

Lifeblood

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The front wheel spits gravel,
the back one slides, and she
hits the brake. "Don't touch
the brake," I whisper, but

in that other life she is deaf
to my plea. In my mind's eye
the car spins, rolls, and rips
the very fabric of time itself.

At the hospital they know me,
nod quietly as I pass, my feet
silent on the green linoleum
that leaches away the clamour

beyond the sliding doors. Here
all is quiet, a world of murmurs,
a whisper of muted misery
in an antiseptic universe.

I sit by the bed. Take her hand.
Smile. Talk. Weep. Pray. Mourn.
Her eyes see nothing. "Deep trauma,"
they say. "Could be months. Years."

I wait but she drifts in a space
I cannot know. The bruises fade
to the pallor of late autumn
and I am left in a barren winter.

I wonder if she will ever speak
again. "I'm here," I say, as my mind
drifts like smoke into the corners
of the life we made together. She

rode into town on a motorbike
five years ago...leather jacket,
jeans, dark hair like tumbled silk
curled under her helmet. We met

on the road near the old barn,
married six months later. It was
meant to be. She was a teacher
and I waited for her...a lifetime.

She learnt to ride, endured long days
in the saddle when the dry heat
gagged in the throat and a heavy
haze suffocated the stricken earth.

She held me close on the cold nights
when the water froze in the pipes
and dawn brought a thick layer
of frost that crackled underfoot.

"Would a change of scene help?"
The doctor shrugs, taps a pencil
against his teeth. "Maybe. Perhaps."
I wheel her out and they lift her

gently, fasten the belt, stare blankly
at the empty car-seats in the back.
I dare them to ask, but they turn,
embarrassed. I have my reasons.

We pass the school. "This is the heart,"
she would say. "This is the centre
and my children are the lifeblood
of the town. Do you see? The roads

are the arteries and veins. Every
day they come in and I send them
out again. Stronger. Enriched." She
loved that image. Lived by it. They

were all...her children. We skirt
the silo, head down the avenue
of trees, each with its tiny plaque
as a memorial to The Great War.

I turn into our road...slowly, slowly,
hoping that the past might unravel.
Fresh black tar, an angry ribbon-slash
between drought-brown fields

hides the pitted gravel that killed
my dreams. Past the barn, through
the curve where the horses turn
their curious heads. "There's

the house," I say. "Gave it a coat
of paint a few weeks ago. Hope
you like it. And the vegie patch
is coming along nicely. Never know

you'd been away." I park in the drive
next to the red swing with the yellow
bucket seats. It's beginning to rust but
I haven't the strength to sell it. Maybe

it could go to next year's fair. She
always ran the bric-a-brac stall,
that refuge for a miscellaneous
assortment of odds and ends, surely

a symbol of what my life has become.
I leave the car, walk inside the house
and stand at the window for a moment.
She does not move. Dust motes float

in a shaft of sunlight, illuminated
briefly in a transient shimmer, yet
lost to any lasting sense of beauty.
The heady scent of the Boronia bush

wafts in from beside the porch. I pluck
a flower, hoping in vain that her eyes
will follow me as I walk across the grass,
get back in the car, and place the bloom

in her lap. "You planted that bush.
Do you remember? It was always
your favourite. You kept it alive right
through the bad years. So determined

you were." She stares straight ahead,
no flicker of recognition in her eyes.
I have but one chance left and reverse
slowly, turning back the way we came.

"This road is an artery." I keep my voice steady. "Of all the roads I've travelled this one means the most. It carries me out each morning and home again

every afternoon. To my own heart. My lifeblood." I stop. We are facing the tree, its rough bark stripped to the inner flesh, exposed like a suppurating open wound.

"It's not your fault." My voice breaks. "Do you hear me? It's not your fault. The surface...should have been fixed. Would've been. But when it was listed

at Council I... said it wasn't urgent. Said it could wait. I am so, so sorry." Fingers touch my face. A butterfly caress. I see her eyes... her tears.