

Become Ashes

I hurled the buggy down the dried up river and the heat of the engine blew against my face and the tires screeched as they chewed up pebbles. I looked over to the passenger seat to check on you. Your father Jed was blinking the dust out of his eyes and on his lap, your son Isac coughed. Your ashes rested in his backpack, wrapped around his arms.

‘Sorry about the buggy,’ I said. ‘It must be annoying.’

Isac smiled. ‘It’s kind of fun.’

I remembered when you were a boy and we collected hay bales at dusk. It was hard work, but it made you feel like a man. When we collapsed into the tray of the ute, you asked me profound questions: *do you think there’s people like us around the stars? Do you think they’d be looking at us, thinking the same thing?* I laughed at you. Your thoughts were always too big for me, even then.

Brisbane’s skyscrapers rose through the orange mist and life before the collapse rushed through my mind; the bar we liked on Ann Street, our university, the restaurant on the wharf where I had my first date.

‘Grandpa,’ Isac said. ‘Do you think Brisbane will be how you remember it?’

How was poor Jed supposed to respond to that? I drove out of the river onto a pothole riddled road and pointed to rows of tents in the distance. ‘This must be the first checkpoint.’

Isac straightened up on Jed’s lap. ‘Where are these people from?’

I stopped beside a red tent at the front of the complex. I saw Jed pull his facemask up to cover his face. I knew he was worried about the colour of his skin. I nodded to the guard, and

glanced down at the pistol holstered around his waist. I thought about your lie. Why would you have done something like this to us?

An official in a navy-blue uniform walked over. I leant over and unzipped the backpack where you laid, pulled the papers out and handed them over. ‘Are all these people from Sydney?’ I asked.

His wide brimmed Akubra cast a dark shadow over his face. ‘Your first time back I take it?’ He took the papers and walked under the shade of the tent. ‘They live here,’ he yelled back. ‘And my condolences. I was moved by his poetry when I was younger.’

I couldn’t believe it. Your entire life I’d taken you for granted. Thought you were a fool for writing poems when the world was falling apart.

He leaned against the buggy, handing back the passes. ‘Mate, you got enough carbon credits to make you rich. You be careful, yeah?’

I nodded.

‘And fair warning, there’s not a lot left of the city, and what is, is dangerous. Stick to the main roads and come back through this checkpoint on the way out.’

‘Thanks,’ I said and drove on.

Is this what you imagined for us? Surely, even with all your foresight... But then again, maybe you did, I never was smart enough to read your poetry.

‘Do you think we can see a movie today?’ Isac asked. ‘Dad said he loved the movies.’

Jed rubbed Isac’s shoulder.

‘Grandpa, you told me there were movies about superheroes, like in my comics.’

‘There was.’

‘Can we see one of those movies, please?’

‘We’ll see, mate. Maybe after the important stuff.’

Isac looked down to his backpack, nodded.

I parked outside the coffee shop you loved. I sat back in the buggy and took a deep breath. Across the road was a stumpy old building and behind that the remains of Roma Street Gardens, and far in the distance, the purple haze of Mount Cootha floated over the horizon like a bruise. I felt nothing.

Isac jumped out the buggy and flung his backpack over his shoulders. ‘Wow,’ he said, thumbs under his straps. ‘Everything’s so big. Way bigger than anything at Tara.’

‘You wait ‘till we take you to Sydney,’ Jed said. ‘The buildings are safe there too. I’m going to take you to the top of one.’

His eyes widened.

A voice from across the road yelled out to us. It was Liz, your wife. She waved us over. I hugged her outside the entrance to the coffee shop.

We walked into the café. ‘Did you get here ok?’ she asked.

I couldn’t respond. The room flickered in the glow of candles and people huddled around every available table.

Liz smiled. ‘They’re all here for Eli.’

‘Christ,’ Jed said. ‘Did you organise this?’

‘No. But he did write a lot about this place.’

People noticed us, got up, apologised, told Jed about how much you meant to them, how his poetry had changed their life, how they somehow knew him well enough to be here. I’d known you since you were a boy, and I didn’t know any of these people. Did you? What did they mean to you?

Liz hugged Jed. ‘A publisher from Melbourne popped by earlier,’ she said. ‘He wants to publish Eli’s poems. It’s a good idea. The money could help Isac get through school.’

Jed glanced at me.

I didn’t respond. I never thought there would be this kind of reaction — to poems of all things — I was a bit speechless.

‘I’ll think about it,’ Jed said.

She took a step back. ‘I want you three to come with me. I want to show you something.’

She put her hand around my waist and led me downstairs. She’s always been beautiful, and I’ve always been jealous of you. It’s weird — I’m not sure how I feel about telling you.

‘We were lucky that we were the ones closest to him,’ she said.

I cringed at the past tense.

She turned the lights on. ‘The owners created a mural for his poems here. They framed them alongside some art the barista made.’ It was cool and damp down there, and your poems hung on little wooden frames next to pencil drawings. ‘Apparently he was an artist before... you know.’

Jed stopped to look at a drawing of a bushfire overlaid with a politician's face. ‘He was so stubborn.’

‘Most are unfinished,’ Liz said. ‘He never stopped tinkering.’

Isac squinted and silently mouthed the words of a poem. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said, looking back to his mum.

‘I remember when he wrote that one, don’t you? He made pasta that night and read it to us at the table. He said the rhymes were cliché.’ She looked over to Jed. ‘He suffered so much for his poetry.’

‘Come on, mate,’ Jed said to Isac. ‘Let’s go upstairs and get a coffee. One for your old man, yeah?’

Jed nodded.

I stared at one of the drawings. It was a diagram of a water cycle overlaid with a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. I couldn’t bring myself to read it because I remember when I showed you a video on the butterfly’s life cycle. You made it your mission that day to catch a caterpillar and see it for yourself; you just wouldn’t believe it until you saw it.

I walked over to the next and looked at a drawing of scientists taking measurements from glaciers. Again, I tried to make sense of the poem but couldn’t understand it. I always thought you’d make a better scientist, but I think I’m biased.

Liz walked up to me. ‘He certainly had the imagination of a poet. Didn’t he?’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve never understood poetry,’ I said without thinking. ‘I mean...’

She nodded. ‘I understand.’

I walked over to a prose poem called *Climate Hostage*. You wrote that no one was caught up in history and that if enough of people move, they can change the current. I sighed at your optimism.

Liz wrapped her arms around herself, looking at the same poem. ‘I need to tell you something. I... I have to tell someone. I don’t know, I’m sorry.’

‘No, Liz. Please.’

‘I guess I feel that wasn’t a good wife. I was never there. I worked too much.’

I shook my head and looked at the concrete floor she was standing. I tried to compose my thoughts.

The muscles on her neck twitched. 'I can't stop thinking about it. I was so selfish. We should have known that he didn't need a gun for his farm.' She paused. 'I should have known.'

I hugged her. I knew what to say, like you always did.

She took a deep breath. 'He battled with depression his whole life. He bottled up generations of trauma. His antidepressants had stopped being made. For God's sake, I should have been more careful. His father did so much for him. I was so careless. He'd still be here, Sam.'

I took a step back, holding her arms. 'Liz, this isn't fair. It wasn't your fault he had depression.'

She wrapped her arms back around me and sobbed. I felt her tears run down my shoulder.

'We all knew he'd taken up hunting,' I said. 'And I think he was actually hunting too, it's just... you know how it was when he wasn't himself.'

'I'm sorry, Sam.'

'We all wish we could have done something. It's not anyone's fault, really.' I closed my eyes and held onto her. I gave her all I could.

She stepped back and wiped her nose with her wrist. 'Thanks for coming today.'

'Of course.'

'Is there anything I can do for you?'

I shook my head.

She nodded then walked upstairs.

I looked back over the *Climate Hostage* poem; looked at the drawing again; remembered the mangroves at Bribie Island we fished at, how we strolled around looking for crabs. I wish I

could remember something profound you said, but I can't remember anything. I don't even remember how old you were. But I guess I was tired — I guess I still am.

Jed's voice called down the stairs: 'The sun's setting, mate.'

I followed him up and walked through the cafe.

'Did you read the poem *Transitions*?' Jed asked. 'The one where he described where he wanted his ashes spread?'

I shook my head.

'They hung black fellas from the windmill, Sam. Back when the city was first colonised.'

'Christ. That's why?'

Jed nodded and looked across the road to the stumpy old building. Was that it?

Behind it, the sun was bleeding pillars of light, and I looked down to the grass in the surrounding gardens that had died and saw animal tracks in the dust of the dried up streams.

Isac came out of the cafe with his backpack and he smiled at us. My chest tightened and I knew I couldn't hold it back much longer.

I followed behind him and his grandfather as they walked across the road. They blocked the light with their silhouettes and held each other's hands.

Isac approached the windmill and placed his palm on its white exterior. I felt it swell up inside of me when he took a step back and placed his backpack on the ground.

I wish I was stronger for you when you were alive, Eli. I wish I fought harder with you. I wish I was there for you when you needed it.

Jed knelt beside Isac and unzipped his backpack for him.

'I'm sad I'll never really know him,' Isac said.

Jed nodded and took in a deep, strong breath. 'I have to tell you something, about the poem, about us. Your father, Isac... my son.' He paused. 'Elijah wanted this because he was a descendant of survivors. You are the descendent of survivors. Their strength runs through you. You can talk to them and ask them for guidance. Remember this, so you don't lose hope.' Jed glanced up to the windmill, as if the words he needed were hidden within it.

Isac reached into his backpack, lifting out the little chest where you rested. His hands were shaking and he held you there a moment, staring down at the chest.

The chest slipped out of his hands and fell to the ground.

Jed placed his hand on Isac's shoulder and smiled at him. He opened the chest where it laid.

I found myself thinking of the time I told you about DNA, how it held the information of your ancestors, and how you asked me about them. I couldn't answer. I wanted to rustle your hair in the way I did when you were young, just once more. Talk to you about science and the miracles of natures, just one last time. All that time you spent listening to me, and I can't even remember anything you said and I never read your poems. And yet, there you were. A little pile of ash at the bottom of a tin chest.

Jed reached his hand in and wrapped his fingers around you and lifted you up and watched as you ran through his fingers. He threw what was left of you towards the city.

Isac looked back at me. The tears down his cheeks like diamonds.

I placed my hand on Isac's arm. 'I've never told anyone this, because I've been embarrassed. But I'm devastated, devastated about everything, and I've been hiding it for a long time. Don't be like me, don't let fatigue disguise despair. Hope isn't won in battles. It's that quiet voice at the end of the day that reminds you to try again tomorrow.'

Isac smiled at me and took a handful of you for himself. He turned and threw you into the air like he was pegging a ball and the ash erupted into a mist around him.

With one hand, I lifted you up and threw you towards the sunset. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and felt the warm air in my nostrils. When I opened them, I marvelled at the last rays of light that fell over the mountain, over the dried up river, over the remains of the city, and I realised what you meant by transitions. You weren't the ash. You were the sunset.

Draft.3 Transitions

I hurled the buggy down the dried up river and the heat of the engine blew against my face and the tires screeched as they chewed up pebbles. I looked over to the passenger seat to check on you. Your father Jed was blinking the dust out of his eyes and on his lap, your son Isac coughed. Your ashes rested in his backpack, wrapped around his arms.

‘Sorry about the buggy,’ I said. ‘It must be annoying.’

Isac smiled. ‘It’s kind of fun.’

I remembered when you were a boy and we collected hay bales at dusk. It was hard work, but it made you feel like a man. When we collapsed into the tray of the ute, you asked me profound questions: *do you think there’s people like us around the stars? Do you think they’d be looking at us, thinking the same thing?* I laughed at you. Your thoughts were always too big for me.

Brisbane’s skyscrapers rose through the orange mist and life before the collapse rushed through my mind; the bar we liked on Ann Street, our university, the restaurant on the wharf where I had my first date.

‘Grandpa,’ Isac said. ‘Do you think Brisbane will be how you remember it?’

How was poor Jed supposed to respond to that? I drove out of the river onto a pothole riddled road and pointed to rows of tents in the distance. ‘This must be the first checkpoint.’

Isac straightened up on Jed’s lap. ‘Where are the people from?’

I stopped beside a red tent at the front of the complex. I nodded to the guard. An official in a navy-blue uniform walked over. I leant over and unzipped the backpack where you laid, pulled the papers out and handed them over. ‘Are all these people from Sydney?’ I asked.

His wide brimmed akubra cast a dark shadow over his face. ‘Your first time back I take it?’ He took the papers and walked under the shade of the tent. ‘They live here,’ he yelled back. ‘And my condolences. I was moved by his poetry when I was younger.’

I couldn’t believe it. Your entire life I’d taken you for granted. Thought you were a fool for writing poems when the world was falling apart.

He leaned against the buggy, handing back the passes. ‘Mate, you got enough carbon credits to make you rich. You be careful, yeah?’

I nodded.

‘And fair warning, there’s not a lot left of the city, and what is, is dangerous. Stick to the main roads and come back through this checkpoint on the way out.’

‘Thanks,’ I said and drove on.

Is this what you imagined for us? Surely, even with all your foresight... Then again, maybe you did, I never did read your poetry.

‘Do you think we can see a movie today?’ Isac asked. ‘Dad said he loved the movies.’

Jed rubbed Isac’s shoulder.

‘Grandpa, you told me there were movies about superheroes, like in my comics.’

‘There was.’

‘Can we see one of those movies, please?’

‘We’ll see, mate. Maybe after the important stuff.’

Isac looked down to his backpack, nodded.

I parked outside the coffee shop you loved. I sat back in the buggy and took a deep breath. Across the road was a stumpy old building and behind that the remains of Roma Street

Gardens, and far in the distance, the purple haze of Mount Cootha floated over the horizon like a bruise. I felt nothing.

Isac jumped out the buggy and flung his backpack over his shoulders. ‘Wow,’ he said, thumbs under his straps. ‘Everything’s so big. Way bigger than anything at Tara.’

A voice from across the road yelled out to us. It was Liz, your wife. She waved us over. I hugged her outside the entrance to the coffee shop.

We walked into the café. ‘Did you get here ok?’ she asked.

I couldn’t respond. The room flickered in the glow of candles and people huddled around every available table.

Liz smiled. ‘They’re all here for Eli.’

‘Christ,’ Jed said. ‘Did you organise this?’

‘He wrote a lot about this place. I think it was spontaneous.’

People noticed us, got up, apologised, told Jed about how much you meant to them, how his poetry had changed their life, how they somehow knew him well enough to be here. I’d known you since you were a boy and I didn’t know any of these people. Did you? What did they mean to you?

Liz hugged Jed. ‘A publisher from Melbourne popped by earlier,’ she said. ‘He wants to publish Eli’s poems. It’s a good idea. The money could help Isac get through school.’

Jed glanced at me.

I didn’t respond. I never thought there would be this kind of reaction — to poems of all things — I was a bit speechless.

‘I’ll think about it,’ Jed said.

‘She took a step back. ‘I want you three to come with me. I want to show you something.’

She put her hand around my waist and led me downstairs. She’s always been beautiful, and I’ve always been jealous of you. It’s weird — I’m not sure how I feel about telling you.

‘We were lucky that we were the ones closest to him,’ she said.

I cringed.

She turned the lights on. ‘The owners created a mural for his poems here. They framed them alongside some art the barista made.’ It was cool and damp down there, and your poems hung on little wooden frames next to graffiti-style drawings. ‘Apparently he was an artist before... you know.’

Jed stopped to look at a drawing of a bushfire overlaid on top of a picture of a glacier. ‘He was so stubborn.’

‘Most are unfinished,’ Liz said. ‘He never stopped tinkering with them.’

Isac squinted and silently mouthed the words of a poem. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said, looking back to his mum.

‘I remember when he wrote that one, don’t you? He made pasta that night and read it to us at the table. He said the rhymes were cliché.’ She looked over to Jed. ‘He suffered so much for his poetry.’

‘Come on, mate,’ Jed said to Isac. ‘Let’s go upstairs and get a coffee. One for your old man, yeah?’

The boy nodded.

I stared at one of the drawings. It was a diagram of a water cycle overlaid with a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. I couldn’t bring myself to read it because I remember

when I showed you a video on the butterfly's life cycle. You made it your mission that day to catch a caterpillar and see it for yourself; you just wouldn't believe it until you saw it.

I walked over to the next poem and looked over to a drawing of scientists taking measurements from glaciers. Again, I tried to make sense of the poem but couldn't understand it. I always thought you'd make a better scientist, but I think I'm biased.

Liz walked up to me. 'He certainly had the imagination of a poet. What do you think it all meant?'

I shrugged. 'I've never understood poetry,' I said without thinking. 'I mean...'

Her nod cut me off.

I walked over to a prose poem you wrote called *Climate Hostage*. In it, you wrote that no one was caught up in history, and that if enough of people move, they can change the current. I sighed at your optimism.

Liz wrapped her arms around herself, looking at the same poem. 'I need to tell you something, Sam. I... I have to tell someone. I wasn't a good wife. I was never there. I worked too much.'

'No, Liz.'

Her neck muscles twitched. 'I can't stop thinking about it. I was so selfish. We should have known he didn't need a gun for his farm. I should have known. It was me who didn't stop him.'

I looked at the concrete floor she was standing on.

'He battled with depression his whole life. He bottled the generations of trauma. His antidepressants stopped being made, for God's sake. I should have been more careful. His father did so much for him. I was so careless. He'd still be here, Sam.'

‘Liz, this isn’t fair.’ I looked up at her. ‘It wasn’t your fault he had depression. It wasn’t anyone’s fault, and no one blames you.’ I hugged her and felt her tears run down my shoulder. ‘We all knew about the gun. It just didn’t cross any of our minds, how could it? We all wish we could have done something. It’s normal to ask these questions.’

‘I’m sorry, Sam.’

‘It’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault, really.’

I held her in my arms for you. I know this is what you would have wanted. I know you weren’t yourself when you did it.

She stepped back, nodded. ‘Thanks for coming today.’

‘Of course.’

She nodded again, looked down, then went upstairs.

I looked back over the *Climate Hostage* poem; looked at the drawing again; remembered the mangroves at Bribie Island we fished at, how we strolled around looking for crabs. I couldn’t remember what you said to me that day. I don’t even remember how old you were.

Jed’s voice called down the stairs: ‘the sun’s setting, mate.’

I followed him up and walked through the cafe. You felt so much so beautifully, and I’ve never felt anything at all. I walked outside with Jed.

‘Did you read the poem *Transitions*?’ Jed asked. ‘The one where he described where he wanted his ashes spread?’

I shook my head.

‘They hung black fellas from the windmill, Sam. Back when the city was first colonised.’

‘Christ. That’s why?’

Jed nodded and looked across the road to the stumpy old building. Was that it?

Behind it, the sun was bleeding pillars of crimson light, and I looked down where the grass in the surrounding gardens had died and left behind dirt which fanned in the wind like a dune. Down the middle of the garden, animal tracks ran through the dried up riverbed. I remembered the sight of water, the green on the trees, and the clear, cool smell of a healthy world.

Isac came out of the cafe with his backpack. He smiled at us. My chest tightened.

I followed behind him and his grandfather as they walked across the road. They blocked the light and their silhouettes, as they held each other's hands, made them look like ghosts from a better time.

Isac placed his palm on the windmill's white exterior and then took a few steps back from it. He took off his backpack and placed it on the ground.

I wish I was stronger for you when you were alive, Eli. I wish I fought harder with you. Maybe then, no...

Jed knelt beside Isac then unzipped his backpack for him.

'I'm sad I'll never really know him,' Isac said.

Jed nodded. 'I have to tell you something, about the poem, about us. Your father, Isac... my son.' He closed his eyes, took in a deep breath. 'Elijah wanted this because he was a descendant of survivors. You are the descendent of survivors. Their strength runs through you. You can talk to them and ask them for guidance. Remember this, so you don't lose hope.' Jed glanced up to the windmill, as if the words he needed were hidden within it.

Isac reached into his backpack, lifting out the little chest where you rested. His hands were shaking, and he held you there a moment, looking down at you, before dropping you on the ground.

Jed placed his hand on Isac's shoulder and smiled at him. He opened the chest where it laid. And then there you were, a little pile of ash. Jed reached in and grabbed a handful of you and threw you towards the sun.

‘Grandpa, were those horrible things in the poem true?’

Jed nodded.

Isac looked back at me. The tears down his cheeks like little diamonds in the evening light.

I knelt down beside you. My heart was pounding. ‘I’ve never told anyone this, Isac, because I’ve been embarrassed. But I’m devastated, devastated about everything, and I’ve been hiding it for a long time. Don’t let fatigue disguise despair. Life changes and the world changes and you have to learn to ride the waves and you have to learn to fight with the gritty hope we’ve earned.’

Isac smiled at me and took a handful of you for himself. He turned and threw you into the air like he was pegging a ball and the ash erupted into a mist around him.

I picked a handful of you up and threw you. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and felt the warm air in my nostrils and when I opened them and looked out over the remains of the city, I realised that you weren’t the ash, you were the sunset.

Draft.2 Transitions

I hurled the buggy into the dried up river. The heat of the engine blew against my face and the tires screeched as they chewed up old pebbles. I looked over to the passenger seat to check on you. Your father, Jed, was blinking the dust out of his eyes and on his lap, your son, Isac, coughed. Your ashes rested in his backpack, wrapped around his hands.

‘Sorry about the buggy,’ I said. ‘It must be annoying.’

Isac smiled. ‘It’s kind of fun.’

A memory of when you were a boy hit me like a fist: us collecting hay bales at dusk. It was hard work, but it made you feel like a man. After the sun had set and we were exhausted, you’d ask me profound questions: *do you think there’s people like us around the stars? Do you think they’d be looking at us and thinking the same thing?*

I’d laugh at you. Your thoughts were always too big for me.

‘Grandpa,’ Isac said. ‘Do you think Brisbane will be how you remember it?’

I raised my eyebrows. How was poor Jed supposed to respond to that?

Brisbane loomed over the horizon through the orange mist and I couldn’t help but think about life before everything changed: the bar on Ann Street, the university we went to together, the restaurant on the wharf where I had my first date.

‘Probably not,’ Jed said.

I turned down a pothole riddled road. ‘We’re coming up to the first checkpoint.’ I passed ransacked houses and was surprised when I saw rows of tents around the checkpoint’s wall.

Isac straightened up on Jed’s lap. ‘Wow,’ he said. ‘Where are these people from?’

I stopped beside a red tent at the front of the complex, pulled the papers out and handed them to the official. ‘Are these people from Sydney?’ I asked.

‘This is your first time back, I take it?’ He paused, as if he was waiting for my response, then walked back to the tent to read the papers. ‘These folk live here,’ he yelled back to us, stamping the papers and walking back over to hand them to me. ‘And my condolences. I was moved by his poetry when I was younger.’

I couldn’t believe it. Your whole life I’d taken you for granted. Thought you were a fool for writing poems when the world was falling about.

I drove on, and ignored the abandoned suburbs lined with houses that grew larger and larger, and took little notice of the makeshift farms that had been set up everywhere and the lights shining out of the hospital — all I felt was the humidity in the air as I breathed; it was so damp that we could have passed fish, swimming by the buggy, and I wouldn’t have even noticed.

As I approached the CBD’s outskirts, a barbed wire fence with guards came into view. Wide akubras cast shadows over their faces and rifles hung from their backs. I stopped the buggy before them. Without the whirl of the engine, everything went silent.

‘Don’t get out of the buggy,’ one of them shouted.

I looked over to Jed, who pulled up his facemask. I knew he was worried about the colour of his skin.

The guard took a few steps towards us, pulled the rifle from his shoulder, and poked the wheels. He glanced at the other guard, who shrugged.

‘Have we done something wrong?’ Jed asked.

The guard laughed. ‘Not yet, mate.’

I leant over and unzipped the backpack where you were, pulled the papers out, and handed them over.

The guard read them and nodded. 'I see... And sorry to make you nervous. We usually don't see a soul for days coming through, but it's been non-stop today. We're worried something might be going down.'

I glanced over at Jed.

'And Christ, it looks like you have enough carbon credits to make you rich, when was the last time you were in the city?'

I took the papers from the guard. 'We left when everyone else did. So what? 20 years.'

'Fair warning,' he said. 'There's not a lot left and what is, is dangerous. So be careful.'

I brought the buggy back to life and drove on, following the main roads wherever I could. Is this what you imagined for us? You could never have known the world would be like this.

'Do you think we can see a movie today?' Isac asked, as passed North Quay. 'Dad said he loved the movies.'

Jed looked out the buggy.

'Grandpa, you told me there were movies about the superhero's, like in my comics.'

'There was.'

'Can we see one of those movies, please?'

'Well see. Maybe after the important stuff, mate.'

Isac looked down to his backpack, nodded. His generation was used to disappointment, he is going to be tough like you were.

I parked outside the coffee shop you loved, just across from Roma Street Gardens. I sat back in the buggy and took a deep breath, saw the silhouette of Mount Cootha through the haze, a stumpy old building looming over the city like a guardian, and felt nothing.

Isac jumped out the buggy and flung his backpack over his shoulders. ‘Wow,’ he said, thumbs under his bag’s straps. ‘Everything’s so big. Way bigger than anything at Tara.’

I smiled. ‘You wait ‘till you see the buildings in Sydney.’

‘No way they’re bigger.’

‘Way bigger. And safe too, we can take you to the top of one.’

His eyes widened.

A voice from across the road yelled out to us. It was Liz, your wife. She waved us over. I hugged her outside the entrance to the coffee shop. She smiled.

‘Did you get here ok?’

I nodded, and we walked into the café. I was shocked to see candles everywhere, giving the room a flickering glow, and heaps of people — 50 maybe.

‘Everyone’s here for Eli,’ Liz said.

I cringed when she said your name.

‘Christ,’ Jed said. ‘Did you organise this?’

She shook her head. ‘He wrote a lot about this place. I think it was spontaneous.’

People started to notice us. They got up, nodded, apologised, told Jed how much you meant to them. How his poetry had changed their life. How they somehow knew him well enough to be here. I’d been in your life since you were a boy and I’ve never met any of these people. Did you? What did they mean to you?

Liz hugged Jed again, and he smiled in a way that was polite and full of disgust.

She took a step back. ‘A publisher from Melbourne popped by earlier. He wants to publish Eli’s poems in a collection. I think it’s a good idea. The money could help get Isac into a good school.’

Jed glanced at me.

I didn’t respond. I never thought there would be this kind of a reaction — to poems of all things — so I was a bit speechless.

‘I’ll think about it,’ Jed said.

‘I want you three to come with me,’ she said. ‘I want to show you something.’

She put her hand around my waist and led me downstairs. She’s always been beautiful, and I was always jealous of you. It’s weird — I’m not sure how I feel about telling you.

‘We’re lucky,’ she said. ‘We’re his family and he loved us most. We were really lucky.’ She turned the lights on. ‘The owners created a mural for his poems here. They framed them alongside some art the barista made. He was an artist before the collapse.’ She put her hands in her pockets and looked around. It was cool and damp down there, and your poems hung on little wooden frames next to graffiti-style drawings.

Jed stopped and looked at a picture of a bushfire overlaid on a picture of a melting glacier. ‘He was so stubborn.’

‘Are these pictures of Dad’s poems?’ Isac asked. He squinted and read aloud:

“The trees, together
the weather
a language we once understood
the land of burnt faces, the boy of broken places

the blood in the hills,
bodies bursting into flames.””

Isac looked back at us. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘That one was a draft,’ Liz said. ‘I remember when he wrote it.’ She started to break down. ‘He made me pasta that night, and he read me the poem, and he said the rhymes were cliché. He suffered so much for his poetry.’

Jed sighed. ‘Come on, mate,’ he said to Isac. ‘Let’s go upstairs and get a coffee. One for your old man, yeah?’

The boy nodded.

I was staring at a drawing of the water cycle interconnected with a picture of the life cycle of a butterfly. I couldn’t bring myself to read the poem because I remembered when I told you about how the caterpillar changed into a cocoon which turned into a butterfly. You made it your mission that day to catch a caterpillar and see it yourself. You just wouldn’t believe it until you saw it. Another memory then, of when I told you about DNA and how it held the information of your ancestors. Then another memory, flicking by like cards. I looked over to a picture that showed scientists taking measurements of glaciers. I walked over and tried to make sense of the poem, but couldn’t understand it. I always thought you’d make a better scientist, but I think I’m biased.

Liz walked over to me. ‘He certainly had the imagination of a poet. What do you think it all means?’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve always found poetry confusing,’ I said, speaking without filtering myself. ‘I mean...’

‘I understand,’ she said. ‘He said it was part of it. Ignorance, confusion — maybe even fear.’

‘I just...’

She sighed. ‘Look, I need to tell you something. I... I need to tell someone. I wasn’t a good wife, Sam. I was never there. I worked too much.’

‘No, Liz.’

‘I knew he had depression, Sam. I didn’t do anything to help.’

‘Liz, stop. There was nothing you could have done.’

Her eyes welled up. Tears were on her cheeks. ‘I can’t stop thinking about it. I was so careless. I don’t think he ever needed the gun for his farm, why did we believe him?’

I didn’t know what to say.

‘A husband with lifelong depression, living with generations of trauma. His father did so much for him and I was so careless. He’d still be here, Sam. He should be here with us.’

‘Liz, this isn’t fair.’ I hugged her. ‘It wasn’t your fault he had depression. It wasn’t anyone’s fault and no one blames you. We all knew about the gun, and it never crossed any of our minds. We’re all asking ourselves what we could have done. We all wish we could have done more. It’s normal to ask those questions.’ I feel my shoulder become wet through my shirt. She’s heaving, sniffing.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘It’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault, really.’

She steps back, nods. ‘Thanks for coming today.’

‘Of course.’

‘Do you want to go up and get something to eat?’

‘Yeah.’

I followed her up stairs, only looking back once to see again the melting glacier drawing. You knew, long before the rest of us did what was coming. How the climate was going to change. If only... I don’t know.

Upstairs, Jed was waiting for me. ‘The sun’s setting,’ he said.

I nodded.

Outside, I smelt the ash in the evening air. More bushfires somewhere.

‘Did you read the poem *Transitions*?’ Jed asked. ‘The one where he described where he wanted to be spread?’

I shook my head.

Jed paused and took a deep breath. ‘Did he ever tell you about the windmill? The one in the poem?’

‘No.’

‘Sam, they hung black fellas from the windmill. Back when the city was first colonised.’

‘Christ. That’s why?’

Jed nodded and looked across the road to the stumpy building. Was that the windmill?

Isac came out of the cafe with his backpack. He smiled at us. I felt my chest tighten.

I followed behind Jed and Isac as they walked across the road to the old building. The sun was setting in front of them and I saw the silhouette of Jed’s hand resting on Isac’s shoulder. Pillars of crimson light shone through the gaps in the buildings around them and little particles hung in the air.

Isac approached the windmill, put his hand on its white exterior, then looked up to it. He took a few steps back and put his backpack on the ground and did nothing.

I wish I was stronger for you when you were alive. I wish I fought harder with you, for all those things you believed in, maybe then, no... don't think like that.

Jed knelt down beside Isac and unzipped his backpack for him. 'I have to tell you something,' he said, glancing up to him. 'Why your father wanted his ashes spread here.'

'I read the poem, Grandpa.'

Jed glanced up at me, smiled. 'Yes, about the poem,' he said. 'About us.'

Isac took deep breaths, shook his head in frustration. 'I don't understand.'

'Your father... my son, he wanted this because he was a descendant of survivors. You are the descendent of survivors. Their strength runs through you. You can talk to them and ask them for guidance. You have to remember this so you don't lose hope.' Jed glanced up to the windmill, as if the words he needed were hidden within it.

Isac took out the little chest where you rested. His hands were shaking. He dropped you on the ground.

Jed knelt down beside you and smiled. He opened the chest where you rested and took a handful and threw you into the sunset.

'Grandpa, were the horrible things Dad put in his poems about the windmill true?'

Jed nodded.

Isac leant down with no expression on his face and took a handful of ash. He threw you into the air like he was pegging a ball and the ash erupted in a mist around him.

Jed looked back at me. I understood. I picked a handful of you up and threw you towards the sun. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and felt the warm air in my nostrils. *Transitions*, I thought, and finally understood.