

## Cathedrals of Eucalypt

by Jackie Trott

One hundred eyes track skies as they wait for her. Their shoulders ache under a sadistic sun, scorching without remorse. The day is followed by night with no relief. Dusty shrouds of pitiless stars look back down on them, shining in a pale hum.

The earth here rusts in thick, scabby folds. Burrowing ants swarm like a million soldiers in a tiny war. Their bayonettes stab in parasitic battles, sucking and draining at anything beneath the surface. Above the ground, the soil carries a silence all of its own, sitting with a post-apocalyptic weight. The lambs have all stopped bleating. The children who used to play in rubble piles of broken fences and tin sheeting have gone. Evaporated in the drought.

Amongst the twiggy, spartan leaves, birds perch with bulging eyes and open mouths. Hiding in the anorexic shade of the bony trees, they seem surprised that the songs have been stolen from their beaks. Around them, the insects throb and beat in rhythm, cranked on summer's tuneless gramophone. They sound like a tone-deaf circus tune, warped into a soundtrack for the mad.

The weeping willows are on their knees. The wattle is mute. The hills around the town heave and sigh, exhausted. Withered hands of branches pray and sway, pray and sway in feeble breezes. Reaching up like pilgrims to the skies. The town dwellers here have called on the sky spirits. The gods. A miracle. Anything.

They sweat together in cathedrals of eucalypts. Mumbling praise and wobbling cracked hymns, they punctuate with perspiration drips wiped from their brows. Begging for signs, their chins are heaven-faced, muttering their way through psalms and sayings. But the heavy air sticks their lungs to their ribs, and their throats are as dry as paddock stones.

She enters quietly, breathing a soft wind. Creeping closer, skies bluster and weave her hair into piles of cloudy braids. She is an angel to all of those who crumble their existence from the red dirt. Her bags of potions are toted by her side — today she is the shaman-healer for their fevers and blister-burnt skin. She listens and whispers to their hacking chests and soothes their swollen tongues, crusted with dry spittle. Examining their furrowed brows, she caresses the creases from forehead and field and pours her magicking liquids into mouths begging.

As the night comes, she waits for her younglings to sleep. She balms them with cool hands in their yellow-stained sheets, and dances a lullaby pattern with her fingertips across their corrugated iron rooves.

She is known as the mother of both blessing and curse. Her name is etched from the desert dunes to the snow-frosts. The first peoples here used to dance to herald her coming. The last survivors here will mourn her loss.

Rain.