

Canary Fields

We drive past oceans of canola, coloured like the canaries at the home I have just left behind. Grey gums with twisted limbs stand like lighthouses on lonely skerries. Farm houses with names like Bungalily and Caranook. The smell of luggage, sandwich wrappers and sweat. Soft white noise from the tyres on the wet road. The sound of Mum holding back tears and Dad gripping and twisting the leather steering wheel.

The silence inside the car strains against the windows. I want so desperately to speak, to say something funny and clever to make my parents catch each other's eyes and smile.

"Can I open the window, please?"

Mum looks across at Dad who grips the wheel tighter. He drives for half a minute before speaking but it feels like longer.

"No. It makes my ears pop."

Mum turns her head back to the window and watches random piles of rocks flash past. We come from the city and don't understand most of what we see. Pieces of farm equipment lie abandoned in fields. Giant tarpaulins cover things unknown. Wooden ramps and platforms stand empty near wire fences.

Black swans swim in flooded paddocks. Ducks float in roadside puddles.

A man in a plastic jacket stands on the side of the road spraying something onto the grass. He waves but we don't respond. I turn and look out the rear window and he is back to his work as if we'd never passed.

Paddocks of freshly-shorn sheep wander through the grass, lambs pulled along in their wake. It has just turned spring and the afternoon air is cold and sharp. I worry about the lambs and how cold they must be.

More fields pass, most of them empty. Abandoned houses, doors hanging open, sit quietly at the end of weed covered driveways. Sometimes I see gatherings of large homes in the distance on the hills. I imagine that the people inside are friends, or a large family. I wonder if farmers have time to play games.

Mum is coughing, great racking wetness that I can almost feel in my own chest. She reaches to open the glove box but sees me watching her in the rear-vision mirror. She sits back and I look out the window.

A herd of cows rests on the ground, legs curled up beneath them the way I sit on the couch. The way I'm sitting now.

Dad turns on the radio but it's mostly static. The sound fills the car and I close my eyes, letting it fill my mind, too. It merges with the buzz of the road against the tyres and I fall asleep to its whispers, like waves on the sand.

I wake and don't know how long I've been asleep. The sky is darker but perhaps the clouds have changed and are hiding the sun. My neck hurts from leaning against the window. I can hear a crackling voice from the radio but I can't tell what he's saying. It's still nice to hear somebody's voice.

"Can we play I spy?"

I'm too old for it but we've always played games on long trips. It breaks the silence and gives us something to focus on. Mum turns and gives me a half-smile, which doesn't quite reach her eyes. She nods and I think of what to say.

"Something beginning with G."

Mum turns back and watches the road. The elastic on her ponytail is slipping and wisps of hair hang loose around her neck. I know that when she leaves the car the seat will be covered in hair and it will stick to her back the next time she gets in. I can already see a couple of strands stuck to her shoulder.

Dad is scratching his cheek and jaw. He hasn't shaved in a few days. I like his stubble but Mum doesn't. She says it roughs up her skin when he kisses her. He doesn't kiss her as much these days, I think he's afraid of hurting her. He never says anything but he always looks worried. Once I caught him crying but he said he got shampoo in his eyes. I don't know what is happening. I don't think I want to.

Before we left home we freed my canaries but they flew onto the roof of the garage and sat there for hours.

"Mum?"

"Sorry. Green?"

"No, not green."

The voice man on the radio is clearer now. He is talking to a lady about where she would most like to have breakfast. She says Paris. Or Italy. She could afford to go if she guesses the mystery celebrity voice correctly but she can't do it. She laughs and hangs up. The DJ tells us the name of the station and plays a song by someone called Johnny Cash.

A flock of birds pass overhead. They are flying somewhere, tiny and silent from my perspective. They look so free yet they fly in a pattern. They can fly anywhere they want but they just go back and forth. If I could fly I wouldn't go anywhere I think. I would just fly up.

The scenery outside feels like it has been put on repeat. An endless loop of fields, hills and ponds. It's like God or nature or whoever ran out of ideas and just copied everything, hoping we wouldn't notice.

"Grass?"

The singer on the radio has a rich, deep voice but the song is sad and I don't like it very much. Dad forgets himself and starts to sing along. Mum turns to watch him. She lifts the

corner of her mouth and her eye crinkles up. He notices her and stops singing, concentrating harder on the road. Mum shifts in her seat and chews at her thumbnail.

The sun is setting and colours fades from the landscape. The houses we pass have lights on and sometimes I see a figure moving around inside. I picture a stark but warm kitchen. A simple dinner of meat and two veg is being prepared. People say that things are simpler in the country. They also say that simple is better but I don't know. I don't think it matters how complicated things are if you're all together.

“Honey? Grass?”

We've only been driving a few hours and everything is so different already. Not just outside the car but inside as well. I look up and Mum is staring at me.

“Yeah, grass.”

I lean my head against the window and look up into the sky. It's getting dark overhead but a faint band of light stretches across the horizon. A few stars have appeared but they shy away when I look at them.

The only colours left are the red and white reflectors on the road in front of us. The glow of a city in the distance looks like a miniature sun about to rise and shine its civilisation and life across the fields.

Every so often a green sign appears, pointing to a town but not to where we are going.

Mum is asleep, head tilting to the side and I know she will complain of a sore neck when she wakes. Dad is tired. He opens his eyes as wide as they will go. I smile because it looks like he is surprised at something.

Outside my windows grey shadows hide more fields of canola. I don't know how far into the distance they stretch but I know what colour they are. They are the colour of birds.