

The Things that Remain

Smoke covers most of the horizon now.

As I drive, I watch the thick black plumes billowing over the wheatfields. Their stain spreading across the sky.

The tyres of the ute are churning up a wake of red dust on the unsealed road. There isn't a speed limit out here, but I'm still pretty sure I'm breaking some sort of law. Bouncing over every divot and hump like a rally car.

Through the windshield, the farmlands stream by. Rows of grain and hay bales stacked into stepped pyramids. An entire landscape of dry kindling.

Every now and then a car passes me in the opposite direction. Faces in the passenger windows turning to stare. I don't know if it's because of the way I'm driving or where I'm headed.

Somewhere behind that shroud of smoke is my home.

Up ahead, I see the strobing red and blue of a police car's lightbar. They are parked on the shoulder of the road, the two officers resting against the hood. I ease off the accelerator, but one of them is already walking out with his palm raised to signal me. I pull up alongside him.

When I wind down the window, I can taste the bitterness of the smoke in the air. The officer is wearing a surgical mask over his nose and mouth and he pulls it away from his face to speak.

"You're in an awful hurry," he says.

"Just trying to get home."

He shakes his head. "Sorry pal, you're going to have to turn around."

"It's my home, officer. I'm not allowed to protect my own property?"

He looks back over his shoulder. The smoke has spread to eclipse the sun, an orange circle barely visible through the haze.

"Look, I understand how you feel," he says. "But we can't let anyone through. No point saving your house if it costs you your life."

I lean back in the seat and take a deep breath. Ash has started to fall now. Loose swirls of it coiling down and flecking the windscreen. Dusting the officer's uniform.

“They’ve set up a shelter back in town at the Council Chambers,” he says. “You can wait it out there.”

“Okay, officer. Thank you.”

I turn the ute around and head back up the road, watching the police lights draw more and more distant in my rearview. When they are out of sight, I turn off down a dirt farm road and pull the car over by the wire and post fence and switch off the engine.

On the other side of the fence is a field of barley stubble and a barn with a corrugated rainwater tank. I know this place. From here, the property is only a couple of kilometres northwest.

I step out of the car and look out over the patchwork country. Everything latticed into rectangles. The smoke looming over it all, swollen and malign. I can’t see flames yet, but deep within there are shifting orange blooms like the flare of a searchlight through fog.

Are you really doing this?

Of course you are.

I vault over the fence and set off through the field. The stalks of grain seem to part and flow around me.

Ahead is nothing but smog and fire and the wailing of sirens.

And what little remains of my son’s memory.

I always wished he could have died at home.

Surrounded by all of the things he loved. The open paddocks and the quaver of birdsong from the windbreaks. Bottlebrush trees humming with bees.

Each morning after breakfast, when the first shafts of daylight started to break over the treetops, he would pull on his gum boots and disappear down the timber patio stairs.

Hours later, he would reappear looking like he’d been wrestling pigs. Stomping back up the stairs with his boots and shins caked in creek-mud and dirt smeared on his forehead. Some spider or grasshopper held preciously in his cupped hands.

Melanie would sit him down and pick out the twigs and seedpods knitted in his hair while he winced and made faces.

There had been a window in his hospital room.

I was thankful for that at least.

A view of the asphalt road. The hotel across the street and the drive-through bottle store with its blushing neon sign.

He had laid in the stark white bed with the sheet drawn up to his waist staring out that window through half-lidded eyes. I was never sure if he was really watching or just dozing.

The drip bag hung on a stand beside him and its tube ran down his arm to feed the needle in the back of his hand. The cable of a heart rate monitor snaking through the neck of his gown. A nasal cannula fixed above his lip.

A tangle of tubes binding him to that bed, just as tightly as any rope.

He died in that bed and in that room. But he lived at home.

And so would I remember him.

I've been hiking less than ten minutes when I come to a long swathe of farmland left cauterised and smoking by the passage of the fire.

The smell is caustic inside my nose. The ashen remains of crops crumbling beneath my boots. Smoke hanging low over the ground, like mist.

In the middle of the dead field stands the charred skeleton of the farmhouse. Wisps of flame still flicker in the glassless window frames.

This place is Henry McAlister's home. Or at least it used to be.

The tractor shed where I once serviced his fleet is gone, only the smouldering wrecks of the machinery remain.

Right here before my eyes, a man's entire life and livelihood. All of the days and all of the years stacked atop a bed of kindling and lit for a pyre.

I wonder what Henry will do now. A farmer without a farm.

He always used to book his services first thing in the morning. That way the machines would be ready to go when the farmhands arrived for work. When I pulled up to his place, the dew would still be fresh on the grass and he would already be waiting for me at the gate like I was running late.

There was one exception.

It was the service scheduled the week after the funeral.

I had arrived that morning to find the gate untended. My breath fogging in the cool air as I got out of the ute to let myself through. When I rolled up the dirt track to the house, I saw

the front door swing open and Henry sauntered out onto the patio and leaned against the rail. Watching me through squinted eyes, like he was looking into the sun.

That was as close as he got to surprise.

I parked the ute and got out and tipped my hat his direction.

“No need to come out, Henry,” I called. “I’ll get started on the machinery.”

He nodded, but I could feel his eyes on my back as I crossed the yard.

I went about my usual business in my usual way and halfway through the first oil change I realised I was crying.

I set down the can and wiped my hands on the rag and stood there a moment. Tears cooling on my cheeks. Then I wandered out and over to the outhouse, Henry was still leaning against the railing watching me. I swung the creaking door shut and stared at my reflection in the mirror. My hand clamped over my mouth, eyelids puffed and watering. Snotty nosed like an infant.

When I was done, I splashed my face with cold water from the tap until the redness was all gone. Then I returned to the shed. Henry had retreated back inside the house, but he had left a steaming mug of coffee on the workbench for me. It was not his way to express things with words.

I trudge on through the ash and the ruin of Henry’s farm.

The smoke is starting to feel like grit in my eyes. I squeeze them shut then blink away the tears, but they return almost immediately.

We never packed up his room.

All of his possessions remain in their rightful place. The little figurine men saluting on their shelf. The posters bluetacked to the wall. On his desk is a big jar full of dirt and twigs and browning leaves, the top sealed by pin-holed gladwrap. It was once the home of a stick insect, long dead now.

Every Saturday afternoon I would go in there to clean.

I vacuumed the carpet and dusted the surfaces and polished the trophies with a damp cloth. I hung a fresh lavender-stuffed sock in the wardrobe to keep away the silverfish.

Everything left pristine and preserved. A moment frozen in time.

Melanie had interrupted me once. Gingerly opening the door and stepping inside while I was spraying a photo frame with windex. She was dressed prettily. A summer frock patterned with flowers.

“Going out somewhere?” I asked.

“Just the cemetery,” she replied. She was looking me dead in the eye and something about her expression made me glance away.

“Okay,” I said. “Say hi from me.”

“I thought maybe this time you could come along and say hi yourself.”

I wiped away the excess spray from the glass. “You know how I feel about that graveyard,” I said. “Besides I’m busy here.”

She crossed the room and took the photo frame and spray bottle from me and set them on the desk and took my hands in hers. “Do you think it might be time to let some of this stuff go?” she asked.

“Let what go?”

“His things,” she gestured to the photo frame, to the figurines.

“No,” I said.

“We’d keep the most important things, of course,” she said. “Pick out the mementoes.”

“And do what with the rest. Stuff it in a packing box? Throw it out like trash?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe there’s some other little boy out there who could appreciate some of it.”

“Some other little boy,” I repeated.

“We can drink a bottle of wine and tell stories about him while we sort through it.”

“Seems an odd thing to drink to.”

That look in her eye again.

“It just doesn’t feel right,” I said. “Not yet.”

“It will never feel right,” she said, her hands soft and warm around mine. “But it’s something that we need to do if we want to start moving on.”

“Move on?” I said. “I don’t want to move on. Why do you?”

That had wounded her. I could see the pain writ in the lines upon her face. The two of us had stood there avoiding eye contact until she whispered a response, *fine*, and slipped out the open door.

I stood there a while longer. Pondering the things she had said.

Then I picked up the windex bottle and got back to cleaning.

By the time I get to the property, the fire has already arrived. I stand by the gate, basked in its glow. Feeling the heat prickle against my skin. Everything is tinged crimson by the flamelight. Even the sky is red and raw.

The grassy paddocks and the bushlands that surround the house are ablaze. Roaring flames that rise five feet above the leaf canopy. The big powderbark trees that crane over the house are burning too. Their trunks are blackened and cracked and bright embers glow through the splits. A gnarled branch falls from one and shatters upon the roof. Cinders and sparks swirl in the air and flames begin to ripple along the eaves.

All of my plans unravel in my mind one by one.

There is no way to save the house. But can I save what's inside?

Only one way to find out.

I'm halfway down the gravel driveway when something loud and droning swoops over my head. I duck instinctively and look up to see a scoutplane gliding toward the treeline. Its belly opens up and it dumps a payload of water over the flames. The water sizzles and steam mixes with the smoke. When it clears, there is a patch of extinguished trees standing black and fuming. A small scar in the flank of the inferno.

The plane makes a long bend around and then passes back over me as I bound up the patio stairs. It's so hot my sweat is drying before it can trickle. When I reach for the door handle, the brass stings my fingers and it takes me two grabs to twist it open.

Inside the shadows of the furniture are dancing over the floor and the walls. My own tormented visage cast up there too. Smoke wreaths the ceilings and already it hurts to breathe, like swallowing on a dry throat.

I lift the neck of my shirt up over my nose and make for his room. When I push through the door, I need to shield my eyes against the flare. The far wall is on fire. The flames shimmering like a mirage and the wallpaper curling up and flaking off.

There is a plastic tub full of toys on the chest of drawers. I snatch it up and dump out the toys and then I freeze.

What do I choose first? Where do I even begin?

There is a dry snapping overhead. I look up to see the ceiling buckle and then cave and the back half of the room disappears beneath rattling timber and fiery rubble. I cross my arms over my face, wincing as the hairs singe.

When I lower my arms, the roof is leaning on its side before me. Tiles sliding off and breaking on the floor. A pall of dust rising. His desk and shelves are gone. So too are the trophies. The framed photos. The stick insect's glass mausoleum. All consumed by debris and fire.

I guess that decision's been made for me.

I throw open the cupboard door. Inside hangs his school uniforms. The undersized football guernsey. A few hoodies. I rip them from their hangers and retreat out the door, my desperate bounty bundled in the crook of an elbow.

The heat hangs heavy in the air now. Smoke everywhere. As I double down the hallway, a low concussive detonation comes from the kitchen and the wall there splinters outward. A spray of bright motes needling my face.

When my vision clears, I realise I am sitting down. There is a searing pain along my arm and I look down to see my shirt is on fire. So is my meagre collection of his clothes.

I run enkindled. Tearing at my shirt. Cracks and crashes and clattering all around me as the house collapses in on itself. I burst out of the front door and fall off the patio onto the dirt and roll until the fire is out.

Only a scrap of fabric remains clutched in my hand. I let it fall smouldering from my fingers and watch as it twists down into a bright wisp. Then there is nothing but loose ash, glowing incandescent.

I take a handful of baked earth around the ashes and let it spill through my fingers.

As it scatters over the burnt field, I weep.

I weep for what has been lost. For what I have failed to preserve in effigy. But mostly I weep for what remains. In thought and heartache and habit. A shape wrought immortal in carved stone and in the memory of those who met him.

And if that is not the true shape of a person's soul, then what is?

It is late afternoon when they find me sitting hunched beneath the waterbombed trees. A small haven from the fire, if not the smoke.

My skin and clothes are mottled with grime. Pink burn-marks shine glossy along my arms and cheeks. I imagine my face looks like some old coal miner's. The whites of my eyes stark against the soot caked around them.

The search and rescue team crouch around me in their high-vis coveralls. One of them unscrews a water bottle and holds it to my scabbed lips. I can't seem to swallow properly and the water dribbles down my chin and throat.

They are asking me questions, but I can't speak. My breath rasping in and out.

While they radio for an ambulance, I lay there staring at the sky. The dusk is a deep ruby red. All that smoke and ash and flame diffused on the wind. Spread thin and so made beautiful.

The ambulance arrives and they wheel out a gurney and lift me onto its bed. The paramedic fits an oxygen mask over my nose and mouth. I feel the scratch of a drip needle being set in my inner elbow.

"You'll be okay now," she says to me. "You're going to be okay."

The burns have healed now, but my arms and shoulders are corded with the scars. I fight the urge to scratch them while I stand before the marker.

My hat held in one hand, the other dangling by my side.

This is the first time I have come out here to see him.

There is a grasshopper perched on the corner of his headstone. Its back legs flexing like a violin bow. I leave it be. Its chirping joins the song of a thousand others.

Behind me footsteps approach softly on the grass. A hand slides into mine, fingers interlocking, and she rests her head against my shoulder.

I turn to look at Melanie and she smiles thinly and squeezes my hand.

For the first time in a long while I think that I actually see her. Truly see her. And something occurs to me that should have always been obvious.

For all that has been lost, she is still here.

We are still here.