

THE QUARRY

After the Phoenix

Kirsten Oakley

Your ashes are in my mouth. I swallow the bitter taste as I crouch. But I cannot follow you. They need me here.

In the small bathroom their shrieks reverberate against the tiles. I want to cover my ears but my arms are weighed down with their soapy bodies. I cannot even close my eyes as I know that it only takes a second, a moment of inattention. Instead, I watch them as the tepid bathwater rises and falls with their bickering. I ignore their illogical arguments and try to hold those slippery limbs still. I rearrange my lopsided mouth. Does that look like a smile now? I can't remember the last time I looked at my own face in the mirror. Even now it is at my back, capturing only the faces of my mischievous sons as they dart away from me, and vegemite and dirt slides away from my grasp.

From far away, the noise of the doorbell peals. My neck snaps sideways, listening, exasperated. It rings again and I have called out half a syllable of your name before I remember. Half of you hangs, spoken in the air, reverberating in the empty house.

Their voices clamour and I drag them from the bath, wrapping them in one toweled arm each. I heave and move to exit but our bulk won't make it through the door. I was never good at judging angles, distances, practicalities. That was your department. We jam in the doorway, a three headed monster that sends the cat tearing away from our path. As I untangle us, the towel sweeps a plastic bottle from the makeshift shelf onto the floor. From the cracked bottle a pool of your anti-dandruff shampoo seeps out. Did you imagine that in your new life that you would no longer shed your skin?

I leave the mess and drop one son, wrapping him in his own towel. He leads us down the hall, trailing a path of shampoo, snakelike, for us to follow.

I tell myself that they will be my world, but the water from their wet bodies has already seeped through my t-shirt and is chilling me in the darkening night. Their faces are damp but dirty as the youngest loops chubby limbs around my neck, leaving vegemite in my hair.

I hold them tighter as I peer through the rusted screen at the empty doorstep. I stare at the space where somebody had just stood. There is no-one but me here now. I wonder how soon I can start the rituals of sleep.

At night I will sip the port that your mother gave us as an anniversary present. I will remember the whispered plans we used to make, dreaming of a time beyond sour vomit and cubed food and endless cheap plastic. I will click through the images of you as you inhabit that space of clean, bright newness. I will watch you emerge, trapped in my den of blue light.

This yearning will not snap the tether of small fingers, dark eyes, the smell of breast milk and the tug I feel all the way through the seven layers of my Caesarean scar. I am anchored to them skin and bone. But your ashes are in my mouth as you rise.