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The Blackaby Road (an excerpt from the long story, *The house on legs*)

Biographical note:

Dr Danielle Wood completed her PhD at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Her thesis included the novel *The alphabet of light and dark*, which won The Australian/Vogel Literary Award in 2002 and the Dobbie Literary Award in 2004. Her works include *Rosie Little's cautionary tales for girls*, *Mothers Grimm* and *Housewife superstar: The very best of Marjorie Bligh.* Dr Wood has collaborated with fellow Tasmanian writer Heather Rose, under the pen name 'Angelica Banks', to produce a trilogy of adventure stories featuring a young writer, Tuesday McGillycuddy. *Finding serendipity*, *A week without Tuesday* and *Blueberry pancakes forever* have been published in Australia, Germany and the USA.

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Shadow by shadow, night inches up the hill and the sky turns yellow orange bruise-blue indigo in the gaps between the gums on the ridgeline. Then, when everything dims to black, you can see it up there on the slope—the only place for miles around, firelight burning its jack-o-lantern windows into the dark. There are thin slashes of orange where rough-hewn vertical boards don't quite meet, a stripe for the gap at the bottom of the door. And that's all you can see of the house on legs, unless you count the occasional half-hearted firework of embers bursting out from the place where the chimney must be.

Around the house there's a clearing where the close-cropped grass is scattered with bones. A wood moth, drawn by the light, picks a flight-path high above a careless mosaic of marsupial jaw-bones, ribs, vertebrae, pelvic girdles and skulls. The insect has eyes only for the light; when it hits window glass, it can only keep trying to reach the source. Its body gyrates, plump and worm-like, against the pane. Its wings could easily be slivers of bark.

Before long, something darts at the moth from the inside of the glass. An animal. It leaps up into the frame of the windowpane like a shadow-puppet, forepaws outstretched. Then there are two of the creatures, now three, now four, springing up at the glass in their hunger. But the moth, drunk on light, does nothing to save itself, not even when half of the window hinges open and a hand reaches out. It's a human hand, a woman's, with buckled fingers and nails rimmed with dirt. It cups the moth without hesitation. Fingers squeeze until the insect's body crackles, pops, and is still. Then the hand withdraws, and the window closes.

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Inside, standing at a scarred timber table, the woman drops the dead moth into a mortar. Grey dreadlocks draggle to her waist and a thin, pungent beedie burns between her lips. The mortar is made of stone with a green cast to it, as if it might once have been covered in moss. As the woman dusts off her hands, powdery shreds of wing drift down over the top of the insect's ruined body.

In the pen beneath the window, four quoll pups skitter and climb over tree branches and each other without ever taking their eye off the woman, who now breaks a bantam's egg on the edge of the mortar and pours its contents over the moth. The young orphans, sleek in their spotted coats, watch her walk to the meat safe and reach into a packet of mince. She tosses the shreds of meat into the mortar, and with the first thump of the pestle, a segment of ash falls from the tip of the beedie and into the mixture. If the woman even notices, there is no sign of it.

Yolk, white, meat, carapace, wing. She metes out pinches of the mixture to the quoll pups. Their mouths are full of small, needle-sharp teeth, and the sticky sound of their chewing fills the kitchen.

This night, as on every other, the house on legs is full of creatures waiting to be fed. Hanging from doorknobs, from the backs of chairs, from hooks on doors and hooks on walls, are hessian bags and cushion covers fixed for pouches, all of them lined with pillowslips that have been turned inside out so that small claws can't catch on the seams. Some of the orphans in the pouches are pink-skinned, while the more advanced ones

are velveted with fur. Some will make it. Others will not thrive, and these the woman will take by the tail. A quick flick against the hearth-stones and their suffering is over.

On the table, beside the mortar and pestle, is a jumble of milk powder tins, mixing jugs and syringes for the front end of the feeding cycle. There is cheap toilet paper and cotton buds for the other. But of all the creatures in the room, the one that she finds hardest to feed is the fire. It eats kindling as fast than she can collect it, and consumes every last log she can split. There are nights when the woodpile is a scattering of sawdust on the grass outside the door, and she can do nothing more than feed tree-branches, end on, into the coals. Then she has to sit through the night in an armchair, never more than lightly dozing, her boot against the branch to keep it from toppling out onto the already blackened hearthrug.

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Down the hill from the house on legs, shaping itself to the pleats of the land, is an unlit road. It starts at the edge of the small city that lies on the other side of the hill and ends at a country town. Or the other way around. Cars go fast on this road, getting air over crests, swerving wide on blind corners. At night they drink from private pools of limelight as they go, and leak it back out again red.

Nailed to the white posts at the roadside are cat-eyes that shine and fade, but in the dark bush beyond there are other eyes, pair after pair of them, all blinded to silver coin-spots with every onrush of light. In the house on legs, it's a rare night that she doesn't hear the squeal of brakes. Occasionally followed by the crunch of moulded steel against tree. Here and there are guideposts with posies of plastic flowers cable-tied around their middles. But the human toll is nothing, really. One or two a year at most.

A car comes, veering around a tight left-hand bend. A wallaby freezes. White light catches the pale tips of her fur, haloing the solid triangle of her body, the muscular L of her tail. She doesn't move. The car dodges right, but this happens half a heartbeat after the wallaby makes up her mind to leap in the same direction. Brakes shriek, wheels lock. But it's too late and the front corner of the car catches the animal on the side of her face, crushing teeth into bone. She falls, bleeding, just in time for the car's spinning back wheels to mash her skull into the bitumen. The car fishtails, recovers traction, and is gone.

High on the hill, the door of the house on legs opens and the woman emerges, pulling on a coat. She reaches up to the back of her head, divides the ratty cables of her hair in two, and ties a loose knot at the nape of her neck. The night is cold, and behind a weak cone of torchlight she makes her way down the zigzag of a rutted drive until at last she reaches the road. She walks the verge until she sees the wallaby splayed across the tarmac. On the painted white lines are clotting rivulets of blood.

The woman kneels by the body, which is warm and soft and jumping with fleas in the torch's beam. But then she senses the light and sound of a car coming up on the far side of the bend, travelling in the opposite direction to the last vehicle, and she backs away into the roadside shadow. The car is coming too fast to dodge the body, and though the woman closes her eyes, this doesn't shut out the sound. One wheel, two. The crack of backbone, ribs.

When the dark returns she works more swiftly, pulling the wallaby off the road by the root of its tail. She parts the animal's back legs—female, she sees—then feels for the puckered mouth of a pouch. The creature inside is also female, hairless and small—a pink sack of oversized elbows, knees and claws. On the sides of its head are the rubbery coils of proto-ears. Its eyes are alien, huge. She folds the joey's gangly limbs into a small bag and draws the strings tight before opening her coat and pushing the bag down inside her layered clothes, close against her skin.

The way back to the house on legs is steep. The woman takes long steps, breathes deep. Inside her clothes the joey chiaks softly to its mother. *Are you there?*

'Chk, chk,' the woman replies.

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It's just after eleven when Arlo finds himself in the driveway, considering the Bluebird. It's just sitting there in the driveway, white and boxy and common as a starling with its car park scratches and out-of-vogue styling. It's neither old enough to be cool again, nor new enough to be attractive. It's just ugly, and white.

His mother's car keys are in the house, on the little hook where they always are. Unless her date goes totally to custard, she won't be back before one or two. So he lifts the keys off the hook and this fistful of metal is the first thing, all evening, that's given him a thrill that's anything more than second hand.

The Bluebird's too old to have remote control central locking. He has to slide the long silver key into the driver's side lock. Inside, the car is as clean as it could possibly be after fifteen years of kids, wear and tear. His mother takes a perverse pride in washing it, vacuuming it; she says it's environmentally responsible to look after your old car rather than buy a new one every few years. But Arlo's heard her talking to her friends on the phone, and he knows what she's really hunting on eHarmony and RSVP: a man with a good job and no children. Someone whose looks are ordinary enough that the shreds of hers might be enough to make him feel lucky. Someone to cushion her future.

He fits the key into the ignition. Turns it. The engine fires under the influence of the accelerator and Arlo feels a little fizz of adrenalin under the skin on the backs of his hands–pin prickles of nerves, firing off warning shots. *No, no, no*. He edges the Bluebird backwards. It goes as slowly as his heart goes fast. He can see Mrs McCargill's geraniums in the wing mirror. Driving backwards is counterintuitive, wrong. One of the Bluebird's back wheels swings up unexpectedly over the moulded concrete kerbing, then sinks down into the bark chips that McCargill uses to keep away the weeds.

'Fuck,' he says, and grates the gear lever into first, wiggles forward, then back again, too fast, the wheel spinning the bark chips all over the driveway and bisecting a shrub. That's that, then. He's fucked. Caught. It's almost a relief. Now, all that remains is to make the impending strife worth his while.

He pulls out into the cul-de-sac. All the houses, with their blinds near enough to closed, look like droop-lidded pensioners. He rolls the Bluebird around the top of the cul-de-sac curve. And then, nervous, completes another circle. But this time, when he pulls out of the circle, he lets the road lead him down to the intersection.

It isn't far to the edge of the suburb where a highway slices through like a bitumen invitation. On the brink of the highway, Arlo waits, trying to work out how fast the speeding cars are actually going, so that he can pick a safe gap. He waits, and he waits, even ignoring a big gap, just to be sure. But then there are car lights behind him and he has to go. He judges incorrectly, and swoops–*putt, putt, putt*–in front of a car that swerves into the other lane, horn blaring. Bird fingers fork out of an open window.

On the highway, the white lines make him feel as if he's going to veer over them. It's like the way you can walk straight until someone gives you a tightrope to cross and then balance becomes all you can think of. And the way you can breathe, in and out, in and out, all by yourself, without ever considering it at all, until you do consider it, and then you can't think of anything except your lungs inflating and deflating. Then, once you've thought about your lungs, doubted them, all of a sudden they're inflatable mattresses on your camping trip and it seems they'll never be full, no matter how hard you pump. Arlo is driving, and not breathing. He feels dizzy. He takes the first exit onto the Blackaby Road.

The Blackaby Road leads to all kinds of things that are wrong, or hidden. Or wrong *and* hidden. There's a swampy place with a driveway marked with the Aboriginal flag and a heap of racist graffiti. This is reclaimed land, shadowed by she-oaks every bit as protective as the ugly, overgrown pines on the other side of the road that keep a colonial sandstone mansion in perpetual shadow. Somewhere here, Arlo knows, was the island's first massacre. And it's only a stone's throw to the place where they keep the man who committed Tasmania's best known one. There have been photos of him in the papers lately, as pale and bloated as a loaf of white bread dropped in dishwater.

The jail buildings, with their nude cement, look to Arlo like a series of unfinished apartment blocks, except for the fact that the fences are a bit extreme, all ruffled at the top, trimmed with barbed lace. Just up the road is the dogs' home. It's full of lost dogs, forgotten dogs, vicious dogs, sick dogs, fucked-up dogs, dogs that were Christmas presents that ate the tinsel and shat on the floor. And every one of them, Arlo supposes, might have been a good dog, a true dog, a faithful-at-your-feet, doing-tricks, curled-up-at-the-end-of-your-bed dog. But these ones are the leftovers, marking time in concrete pens.

There's a suburb here, an even sadder one than the one Arlo's left behind. The houses are made of ticky-tacky and lots of them have their windows boarded up. In a few of the front yards are cheap playsets from Kmart, bought in the midst of some optimistic summertime spending spree. Arlo knows only too well that kids know when they're being given shit. Kids know that it doesn't make any sense–or else it makes just a bit too much sense–that Santa Claus delivers better stuff to kids with richer parents.

And then the street lights end. Now there's just a road and the dark, and wire fences and scrub. The road curves and winds into the darkness, heading for the town of Blackaby. It starts to drizzle and Arlo puts the windscreen wipers on. They hiss and whine as they make striped rainbow shapes on the windscreen because their rubber parts are perished and in need of replacement. At first the raindrops fall a bit like they do on a window that's still. They hit, and then dribble downwards. But then the rain comes in harder, and faster. Arlo supposes there's an equation for it. The rain's speed

and his speed and how the droplets start to come at him in thin lines of watery light. Now they're bursting their points on his windscreen. Shattering like crystal. They're catching the light of his headlights and the red of the cat eyes on the guide-posts. The lights are coming, the gear lever in his hand is a joystick. He swings the wheel left, right, left, left. The car slides this way and that, but no matter which way Arlo turns, the waterlights keep smashing into his window. He's losing this game, for sure.

Then it's there. On the road, low and dark as hell. Jesus fuck, he's hit it before he's even seen it properly. He feels the smack of it against the front left tyre. Now he's hauling on the steering wheel and the car's spinning. There's a tree and a whole roof of draping leaves overhead. He turns and turns. The car's spiralling, wheels squealing. The stink of burning brakes floods the car. He's skidding, fast, and now he's facing the way he's just come and when the car slams into the guidepost, he face-plants the steering wheel, hard. Blood rushes to a rift above his eyebrow, and his head ricochets back against the driver's seat. Blackness.

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It's nearly midnight when the road calls to her again, and this time the car's still there: a Nissan Bluebird with one headlight smashed and the other blazing meaninglessly across the road and into the fringe of the bush.

She cups a hand to the dark glass of the driver's side window. There's a boy inside, his hair lying in long strands through the bloodied gash on his forehead. But he's not dead. Once, she'd looked in the window of a broken car to see a girl lying there against her pink seat covers just like she was sleeping. There hadn't been a drop of blood anywhere on her face or head, but she'd been dead just the same. A beautiful corpse.

But there's nothing beautiful about the devil that lies on the tarmac now. Light from the Bluebird shows the woman that the animal had already been dying. Weeping, strawberry tumours are in full bloom over the animal's muzzle and up underneath one eye. In places they are scabrous, in other places blood-bright and gleaming. The woman lays both hands on the devil's unmoving chest, feeling the dying heat of the skin beneath the fur, and she closes her eyes for the few seconds that she allows herself before she grabs the dead animal by a back paw and drags it without ceremony to the verge.

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Arlo wakes with a sense that someone has woken him. He's in the car. There is pain in his neck. There is pain in his face. It's no longer raining, but one of the Bluebird's headlights is still pouring light out onto the wet road. What he sees, he sees thickly, as if through clear jelly. On the road-edge, opposite him, is a shape. It's a person crouching. He thinks it's a woman, judging from the scarf that's wrapped around the rat-tail hair. She's huddled down, leaning over, looking at something.

It's the animal. It's what he hit. It's dead and limp and dark as a fairy-tale bearskin. And she is reaching into it and pulling things out. For a moment, he thinks she is pulling out its organs, but these things are not pink or liver-coloured or glistening. They're devil pups, as black as their mother.

There is a powerful ache in Arlo's head. There is blood in his eyelashes. He unclasps his seat-belt, lurches forward, and falls back. The thoughts inside his hurting head are discontinuous, broken, and when at last he manages to get out of the car, it is with no notion of whether he seeks to help or be helped.

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As the woman gets to her feet, she holds her hand to her chest where four motherless devil pups are pouched in a pillowslip down the front of her shirt.

She sees both things at once. There's the wet road shining brighter, and brighter. And there's the boy, out of the car and shuffling across the road with his hands to his bloodied head. The engine noise from around the bend is getting bigger, and bigger, and it's bigger that she can make herself, even with her one free arm outstretched and waving wildly. From her throat there comes a sound that somehow can't form itself into words but nevertheless means *get back, get back, get out of the fucking way.*

But the boy is dazed, and the car is low to the road and fast. Though it swerves, its catches him full in the legs and he's flung up, boneless, onto the bonnet of the vehicle that doesn't stop. With a roar of acceleration, it hurtles on down the road and the boy is shaken off, flung aside, and the woman, running towards him, notices as he crumples into the dark rainbow of the rain-slick road, that he's only wearing one oversized shoe.

She is breathing hard. Her heartbeat is up in her ears, loud and fast. She feels the devils as shapes down her shirt front, wriggling against each other to get comfortable. She turns her torch on the boy and growls a curse at him. Because now he's lying on the road. Because now he's no longer in the car, where someone will find him and take him back to wherever he belongs, confiscate his car keys, dock his pocket money and tell him he's grounded for a fortnight.

Humans are not her problem. They are not her problem. And yet, here he is, lying on the road with his T-shirt flung up so that she can see the shallow dent of his navel, his arm twisted all wrong, its underside showing, pale as a flathead's belly. If only he'd been face-down on the road. She'd never have seen the way his lip is split or how he's bleeding into the fledgling stubble on his chin. Or how, at the edge of the cut, a tiny bubble of reddish spit fills and empties with each of his shallow breaths.

Research statement

Research background

The recent establishment of the Australian Fairy Tale Society and the publication of *Griffith Review*'s 'Once upon a time in Oz' fairy-tale edition (2013), are high points in a groundswell of interest in issues surrounding the adoption and repurposing of European fairy tales in an Australian, post-colonial context. My creative work follows that of Carmel Bird, whose works experiment with the blending of fragmented European fairy tales and the dark side of Australian history.

Research contribution

The Russian witch/crone figure of Baba Yaga has, as yet, a relatively muted presence in Australian fiction. While Juliet Marrillier's notable tale 'By bone-light' retells a classic Baba Yaga story in a contemporary urban setting, my long story *The house on legs* transports Baba Yaga to a specific setting within the Tasmanian bush and repositions this ambiguous Slavic witch/crone figure within the tradition of the Tasmanian Gothic.

Research significance

The work from which this excerpt is taken constitutes a creative response to my observation that Australian writers seem constrained in their use of European fairy-tale structures and characters when setting their work in a recognisably Australian environment. It asks if an ancient nature deity from the European tradition can be sensitively incorporated into the fragile and contested place/story that is Tasmania.

Works cited

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