

Myxo by Susan Bennett

Sometimes just before sunrise, when the light is not yet whole but static patches of white suspended in the dark, Cosette thinks she is back in the hushed shade of the Amiens Cathedral, before the shelling loosed the plaster to fall like snow. Other times the gloaming tricks her into believing she is in the epicerie, window shades pulled against the afternoon sun to protect the charcuterie and cheeses from the modest warmth she once knew as heat.

In the half light she sees burgundy pate, pale yellow butter and creamy brie melting with ripeness; layered jellied terrines, clay-pot mustards sealed with wax; herbs suspended in bottled vinegars. Her waking breaths promise fresh boulangerie bread and roasted potatoes golden with duck fat, but when she blinks, the delicacies flicker then reform as a battered Kookaburra stove. As the air fattens with the smell of last night's mutton, Cosette wonders again how the mirage fools her into belief every time.

Outside, she knows better than to trust the morning's promises. All that is crisp and cool will soon be cowed by the rising sun. With the dew perishing around her, Cosette sweats out last evening's supper of old sheep and stares into the coming afternoon, knowing that soon, as the sun and the wind lay waste to the lambs, the sad opera of plaintive ewes and steady rhythm of gunshots will lull her into a waking dream.

#

Dear Sasha,

You do not understand. You cannot know what it is like here.

What frugal rain falls gathers together like rivulets of mercury to corrode the tracks. Robert guides the truck to the high verge but the tyres drift down in the silt and bump into the ruts. Cosette throws her hands out to steady herself against the dashboard while the dog scrambles over her to survey the landscape for rabbits from the side window.

Cosette grasps the dog and plants it firmly back onto the seat between them. It bares its teeth, returns a low snarl then jumps back onto her knees, clawing Cosette's skin and pushing its back hard against her chest.

The truck rumbles over the crest, the hillside erupting in furry dun coloured pustules. Robert goads the dog with urgent whispers - Where's the rabbits, Shelley? Where's the rabbits? Hey? Hey? - and Shelley leaps from the moving truck to bound after the panicking rabbits - Go get `em, Shelley!

Where's the rabbits? Where's the rabbits? Hey? Hey?

Robert's door cranks open while Cosette offers her dangling feet to the ground. It doesn't rise up to meet her, so she falls into it, detonating a dust cloud when she lands.

She tries not to notice the dirt that sprays her calves, as she tries not to feel the film of grit that coats her teeth after every journey in the truck, or the layer of grime beneath her fingernails that won't be scrubbed away.

Back up the hill, away from the business of the rabbits, an overhanging rock promises shade.

Cosette drifts into the shadows, rests her cheek against the craggy coolness and traces a crack with her finger, beholding, as she does, a tiny miracle in the crevice.

So far from home.

Condensation has spawned a small patch of moss; within it, grows a single sprig of wild thyme.

Cosette blinks but when she opens her eyes, the impossibility remains, so green and jaunty, as though believing itself to be luxuriating in the richest loam, not marooned in a drying moss island.

The tender sprig beckons her touch; reaching in, she examines the roots, white claws on the moss surface. With so little to cling to, perhaps it will be persuaded to come away without protest. One scrape of a thumbnail is all it takes to prise it from the rock, moss and all.

Cosette dampens her handkerchief in the fissure, wraps the thyme up carefully and cradles it in her palm.

#

All, all is so far away, Sasha - our neighbours, the town, even our own fences. Neighbours visit seldom, but I do not crave their society as I did at first.

Cosette searches out a clean soup can to house the thyme and another to give it water, while in the hut, Robert and the neighbour discuss the starving kangaroos which venture in from the bush to thief grass and water from the stock.

She moistens the dirt with water red and silty from the bore as the neighbour counsels catching the kangaroos as a group, when they gather to drink from the water hole at dusk.

Shoot `em in the guts, the man says. Shoot `em in the guts and make them suffer.

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, Cosette knows just how many feet she must walk calmly before she can run without fear of being seen.

#

Here, heat is a sound. The worst days start with a rising noise, a sort of distant roar. The sun rises angry and glowering then broods all day above all that dares to be alive, before sinking sullenly into the horizon once again. And the wind, I swear... it is like the wind has lost something and cannot rest until it finds it again. It scours the earth overturning every fallen leaf, whipping up little dervishes of twigs and dirt before tossing them back on the ground as though furious at not finding what it seeks. It bangs on the doors and rattles the windows demanding the return of its lost beloved.

Footfalls are rarely soft and never silent. The bark which peels away from the trees in long strips crunches underfoot; yesterday's green leaves crackle, branches snap before they can grow into limbs.

Heat is a sound, and it is a sight. It is a haze that can be seen and a shimmer that can be smelled. By midday, as the eucalypts expel their vapour into the air, courting fire with their fragrance like a woman incites a lover with perfume, a scented mist surrounds the trees like a hungry ghost.

Cosette examines the skin now a stranger to her, tanned like leather. It blurs before her eyes as the truck rattles over the corrugated road into town, shaking her breath and jarring her bones.

... but ... somehow they have already slipped through the cluster of mean-spirited little outhouses which calls itself a town, and into the general store.

Hard tack, bully beef, damper flour, stock grain, pit latrine lime, chicken pellets, shotgun shells, salt, rice, sugar, tea... the basket jolts her arm as Robert loads it, Cosette knowing that the flour she receives will be overrun with weevils and the rice with moth larvae, just as surely as she knows there are women in the dim recesses of the shop, watching her.

They say dogs can smell cancer, Sasha. I swear these women are the same. I swear they know all that is inside of me.

The bell jingles when they leave. Cosette, on the other side of the door, hears the laughter erupt from within.

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Shelley's mother is the dog Blue. There could be no greater difference between their personalities. Blue has nursed so many litters that her dugs hang almost to the ground and her spine sags with the weight she has borne. While Blue sleeps, Robert drowns her latest litter in the dam. It is a pitiful to see the old girl sniffing and snuffling around looking for her puppies. Even more pitiful the wagging tail and trusting eyes she offers up to the man who kills them.

On the worst afternoons, when the sun robs the oxygen from the air and the walls of the hut inch closer and closer, Blue pushes the door open and snuffles her way in to give Cosette her paw, then flops on her back to offer her tummy. Cosette caresses Blue's stomach, catching the dog's leathery teats between her fingers, until the sounds from outside rise as a scream in her throat, and Cosette buries her face in the dog's fur to stifle it.

#

I have started dreaming with eyes open.

Robert cannot know this. I promise you he cannot.

Perhaps it is because Shelley misses out on a rabbit that she kills her own mother. Yesterday morning, when the door is opened, dear old Blue lies dead on the step. With her pointed little teeth Shelley has torn open the very teats which sustained her as a puppy and ripped out her mother's entrails.

Robert buries the mother without ado; tousles the daughter's head as though she done no wrong. At night, as they sit before the fire, when Robert turns on the radio, noises and snatches of words begin to swirl in Cosette's head: the crackling bush, the crack of the gun and the sheep, the neighbour's voice shoot `em in the guts and make `em suffer - noises and words swirling in static so loud it hurts Cosette listen to it. The radio isn't on the dial properly; the static grows louder and louder erupting with words, Robert's words, urging the dog on. Where's the rabbits, Shelley? Where's the rabbits? Hey? Hey? The static is sound and sudden pictures. Rabbits scattering, leaping in alarm and bounding away from the rumbling truck and the circling dog - all but one which takes a few uncertain steps then falters to a stop, quivering. Shelley streaks toward it while the rabbit tries to disappear into the earth, pulling itself into a ball and pushing its body into the ground - and the dog yipping; half-mad with joy about to fall upon the rabbit before Robert calls her off sharply with a whistle.

Shelley! Leave it! The damned thing's got myxo!

Myxo. The damned thing's got myxo - myxo myxo the damned thing's got myxo shoot `em in the guts make `em suffer myxo myxo the damned thing's got myxo shoot `em in the guts make `em suffer damned thing's got myxo - until her rocking chair is suddenly stilled beneath her. Without lowering the newspaper from before his face, Robert has quelled the movement of her chair with his foot.

The only medicine here is the gun, but for the rabbit that cannot run, Sasha, he does not spare a bullet.

I cannot tell him about the other soldiers who reached Amiens first, or what they did to us there. We were wrong to dream of a better life. I know that now. There is no better life, Sasha, there is only life.

#

In the morning cool, Cosette sways before the little herb; ponders how she came to wake and leave the bed without knowing it; ponders how she came to wake and leave the bed without knowing it; ponders how she came to wake and leave the bed without knowing it, until the puzzle dissolves into thyme.

She knows by the way the seedling sags in its soup can it has yet to strike root. Cosette reaches out to touch it with her fingertip, curls her jagged nail into her palm, and strokes it with a knuckle instead, praying to a French God for it to find its feet.

'Myxo' takes historical liberties with the introduction of the myxomatosis virus to Australia.