happy to be out of the house. I was content to ignore the strange looks we received from the passengers on the bus, and then the train, the many furtive glances that stopped at me as if I'd smuggled a leopard aboard when I pulled the rabbit from my pocket and petted it. The smell of something wild, even of a domesticated wildness, was pleasant to inhale over the scents of white-collar commuters who drowned those around them in cologne and perfume.

At university we sat in the quadrangle for a bit, and I named it Mixi. It bounded around and nibbled the freshly-mowed lawn, stopping occasionally to hunch and re-digest what he'd previously consumed. Some of the girls studying nearby on the grass thought he was cute.

I took Mixi everywhere after that, even to my tutorials where I was told he wasn't welcome; unceremoniously, I'd leave him in my backpack. He was good at first, never doing anything untoward in there. I think he must have just slept. And for the first couple of days it became a routine: attend university regularly, stop at Manning Bar till late, stumble home and work in Mum's lair, pummelling the keys of her Underwood. The drinking stopped, then the drugs stopped, and then I didn't miss them.

I woke in my room one night to see Mixy mounting one of my plush toys, thrusting frantically. It was a furry green dog with a vivid afro. Branded "Afroken," it was a piece of borderline-racist Japanese kitsch; but at that instant it confirmed my presumption that Mixi was a male. I pulled him off it a couple of times, but he wasn't satisfied till he'd gone back and corrupted the toy. It became a regular thing with him. Eventually, he moved on from my pile of plush animals and superheroes. For a while, Mixi started trying to seduce Tamora, preening in front of the cat like a nervous Lothario. It was so strange, so strangely adolescent.

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IT WAS IN FISHER LIBRARY where things began to make sense. Milena was there one day. It had been a few years since we'd spoken. She was older, and looked more mature. She still had that beautiful confidence and poise. She

was a master's candidate. She smirked to see me cradling a rabbit, then laughed and cringed at his name, at the morbidity of it: Myxomatosis.

"You're such a child," she said.

But she stroked Mixi, absently, as we stood there talking. Mixi enjoyed the attention.

Something old ignited as we spoke. First, there was a miniature spark, and then an ember that began to glow and burn brighter with every breath and syllable, and then a cadence that pulsed and began to fan the burn between those almost-comfortable silences. It was right that we organised drinks. Then Milena kissed my cheek, squeezed my hip, and wandered away. I sat down on one of the armchairs. Mixi was becoming more and more agitated, his eyes a moist red. Normally the eyes were pink, but now they were enflamed and wet with tears. Then, he bit me hard on the meat between my thumb and forefinger. It bled a lot, and it hurt like fuck. I learned from that episode that rabbits have good biting teeth.

Milena and I started wearing each other like old clothes. We fit each other nicely, and it was beautiful to revisit how we looked on each other. But eventually I had to stop taking Mixi with me when we went out, and would leave him in Mum's "lair," or in my brother's old unused room, since he'd become such a furry torment. And it was then, when I began leaving him like this, that Mixi became truly unruly. He would attack me as I kissed Milena, as I feasted on the plump musk of her lips. He would scramble, a psychotic white ball of fur, over her dark skin and then launch at me, all buck teeth and red eyes and malicious claws. Sometimes his wrath seemed too strong for a rabbit. Eventually I'd toss him in the hall and slam the door, and Milena would clean me up. She'd joke that I should get him some Xanax, and then we'd try and finish what we'd started, if it hadn't already been lost.

But because of it all, an odd idea started to entertain itself in my mind. I didn't or couldn't believe I was right, though, until one of my university lecturers booted me out of a tutorial on account of the white furry bastard.

That day, after I'd packed away my notes and collected Mixi, having tissueed up his waste from the carpet, I lost control of him as I passed Professor Jardin's office. Mixi got restless in my hands, and Jardin must have left the latch to his door ajar. Mixi got in and went nuts. I tried to stop him, to pick him up, but he knocked over bookcases and smashed up Jardin's things. When he was done there, my blood was all over Jardin's pretty Afghan rugs, and his iMac, which seemed well and truly dead, was cracked. Mixi was too strong, far too strong, for a mere rabbit. He was a manic, dis-

illusioned, and violent teenager. Jardin berated me when he came in, but I didn't say anything, other than my gurgled apologies, which he dismissed. And as security came to take me outside, where I would wait for the police to arrive, I accepted that Mixi wasn't a rabbit, but my brother.

At home I told Mum everything. She bundled us into the car—the Sierra. It was the first time we'd both been in it since that night. Mum had bought a new yellow Prius; it was all she drove now.

We talked for all the eight hours to Broken Hill. We took turns driving. Nick Cave growled from the speakers about weeping men and loss. Mum stroked Ryder, occasionally talking to him before returning him to me. She cried at times, and I cried too. I wanted to pretend it was just the cold night wind stinging the tears from my eyes.

We rediscovered each other.

The night was clear, beautiful, and crisp. And as I pulled away from the lights of Bathurst, I watched the Southern Cross sail across the heavens. It was the first time I noticed its different colours. In the city, you can't tell. But out there, away from the lights and the pollution, there is clarity, and that cluster of stars winked red and orange and aqua and bright. We went west, and above us, those stars watched the three of us journey.

The woman who let us into the Broken Hill Hotel was not amused by the late hour of our arrival. But she showed us to a double room. The three of us went to sleep in that cold space, Mum and I still clothed. In the morning, all of us looked out through the frosted balcony doors at the cold fingers of the rising dawn. Broken Hill lacked beauty in the day; it had wide dusty streets that sang of inequality, poverty, and voicelessness. The sun was high when we left; it was hot for June. We drove out to the Broken Hill Sculpture walk. And on the way, as she stroked him, Mum told me about the totem that Ryder came from.

First, she told me about other cultures's totems and familiars, or at least what she knew of them—how they tried to keep their family members close after they'd died, and how they kept them close in the form of animals, like dingoes, or in carvings. I asked, "Why not Dad?" and she spoke haltingly about the wooden rabbit and the sweaty, busy, fragrant marketplace in Marrakesh where she'd haggled for it. She spoke of how she and Dad had come to the sculptures when they were still fresh in the dirt, when they were bursting and full of each other. She spoke of how they sat down to picnic among the desert stones and eerie sculptures. She spoke mournfully of how the dusk fell, all reds and passions falling up to the horizon in the desert as they'd made love.

I imagined them surrounded by silence, enveloped in a bubble of their own desire, her keychain with the rabbit slipping to the edge of the fire, getting too close, and how, right at that moment, another ember lit up deep inside her. Maybe (I held the thought for a moment) they were forever connected in that fiery moment. The rabbit had lost its form, but she kept it as a memento. It was her memento of Ryder.

She was lost in the horizon by the time she finished telling me and Ryder the story. We sat and watched the sun begin to dip. Ryder bounded round the scrub and bracken and stones. Perhaps he had memories of the place from that day, long ago. Mum let him frolic, and I watched. Ryder would wander for a while and return, enjoying the warmth and freedom. Mum and I didn't talk. We just watched the rabbit bound around and eat what it could scavenge amidst the dirt. When it cooled and the sun threatened to twilight the place, Ryder came back and lay down and slept.

We killed him quickly, with a crumbling shale rock, while he slept. Afterwards, we built a small fire from bracken and burnt him. It sounds horrible, even now, and so awful, what we did. It might have been the original holocaust, I told myself, back when it might have meant something positive, and when a sacrifice by fire wasn't as overwhelmingly senseless as it now seemed. We sacrificed him through fire so he could rest, consuming what flesh the flames had not consumed. And under the chewy slivers of meat and gristle, we found wood.