

WINGS

Holly Inglis

In my mind I have wings. Great, big, feathered in greys and browns like the ruru I saw near the barn in autumn, sweeping out behind me and carving trails in the snow behind my footprints. In my mind, these wings carry me away, and I'd be gone.

I'm out of time. Picking up my imaginary wings, I pull away from the creek and hoist myself over the fence. My gumboots scratch at the scab on my calf.

I run down the track, feet falling into the wheel groove and the wind cold against the corners of my eyes. Rain will come in the next few days. I imagine my wings are splayed behind me. Tom Hilton, across the road, watches me go from next to his water tank. He raises a hand to shield his eyes from the setting sun.

I'd hold them out in front of the fireplace when it rained and braid daisies between the feathers on a spring day. They would carry me as I danced over peaks and valleys, into the endless white noise of quiet that exists only in the wild. Like the static on the old box TV that used to sit in the living room; Numbness of limbs personified.

It is not quiet here. I round the corner to the house, kick my boots on top of the pile beside the front door. Jess looks at me behind near-blind eyes and whines. She's an old dog, older than me. I leave her be. The sun's down, down behind the pines but it's still light; Punga tree shadows claw at the weatherboards on the homestead.

Dad sits at the dining room table, paper in hand, striking profile of hooked nose and firm brow. I wince in my brain from a word that doesn't come. I flatten my wings to my back and skirt the room, noticed, but not really.

I think we should coat dad's hands and words in neon paint and shine me under a blacklight. I would glow, knuckles printed across my face and letters carved deep into my skin. My wings are untouched by the hurt-coloured glow.

I slip onto the deck; I'll wait a little longer before I get my dinner - roast meat and boiled vegetables - I'd rather spend time out here. I pretend I'm in the numbness of the wild, by the wild boars and hunting hounds, watching tusk and tooth in silence.

There's a sheep's carcass strung by the ankles hung from the washing line. Manaia turns to me, lit up by a smile that creases the corners of his moko and makes me grin myself. He's old, older than mum, and the hunting knife shakes with his hands, ever so slightly. On the land since before Dad bought it, he lives in the shearer's quarters, and he weaves stories of words I've never heard and spins myths from the air between us.

The knife skims the fine line between skin and muscle, slicing away as he launches into a tale - he knows me well enough by now that I just need to listen. I lift myself onto the fence to rest my legs on green lichen; Peach fuzz on aged wood. He cuts - cuts, cuts, cuts, till the skin is half and then nearly gone - steadying his hands just enough to make light work, lip hard set against his teeth. It's an almost-grimace.

By the time he's done the shadows are lost in the dark; The porch-light strikes from behind as he takes a knife to its head. Summer has shrunk the stream over the fence behind me; It sings softly, filtering through the feathers of my wings.

I breathe and it stings my lungs a little. Manaia wipes his hands on his chaps. The glint of his eye is unmistakable in the dark of early night; Deep, deep understanding. He heaves himself up onto the fence next to me.

I think we are two birds perched on a powerline. I am little but I have my youth. Bright feathers and bravado. I think our wings would catch us if we fell, feather tips snatch at rushing air like Icarus, except he flies.

But we sit here with our not-hollow bones and our not-backwards knees and hope to God that one day we get out.