

FEATURED FICTION

Debra Dank | Deakin University

A feather.

Yes, that's what it is. The kind of feather you see on the tail of the rooster in the chook yard ... do you remember him?

He's the only rooster in that chook yard. With those handsome tail feathers, casting themselves across the dry scratched earth of his empire, in long darkened shadows. And in those shadows, did you see the twisted, naked fingers curving into the earth trying to dress themselves in the puffs of dust rising from his incessant scratching?

He struts around with that tail of feathers splayed in an arrangement of reds and oranges ... kind of like a big bold sunrise with those plumes of colour stretching fingers across the sky ... squeezing the soft night-time away and out of sight.

Tail feathers splayed ... look at me, look at me! And around the wire mesh yard of the chook pen he parades, hiding his dark red heart under those bloodshot clothes.

Did you see him stopping to peck and rake over the dust? The red of the earth sprayed upward and then, in its own little feathering, drift down to find the lethal spurs protruding from those skinny little legs. Settling there, protecting perhaps.

He can always be seen fussing between the shrivelled potato peel and the bits of grain and drying lettuce. Then that wobbling run, skinny little legs pumping like pistons, to snatch the bread crust from the unsuspecting hens. And those awful barbs. Just there waiting to pierce unsuspecting body or limb. The hens run to the corner and wait.

A feather filled with red noise.

This feather has just enough body to catch the soft gold light coming through the window. That corrugated iron flap, propped open with a stick, sending out its own soft light and pattern ... like an eye peering into our family's deepest secrets. Soft reds sitting in the shadows. Over in the corners they become a little duskiest and dustier but the red sits there ... waiting with its stillness.

Have you seen those colours in the morning as the sun rises up on the horizon? Not those soft slow mornings that move from blue to pink to yellow without you feeling the sting or the slap of its arrival.

This feather was like one of those mornings when you know it's the day the piglet has grown, and it is time to take it out the back. When you look up at the tree with the double hooks hanging from the end of the thick hessian rope and chains. Out the back to where the half tank is sitting on its crown of firewood waiting for the fire to burn.

It's the day you feel that eating roast pork will make you vomit, and you might never stop. Or like the evening we go out to shoot a bullock. The one you raised and fed with your fingers dripping of milk. And as you carry the chunks of beef from the bed of eucalyptus leaves on the red earth to the same leafy bed on the back of the Toyota, your fingers no longer drip with milk. Just blood, red and awash with sorrow.

The feather blazed and screamed with a violence made worse by the soft light of early evening, by the distant mellow sound of the neighbours playing Patsy Cline records.

'Walking after midnight,' Patsy crooned. 'In the starlight ...'

And in the becoming starlight, the feather seemed to gather itself ... to float off, perhaps. Desperately, I imagined it might float off to join in the after-midnight ramble and to go long and far away but no, that's not what it did.

That feather broke free of its soft flesh with all the violence of its own traumatic birth, a thing fighting to make its way in this world.

I'd not seen blood do that before. Hadn't thought about what blood was capable of doing really. It was easy to watch that plume grow and stretch toward the corrugated iron wall of the house. It stayed in its feather persona and bloomed even more boldly as it journeyed. The feather—horribly beautiful.

I could survive a feather, so I made the other wait and wallowed for a moment in that beautiful horror. My body, my flesh, my heart wasn't ready to see the other horror.

And as I gazed intently, watching its path, mesmerised by that terrible beauty, I kept my hand over the mouth of my little sister

where she was wedged between me and the half water tank we hid behind. I turned quickly to look at her and placed my finger across my lips. The warning to be quiet came out as a soft breath of air but she heard it as much as she felt the breath leave my mouth. I kept her face in my shirt because I didn't want her to see the terrible beauty in that feather. I kept it for myself.

And on it travelled as if on the wind but much more orderly than the feathers of the white cockatoos being tossed on the updrafts of the whirly winds. Those feathers played with the wind and the heat and you lost sight of them and some even morphed into the leaves of the gums as the winds raced by. They twisted and turned and drifted and hid from your eyes as they traced their way on unseen paths.

This feather travelled like the fishing line with a barramundi caught fast on a hook. It entrapped my eyes and dragged my gaze along on its journey. Soon enough that feather met iron. The blow of blood against that old corrugated iron wall was surprising loud. Rust and fear meeting and shouting red. Its scream is a strange tinging noise that creeps into your ears and stays there. Still now, I can hear that noise as it sometimes rises from its sitting place in my ears ... the gentlest reminder of feather or orange or iron or rust has that vile noise playing its own music, running along the channelled roads of my ears to remind me to remember.

But back then, at last, the feather with its beauty and horror, with its reds and oranges and with its gold tinge, fades and becomes a blood streak as it drains down the wall. Slowly seeping into the dirt and dust below. I watch as he strides away, fists hanging, and Mum lifts a hand to touch her swollen torn lip, tentatively watching Dad disappear into the dark.

There is noise but I can't hear it anymore. The red has become a curtain that makes my eyes shut down sending me sightless and for a moment my ears refuse entry to everything. I turn to my sister and hold her tighter as we both slip down into the dirt, into a crumpled mass of night clothes and child limbs and shattered memories of that beautiful red-filled morning sunrise.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Deb is a Gudanji woman, married to Rick with three adult children and one granddaughter. She is an educator and has worked in the space of learning for many years—a gift given through the hard work of her parents. She continues to experience the privilege of living with Country and with family. Growing in a landscape of family and learning, she is truly fortunate to have the exquisite pleasures of this life and its stories. Deb is currently undertaking her PhD at Deakin University.