

THE QUARRY

To 'Fall At Your Feet' is a re-telling of the Persephone myth as a meditation on mortality, narrated by the Hades-like character who doesn't rule the Underworld, but rather is a man who stops visibly ageing at the age of 50 at the end of the First World War and becomes increasingly fixated on the day-to-day dying of others. Here he is in his early childhood...

To Fall At Your Feet, an extract

John Elder

It was a beautiful sparkling morning and Marmie said she was going to the river and make a fire on the rocks and bathe herself in the shallows and pick some flowers and put them in her hair like she'd seen in the picture book and could we all just leave her alone for half the day. I started to follow her down the slope because I was six years old and lovesick

with my mother. Sometimes if I playfully made a sad face she'd pick me up and talk to me and let me put my hand inside her dress and hold her breast which I still wanted so much but she said to stay with daddy. It was her birthday and she wanted to be a girl. I had a little whinge and turned away and tried to make the world a terrible place but it wasn't. She said daddy wanted me and could I go to him straightaway please and she touched me on the face and I was more lovesick than ever. But I nodded and let her go.

Daddy had asked me to bring in a few small logs and watch for spiders but I remembered instead a sweet red hen I'd made friends with and wondered what she was up to. She loved me in the same way I loved Marmie. All I needed to do was say hello and she'd follow me around. I found her in the orchard where the trees were old. She was nesting the morning in a hollow where somebody was buried from before I was born. As soon as the chicken saw me, up she came and said hello and there was an egg all nice and brown and warm and not too dirty. I put the egg in my pocket and she made no complaint. I started off, walking in big funny steps, and we made a parade in and out of the trees. When daddy called from an open window to get those logs, my little friend followed me to the woodpile and when I was squatting down looking for spiders, she stood by my side and gurgled concern. She followed me back and forth into the house until daddy said to take her out again because he wanted the floors all clean. He was making a fuss and normally didn't. I picked her up, the hen, and was holding her like my baby and daddy forgot about her. He showed me the socks he'd knitted for my mother and I said they were fine. Marmie was turning twenty today and she was feeling strange that no other people had ever come asking if she belonged to them. Daddy said they were being strange with each other. They were a bit mixed up because sometimes Marmie was daughterly more than his wife but not to worry about it he said. This wasn't the way daddy talked any other day because he wasn't a talker at all and because I didn't know what to do I drifted into the small-child vagueness that sings unto itself and is

lost to history. You only remember what you paid attention to in the first place and I was off in that fuzzy nothing place with my friend the red hen until daddy ran his finger and thumb along my arm and said there were Chinamen coming up the track and it was true. They were singing softly like a wheel sings he said. He had an ear for softness.

We went out to the gate and looked down the track and over the bridge came fifty or so Chinese men and women in rusty red suits and slippers. We'd had a few Chinamen working for us but these coming up the track were very proud of themselves. They were jogging along in two straight lines. A dozen of the men were built like tombstones and carried great clanking sacks. There was a bitter vegetable smell and what I didn't know to be fish and some kind of sausage and other smells that made me drunk. The sweet red hen was restless and I let her down but she stayed close to my feet. Daddy and I didn't talk. We watched the Chinese come up the hill and when they passed by every one of them turned their heads to say good morning and daddy nodded and I waved. And then they carried on singing like wheels. They were heading up the rise and we were walking back to the house when one of the women ran back and called out and smiled and sort of bowed and handed daddy an envelope. He put it in his pocket and told me to get out my town clothes and brush them off for the ceremony we were having that afternoon for Marmie. The sweet red hen followed me inside and daddy didn't say anything about it.

At about four o'clock that afternoon the Chinese came back again. Daddy took me out to the gate and Marmie too. She was wearing the old straw hat in which daddy had found her on the day she was born. Half of the Chinese were carrying a cast-iron bed and they were singing a different song and travelling very slowly. Their song made me think of swallows playing over the water; mad as butterflies and impossibly happy was their tune. Propped on the bed was a very old woman. She was about a hundred yards away and one of the taller Chinamen held a broom with an enormous canopy to keep her shaded. He had a paper fan in

his other hand and was very busy waving the flies away. He was walking along sideways. Marmie had read in the newspaper about gay parties and she wondered if this was one of them. She was walking with her arms folded and then she dropped her arms and swung them like a child and sang in sympathy with the Chinese, and then she danced ahead of us, whirling away and then dancing very slowly, edging her way toward the bed. The old woman was arranged there on many pillows to be almost sitting up but well secured and she was looking around with a smile on her face from very long ago. Her face was heavily powdered to keep the sun from burning and the flaky whiteness made her look like a statue in a graveyard. Daddy knew this old woman from a homestead five miles away and he said let's walk up to meet her. Her name was Mrs Alice Farnham. She might have been the oldest woman in the world daddy said and the Chinese were carrying her very carefully. If she'd been travelling by wagon, the track would have broken all her bones and up close I could see this was true. Marmie sometimes made me lovely animals she'd seen in picture books by arranging and balancing twigs together and Mrs Farnham was no better put together than those crazy twig unicorns and seahorses. Daddy got beside the bed and walked along as if there were no Chinese in attendance. He wasn't being rude, he just didn't know them. He was asking Mrs Farnham if she'd like to come to the house for a cup of tea or stay for dinner but it took a number of moments for Mrs Farnham to dig herself out of the long-ago world to say:

'They're taking me to the train,' and she thought it was very funny, in a confiding way, as if it was somebody else, some silly fool she'd once been friends with being carried along. I'd seen people visiting our homestead talk this way. I didn't know what to do with it.

'Do you remember me?' said daddy. He'd visited Mrs Farnham's place a number of times some twenty years ago, while chasing down some men.

'Did you?'

One of the Chinamen was telling Marmie that Mrs Farnham, famously old, had been invited to the grand opening of the Asphodel hotel in Melbourne. The Chinese had been sent to fetch her. They were carrying her to the town of Woodend, another twelve miles away, where they'd all take the train the following afternoon.

'I knew some good reverends but you wasn't one of them, were you?' said Mrs Farnham and daddy said no, he wasn't a reverend and when Mrs Farnham looked like she might fly apart in confusion daddy said he used to do God's work.

'You're not the one who married me and Arthur,' she said.

'Mainly in the funeral line,' he said, and that tickled her.

'There's nobody left but me,' she said.

I'd never seen someone so pleased with themselves and bitter at the same time. She caught me staring and she was gone from daddy and everything that was going on. She was off somewhere playing with a doll and having her hair brushed and pinching hard the cheek of a little brother and making big eyes as to what could be the trouble. I'd seen other children engaged in such sweet warfare when we'd taken apples and eggs into Woodend and there was one little girl who I longed to see again who had spoken to me and teased me and chased me through the holding store and Mrs Farnham gave me the same sorts of feelings for here she was looking down at me, excited and stunned both of us, one child meeting another. We talked to one another with our eyes. Mrs Farnham wanted to take me somewhere to play and I wanted to go there and Marmie took my hand and pulled on it fearfully but I pulled my hand away and tried to climb on to the bed. Daddy said no and the Chinaman talking to Marmie suddenly crouched down and walked along with his backside stuck out, his face in front of mine, very serious like he had a stomach ache and sort of looking up at Marmie at the same time and

saying how the Asphodel hotel had been carved from an immense hill of red rock and wasn't that amazing. Every room was a great cave he said filled with ancient treasures. He'd been one of the carvers of the rock from the first day, him and a whole army of Chinamen. Marmie said people passing through had talked about it. It was already world famous said the Chinamen who then bid for daddy's attention and asked if he might graciously accept the invitation to the grand opening on account of daddy, the great Pialuto, being a person of historical note and everybody would be so pleased to see him there.

'What invitation?'

We were all very startled, even Mrs Farnham, because Marmie, even when upset or angry, was painfully soft spoken, but here she was as strident as a hammer on an anvil. Daddy pulled the envelope from his pocket and handed it to the Chinaman and said he'd got another one in the post two months ago and he apologised for not writing thank you, no. The Chinaman was looking at the envelope in his hand like he didn't know what to do with it and Marmie snatched it away, saying 'well I'll go then' and shocking to me was daddy shrinking away like all the water had gone out of him. He looked for a moment older than Mrs Farnham. The world wasn't working properly. We were all travelling along very slowly, almost at the gate now, and there was the house and the orchards and goats and chickens, everything that was our life together didn't seem to belong to us in that moment of nobody talking and all the earth turning in Marmie's eyes like I'd never seen them. I wondered where we were travelling to if we didn't go home. Daddy saw me worried and took charge in the strangest voice, as if he'd been drinking and crying in his sleep:

'You people can't stay on the road tonight. You better camp here.'

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An eel buttered the darkness and we spoke to one another as underwater creatures do. I was but a mollusc and it made no sense to say I was upside down. He bade me, the eel, to swim out to meet him. I had an idea of his whiskers and I can't say why that is. He knew nothing of mothers and I knew nothing of whiskers. We were simpletons. When he grazed her belly, I felt him sliding by and there was a great shuddering and her hands were holding me and later she'd say, my mother, there he was eeling by and lo he was gone from both of us and there her fingertips on my knee. It made a little tent she said. She was sitting on the muddy floor of the river, the water bobbing her breasts and the light through the trees making sparks upon them. There was a great shuddering again, but the eel was gone to the darkness, it was all about me. A great creaking sound I would later hear on boats. So many sucking sounds if you really want to know. The apples fermenting in her bowels. My heart twice as fast and not so whomping. I may as well have been inside her heart. The tired river and the empty red trees sucked on one another and there was the pleading of the earth itself from long before my father and mother got me started. The ever-be drought had sucked the colour from the sky she said. And the river sighed. What does a river remember? I have begun to wonder, as perhaps Mrs Farnham wondered: if I travel on as I've been travelling, getting older inside and everything working beautifully, will my memories go back to before I was born?

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