

The Dam by Robyn Butler

As she reaches the gate, before lifting the chain she hears chirrups. She stands on her tip toes, the plastic of her black gumboots folding, pressing into the tops of her feet. The gate post is rotted, hollowed in the middle. Down in it there are wide, eager mouths attached to big fat heads, wobbling on thin extended necks.

Her hand fits in the hollow. Only just. Her mother has told her not to reach into logs but she doesn't think of that.

The shadow of her hand and the pink of her fingers, looking like big worms but smelling distinctly of something else, stops the baby birds' noise. She is elbow deep in it when her fingertips touch one of the bobbled heads. Pushing deeper, her fingers wrap around it. She pulls.

It is mostly skin. Its belly is fat. Its eyes bulge. It is hot in her cold hand.

She stuffs the bird in her parker pocket and opens the gate. From the gate, the land inclines. Cut into the incline, the bank of the dam rises. The gate swings freely as she lets go of it, like it had on the day she'd been made to take her brother with her.

On that day, he had one of the nets they'd made out of their mother's old stockings, the frame a wire coat hanger. They used it to catch butterflies when they weren't up at the dam catching water boatmen and tadpoles.

He waved the net at her. "Hanny! Pleeze!" He jumped up and down, his cheeks blotching red. His eyes glassing with tears. "Hanny! Pleeze! Mummy!"

"Hannah!" their mother said. "Just bloody take him up there."

She wanted to complain. It wasn't fair. She *always* had to take him with her.

Everywhere.

Their mother glared at her, so she grabbed her brother by the hand. Yanked him.

"Come on, then!"

Out the door. Onto the porch. She put her feet—one, two—into her gumboots. Took her parker from the hook. She didn't help him with his gumboots. She didn't help him with his parker. She put hers on, zipped it up and went out onto the farm road. When he started to follow, howling that his boots hurt, and how he couldn't do his zipper, she ignored him.

At the gate, she lifted the chain. Let it swing open, and didn't wait. She climbed the hill towards the dam; all the while him whinging and calling, "Hanny! Wait! Me! Wait!"

As she stepped up onto the dam lip, two ducks scattered into the sky, their feet roughing the still brown surface.

She kept walking, past the dam, past the lone large gum that stood watching. Up the hill. Her mother always said never to leave her brother alone, especially by the dam, but she wasn't thinking of that.

She heard a rain of splashes but didn't turn around. Her brother liked throwing rocks. She was glad he'd found something to do. Glad he'd stopped following her. Glad he'd stopped whinging. She heard a large splash, and noises like the dam was gulping. She kept walking.

At the crest of the hill, she turned. Headed back towards the dam, wondering where her brother had gone. Probably to the farmhouse, telling their mother she'd left him alone. She knew she'd be in trouble.

But she hadn't been.

She didn't know what to call it—she still doesn't—but it wasn't trouble.

She reaches the flat lip of the dam then side-walks down the inner edge towards the water. She squats. Puts her hand in her parker pocket.

The bird is warm. It bobbles and squirms. She draws it from her pocket. She holds it out in front of her.

When she lets go, it hits the water with a splash. It doesn't struggle. It doesn't begin to chirrup—to call out for help like she expects it to. It doesn't move towards the side of the dam and try to drag itself out. It just lies in the water. Moves its legs a bit. Flicks its wings a bit.

Then it sinks. Silently. Its beak wide open. Bubbles rising.