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Also by Josephine Rowe

*Tarcutta Wake*  
*How a Moth Becomes a Boat*

# A loving, faithful animal

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UQP

First published 2016 by University of Queensland Press  
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Cover design by Natalie Winter  
Typeset in 12/16.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane  
Author photograph by Jason Montano  
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

Epigraph taken from 'Someday I'll Love Ocean Vuong' by Ocean Vuong, published in *The New Yorker*, 4 May 2015. Reproduced with kind permission of the author. Quote on page 48 taken from 'Come-By-Chance' by Banjo Paterson, published in *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*, Angus & Robertson, 1895. Quote on page 170 taken from 'Dockery and Son' by Philip Larkin, published in *The Whitsun Weddings*, Faber & Faber, London, 1964. Reproduced with kind permission of Faber & Faber.



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



This project is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria.

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data is available at <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au>

ISBN  
978 0 7022 5396 6 (pbk)  
978 0 7022 5699 8 (ePDF)  
978 0 7022 5700 1 (ePub)  
978 0 7022 5701 8 (Kindle)

University of Queensland Press uses papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

*For N.*

Here's the house with childhood  
whittled down to a single red tripwire.  
Don't worry. Just call it *horizon*  
& you'll never reach it.  
Here's today. Jump.

—Ocean Vuong

# I. A Loving, Faithful Animal

THAT WAS THE SUMMER a sperm whale drifted sick into the bay, washed up dead at Mount Martha, and there were many terrible jokes about fertility. It was the summer that all the best cartoons went off the air, swapped for Gulf War broadcasts in infra-red snippets, and your mother started saying things like, *I used to be pretty, you know? Christ, I used to be brave*. But you thought brave was not crying when the neighbour girl dug her sharp red fingernails into your arm, until the skin broke and bled, and she cried out herself in disgust. You were still dumb enough to think that was winning.

It was around the same time that your uncle Tetch started turning up in the garage. You pulled up the roller door on the morning of New Year's Eve to get your bike, and there he was, standing barefoot next to the oil stain that your father's car had left behind. Everything in the garage had been made very neat, so it looked like the sort

of garage they'd show in a hardware catalogue.

Careful, you warned Tetch. There's redbacks galore in here.

I know, he said, and held up one of his shoes to show the mess of spider on the sole.

Just here for my bike.

Tetch went over to the wall and wheeled it out.

I fixed the bell, he said, and he rang the bell to prove it.

There was something a bit wrong with Uncle Tetch, this was the general opinion. But there was something a bit wrong with everyone: your sister Lani couldn't keep her legs together and you had this knot in your chest that nothing could untie. People assured you that it was only growing pains, that it would loosen soon enough, but it just got tighter and tighter. And then there was Belle, poor pup. What happened to Belle wasn't fair.

When your father left—the first week of December, freckles resurfacing across cheeks, the stink of insect repellent suffocating the kitchen—Aunt Stell sent a card that said *It Is Better To Have Loved And Lost Than To Live With A Psycho Forever*. Your mother liked it so much she put it up on top of the fridge and it stayed there, all through Christmas, the smallest of her small revenges, roosting amidst the cards with snow and camels and reindeer.

The card is still up there, standing lonely and a bit proud after the frantic de-Christmasing of the house. You and



your sister have spent the morning winding tinsel and fairy lights around your fists, scraping fake snow off the windows with Lani asking, Why. The fuck. Do we always have to do this?

Mum doesn't even look at her. Because you know why, she says. Because it's bad luck to leave them up. Ru isn't complaining, are you Ru? (You aren't.)

Lani lets the paint scraper fall to her side. Ha, she says. *Luck*. As though our luck could even get any shittier. And Ru's not complaining because she's got nothing better to do. Shouldn't a kid her age have hobbies?

It sounds parroted, the way she says it, has obviously come from someone higher up. Grandma Mim maybe. You have hobbies. They just aren't for show.

Ru has a vivid interior world, don't you, love? Mum quoting your art teacher, wholesale.

Your sister shakes her head and goes back to attacking the canned frost. Right, a vivid interior world ... What does that mean, exactly?

It means, keep pushing me girl. See just how far it gets you. Ru, honey, can you give me a hand with these Santas?

I don't know why we even bothered, Lani says, only for you to hear, as you climb down from a chair to take charge of the ornaments.

She's right—aside from the bike, Christmas was the same tired cracker jokes and picking at a cold Safeway chook while the TV murmured to itself disconsolately in

the lounge. Lengths of red and gold tinsel wound around the antenna only made things worse.

But you keep your mouth shut. Let them scrap it out. Let them go at each other like cats, if that's what they want. As soon as you finish tucking the old mercury-glass Father Christmases into their crumbling styrofoam coffins, the day will be your own.

Now Tetch stands in the garage and watches you push the bike over the blonde stubble of summer lawn. It's obvious he's never cared much for the name Tetch, though he never whinges about it. You try to remember to call him Les, but it isn't easy.

Okay, your mother said once. So Tetch doesn't have his brother's brains. But he doesn't have his meanness either.

He's a little younger than your father, and only has eight fingers—he got rid of both the index ones so he wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. *Can't pull a trigger without a trigger finger.* Most people think that the finger thing must mean he's a coward, but your mother said she didn't know what kind of coward would whip his own fingers off with a bandsaw or what-have-you. But his birthday hadn't even come up in the ballot, so who knows what he was thinking.

He's harmless though. Wouldn't kill a thing but to put it out of its misery, the way he'd done with a fox once, a little one crazy with mange. These days he just wants to be

useful, hovering around the garage, repairing bicycle bells and such. You didn't ask him for anything at Christmas, but he'd sprung for a secondhand Malvern Star, licked with a fresh coat of bottle green, no childish junk clattering the spokes. It is the best non-living thing you've ever owned and you guide it one-handed, resting your palm between its handlebar horns as though it is a loving, faithful animal. *A loving, faithful animal*, like Dad would say of Belle. Still too sick-making to think of the shreds of fur scattered through the backyard, right down to the fenceline, the way you might see of a mauled rabbit or a possum, but never a dog. That was the last family activity, the four of you hunting through the grass like an awful treasure hunt. It was Dad who found the ear, all on its own beneath the magnolia. The silky fur so perfect you almost wanted to speak into it, as if she might be able to hear how badly she was missed. Dad picked the ear up, very gentle. He held it in his palm and looked down at it, and you saw his shoulders shake, which was something his shoulders had never done. Then he turned around quick and stalked back to the house. He'd found Belle under the Pyalong Bridge when she was only tiny.

Maybe a fox got her. So said Karlee Howard, of the sharp red fingernails.

Nup, she would've walloped a fox.

You know what it was. Sure you've seen it, crouched black amidst the sea of high yellow grass, keeping its belly to the earth. It slips easily from the rifle-sights of farmers, of roo-shooting boys. Is only ever caught in the outer millimetres of grainy film; a lanky shadow and a flick of tail. Though scientists and game hunters have come in pursuit of it, set up with tents and traps. The creature is too crafty, evading their snares, walking so lightly it seldom dislodges enough earth to leave as much as a print, any trace of itself. It must bury its scat, they reason. The researchers carry back nothing but samples of grass and hair, tissue from the torn bellies of savaged pets. *Evidence inconclusive.*

*Panther* is what the locals call it.

You know that it is not your father's panther, the one that came during the war, packed up in a crate from Sumatra after its mother had been shot out of fear or fun. A panther lives twenty years if it's lucky, and that Sumatran cub was not lucky—obviously—getting itself orphaned and then caught, smuggled back to Australia and a lonely life of mascotting at the Puckapunyal barracks. It must've got weak, got bored there on the base, caged up. Wondered where its own kind were, when they were going to come for it. It must've been afraid of the night criers, strange shrieking birds and booming owls, the roaring of bull koalas, languages it didn't understand. Meanwhile, its silhouette was stencilled onto everything that didn't move, and some things that did: your father's

arm, for instance. When you were little, the tattoo-panther was sleek and wonderful, clawing its way up his bicep. He could make it writhe, make it roar. But as the war grew further and further away the ink had faded, softening and spreading at the edges so that the cat was bigger than it had been, but less ferocious, the muscles that moved beneath it growing tired and ropey.

What happened to him?

Got too big, love. Friendly and dopey as a labrador, but he had to go. Sent to live in a zoo up north.

As for whatever got Belle—that other something, sneaking into backyards for a taste of cat or chicken, fed up with marsupials and disease-ridden wild rabbits—Mum said she'd have it for a throw rug before she let it have her angoras. She protected them from meeting the same grisly end as Belle, hauling the hutch up to where she could keep an eye on it at all times. Sometimes patrolling the fence at the back of the property of an evening, beyond which all was paddocks and dense banks of blackberries and whatever they might shelter.

Your bike muscles aren't up to much yet, so you stand for the dusty rises in the road and march on the pedals, the sun slung across your bare shoulders, warm as Reef oil. And although your lungs are on fire and the corners of your eyes are filling with grit, that tight place in your chest is cracking open, the bright afternoon spilling in.

The new year will be better. It will be. It will. There's a song on a tape someone made for your sister, and it's playing over and over, behind your eyes. Even when it gets so steep that you have to jump off and push, the song is still there; about a wide open road, and how you can go any place you want to.

The road levels out where the new estate is going up. It's good, some days, to walk around there, to climb onto the skeletons of roofs or to wander around all those rooms where nothing has happened yet. The Howards are building up there, a bigger place. A pool room and two bathrooms and bedrooms forever. That's where Karlee tested your nerve.

She's off limits now. Mum had spotted the little sequence of scabby crescent-moons, near the inside of your elbow, as though a strange creature with strange teeth had bit there.

Who did that to you? she demanded. Why on earth did you let her? Disfigure you like that.

You hadn't cried out or anything, had stood perfectly still in the room that Karlee said would soon be her bedroom. Felt her breath puff on your cheek as she watched your face for a hint of flinch. Nothing. She dug harder and then too far. It *had* felt like winning, watching her jerk her arm back and scrape under her fingernails. But then she said, Now try me, holding her arm out, and you quit. You had nerve, but only one kind of nerve.

Wuss, she'd laughed.

Anyway, she's off limits now. You'll never get to see the inside of that room once the walls go up.

You push on further, past the ruined hayshed where Matthew Collins got his fingers into Renee Tillman, and where the old dredge and dragline is crumbling into the ground like a dead mastodon. On to where the bitumen turns to gravel, shifting loose under the tyres, and then the gravel gives way to corrugated dirt, juddering your teeth. Then there's only the three long strips of road, paddock, sky, waving like a tricolour flag, and it's as though no time passes, like sleeping without dreams or dreaming awake, until the road runs out in crooked star pickets and snarls of wire. You heave the bike over and push it through the thirsty grass to where a huddle of cypress trees rise out of the grasshoppers and dust, a quiet green island. Cicada husks cling to the cypress bark and you try not to crush them, propping the bike against a trunk and crouching down amongst the needles, untucking a leather pouch from the waistband of your shorts. When your father left he forgot to take his cigarette things—papers and filters and matches, the tobacco that smells sweet like port wine, like rum and raisin. You got to them before your mother did, before Lani, because you know this much: cigarettes are a kind of power. A kind of toxic magic that can be both the spark of an argument and the end of one. They are more important than milk, than bread, than uniforms or

tuition fees. You learnt these things early, going to school each morning in clothes that were almost right, clothes that were clean at least, the right colours. But the missing school emblem was a marker in itself: *poor*. Nothing you could do about that, except to get mean or to stay quiet, act like there was nothing you were hungry for anyway. Lani had already taken the first option; you took what was left.

You know how much tobacco to pinch from the packet, have watched Dad rolling them up at the kitchen table, somewhere else in his mind. Somewhere far away from Sunday morning, far away from instant coffee and toast crusts, the kitchen filling quietly with his smoke, Rodriguez, the sickly strawberry incense Mum likes to burn at weekends. Have watched him in fat cigarette times and thin cigarette times—three days from pension day Dad rolled them skinny as twigs. These might as well be fat cigarette times, you reckon, the tobacco already cut as it is with dried curls of orange peel to give it back some life. You roll one thick as a pencil and lick the gummed edge to seal it. A bit lumpy. Not perfect, but it will do.

From the dark, secret shade of the pines, you'll see someone coming long before they see you. Unless that someone gets down on their stomach and slithers through the grass, which they just might. But it's snake season and that would be, in Dad's words, about as clever as a box of hammers. Right before he left, he'd promised a trip to the ocean to see the whale, before they figured out how to get



rid of it. Neither you nor Lani had ever been close to one, living or dead. Living would be better, but the dead one would do for the meantime. There it was on the news, this wonderful thing the sea had coughed up. They were deciding whether to blow it up, or bury it, or tow it back out through the heads. There was still time. Tomorrow or the next day, Dad said. We'll go. But then came the trouble with Belle, and the morning after that the car was gone, along with his duffel bag—a sure sign that this time was going to be another long one—and from the couch you watched as they tied orange ropes around the whale, using cranes to nudge it back towards the water.

The cigarettes are your own revenge, or maybe they are something else: a come-here-you, like a fox whistle. Something that will call your father back in spite of himself. Touch the lit match to the paper, draw deep, don't cough. Don't cough. And he'll come striding up the yellow hill to slap your face. That would be the least worst thing. And still, it doesn't happen.

What have you been given to miss? More than you'll likely remember. More than the smell of pine resin and diesel. More than tooled-leather gimcracks with your name stamped in, and creatures fashioned from wine corks and Easter-egg foil; projects to keep his hands and mind placid. More than being hoisted up for a better view of the moon rabbit; more than the names for constellations, and seven slang words for *horse*. More than *this is*

*how to eat a prickly pear* and *this is how you hypnotise a budgie* and *this is how to stave off thirst*—breaking a button from his shirt and sucking on it like a lozenge. More than knife tricks and old wives' tales and nonsense riddles—*why is a mouse that spins?* He's never read aloud from any book you can recall, has all his poems and songs and jokes stashed away by heart, to trot out whenever the occasion might call for one.

Your father. His head is a ghost trap. It's all he can do to open his mouth without letting them all howl out. Even so, you can still see them, sliding around the dark behind his eyes like a Balinese puppet show. At night he'll let his guard down. Too bad for everyone. Now he's out there somewhere. Wasting his New Year's Eve in a shabby, forgetful room that has bedsheets for curtains, a mattress soaked in other men's fevers. You've seen those rooms. How is that better than being at home? Those sad seedy places that Mum has dragged him out of before, you and Lani waiting in the car. Bored brainless in the backseat, sucking barley sugar, reading stolen doctors'-waiting-room magazines—*20 Ways I Beat The Change!!*—not understanding how she always hunted him down eventually. Not understanding why she hunted him down at all. Weeks of nothing, then the phone would ring one morning with a tip-off, and she'd be thrown into action. Saying to forget about school, I need you both today. Needed for what, exactly, neither of you could say—to hold on to a fistful

of change for the parking meter, keeping watch for the inspector? She'd do her lipstick in the rearview mirror and fluff up her hair—*Okay, girls, cross your fingers*—before clipping up the stairs of a mean-looking building.

Silly bitch, Lani would say, after Mum had been swallowed up by the rooming house. It's so embarrassing; he's just going to belt her around again.

Watching her in those moments, with her clotted mascara and worn-down heels, it was impossible to imagine her ever being young, impossible to imagine swimming trophies and a modelling portfolio with Vivien's. Most of the proof of that life was elsewhere—pawned or held ransom *up north*, which meant The House I Grew Up In, which meant Grandparents. These people who were only feathery handwriting in birthday and Christmas cards, padded envelopes containing presents of glittery stationery and books you'd read years ago. The word *Merewether* crouched in the return address like a dangerous spider. *That Merewether mansion*, Dad called it—though it wasn't, Mum insisted, really wasn't a mansion—that's where everything was.

All she had to show now were an arctic fox coat and a photograph of her in the driver's seat of the famous green Corvette, a few years before she sold it to pay off a loan. The Corvette is gleaming, cicada-coloured, its cream panels like wings and the soft top folded down. You're there, a slight swell under her orange kaftan, baby Lani

sitting up in her lap like a doll. In the photograph, you cannot tell what is coming. And neither can she. She is laughing behind her Audrey Hepburn sunglasses, oblivious to the time when she will use them to hide bruises and nights without sleep.

This is Exhibit A in the Museum of Possible Futures; the life that might have rolled out smooth as a bolt of satin, if she had just swung her slender legs up into that beautiful car and driven as fast as she could in the opposite direction, leaving the man with the camera far behind. Your father, he could keep the photograph.

But she did not drive away. Instead she sold the car and spent every night of her life trying to lead your father out of the jungle, out of the mud, away from the cracks of invisible rifles, strange lights through the trees.

When Lani was five or six, old enough to understand what the shouting meant when you did not, she would climb into your cot to curl around you like a shell—*Big C little c*—and tell you it would be over soon. She'd hum whatever songs she could think of—advertising jingles, songs she'd learnt in school—to drown out the shattering of plates, the thud that might be your mother's head hitting the wall. Then it was you climbing into your sister's bed, welcome for a year or two. Top to tail, sardines on toast, till she got tougher and her comforting was something you had to trade for, something to buy with money or favours, her share of the dishes. Then there was nothing you had

that she wanted (*I don't even read those stupid vampire books anymore, dumb-arse*) and she said she was tired of waking up with your fricken feet in her fricken face. Eventually you became too old for that kind of thing anyway and, at twelve, too proud. That's how it went.

There is a picture you have in your mind, though you're not certain how it got there. Another photograph from the green Corvette years, maybe, but this one is in black and white: a semicircle of scraggly men standing around a large pit. From outside the photograph, you cannot see the men's faces. Only their backs, their arms loose around each other's shoulders. You cannot see what is in the pit. But somehow you know what is in there, and wish you did not. In the foreground, a pair of rifles are crossed, jabbed barrel-down into the dirt, making an X. One of these rifles is your father's. This is all you know about the war; this and the panther and your mother's face.

After three fat cigarettes your brain feels padded with smoke, the afternoon humming with a loud, high-pitched heat. You scuff the fallen pine needles into little heaps with the heel of your shoe. Sometimes there are things left up here—beer bottles, bones, burnt pieces of hose, once a pair of grubby cotton knickers tangled in a chequered blanket—so you know it isn't only yours, this place. But today there are just the shells from the cicadas, who have