Creative Writing manuscript title: *farmwoman*

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if I could speak out loud speak my mind

if I could say anything that would be listened to

if I could just open my mouth and let words fall out

if I could only say what is on my mind but I can't here in this stuffy

farm kitchen not a breath of air moving the doors all wide open the air as hot and thick outside as in here in this

farm kitchen sitting around the table where I serve meal after meal day after day week in week out

here around the well-scrubbed table on the old wooden chairs that have done service for farm generations painted and stripped and repainted repainted and re-glued repainted and stripped stiff backed and unrelenting as the seasons and the cropping and the bank each has a voice which will be listened to but me each can say their piece I am the outsider I am the daughter in law the bushie dumbo I wasn't born on the family farm

one day I will say it all
a little girl helping my Gran / I remember vividly
though she died forty years ago / I set the scrubbed deal

I

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table for breakfast with white pottery bowls / the heavy
blue and white milk jug filled with scalded milk and
covered with beaded lace / the treacle tin / loaf of
bread ready to be buttered and sliced / only Gran ever
wielded the bread knife /
an assortment of spoons / big brown pot of dripping
honeycomb on a saucer / I waited at her elbow for
instructions

she stopped stirring the porridge on the blackened top of
the wood stove / she stood with the wooden spoon in her
right hand / her old body rigid and angular with the
urgency of her words / actions speak louder than words
Molly my girl / never mind if the cat's got your tongue
you just show them what a sensible little thing you are
they'll take note of you you mark my words

I learnt to toddle among the chooks I learnt to fend off
the rooster with his sharp fighting spur my water play
grew from chook trough to duckpond to dam with the
goose and on to the creek which wound down through the
valley of the farm
Mum kept chooks for pin money before the Egg Board
made it hard the bantam hens smaller and more
showy than the layers were always ready to ruffle up
they'd brood up to two dozen eggs at a time and be
spitfire little mothers to the balls of fluff in the home
paddock scratching Mum as she upended the chicks to
sex them these for layers these to be fattened as
meat birds  see here Molly  can you see these are
the little boys?  the difference never obvious to me
meat chickens were kept in a big barn and fed grains and
kale and corn cobs from the vegie garden  layers roamed
all day across the home paddocks scratching for seeds and
bugs but at night they went willingly to roost on perches
huddled together for comfort in the fox-proof shedding


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Mum taught me to throw out the wheat to the chooks
to keep the drinking water clean  to collect the eggs
warm from laying  holding my pinnny up in my left hand
and carrying the precious hoard carefully into the musty
underground pantry  / dug into the hillside behind the
kitchen / together we would set the eggs round-end-up
in layers of cardboard  twentyeight  twentynine
thirty to a layer  ready for market on Friday
farmwoman
Mum and Gran and I pulled the feathers off the headless
meat chickens the air nosecurling with burnt feather
and wet chook Dad covered in blood all appetite
gone for a day or so
death always hovering

5
I must have been born in the dairy can’t remember not
being around cows kneehigh to a chicken I fed the new
born calves taken from their mothers after their first
feed warm milk from a bottle sticking my fingers
into their soft mouths their tongues suck and rasp
taller now feeding eight calves at a time from the
milk churn fitted with ten black rubber teats / the ten-
titted-cow Dad called it /
the calves no longer gentle splayed around the churn
like the spokes of a cartwheel pushing each other off

5
farmwoman

the teats in their eagerness round and round their tails in a wrigglefrenzy
soon they had names and took their turn in the dairy

6
I cried for the tottering bull calves packed off in the butcher’s truck the day after they were born some even picked straight out of the paddock their cords still soft and drippy their mothers bellowing frantically over the fence
I learnt to harden my heart and my stomach also watching Dad kill our mutton sometimes a hand reared wether for a special Sunday roast leaning / elbows on the table / seeing how Mum cut up the carcass how the pet lamb in the home paddock which had followed at my heels turned into chops and kidneys and roast

6
Uncle John was my special friend he came whenever there was machinery to be repaired the best bush mechanic in the state Dad reckoned he would come for weeks at a time and tinker around all day in the sheds then bunk down in the shearers' hut Uncle John ate with us in the big farm kitchen then he would sit me on his lap and read me stories and sometimes he would bath me out in the washhouse he tickled me and made me laugh he showed me how to feel hot and tingly with my fingers in my body in his lap being dried we rocked together singing happy songs and he went red in the face Uncle John said this is our secret Molly mind you don't let the cat out of the bag as that will spoil it I didn't know what our secret was but I liked the way he made me laugh so I didn't tell anyone I didn't want to spoil the secret so I stopped talking Dad said where's my little chatterbox? I laughed and I listened but I didn't let on I listened when they said Uncle John / they called him John the mechanic / they said John had been interfering
with little girls and had gone to Gaol it said so in the paper I thought Gaol must be a long way away because he never came back I missed Uncle John but I never told our secret I became silent

silent as a child as a daughter as a playmate our quiet little Molly-coddle our dark horse our dumbo silence in a growing girl is taken for insolence for stupidity for having secrets I'd always been quiet but now silent at the dinner table silent on the school bus silent at the back of class silent in the bullying the taunting and the sidelining silent in the questioning silent
farmwoman

Tyndale

but the animals could talk to me and I could talk to them
quiet crooning song intimate endearments songs
of love here chooky chookies g'day Bluey g'day
Ned well my lovely moos how are you today?
no one like Molly can get the cows to let their milk down
Molly has a way with those dogs Molly is a wizard in
the dairy Molly'll make a great farmer's wife
won't answer back

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Dad caught trout in the creek in green waders to his
armpits he walked up Buckland Creek flicking his rod with
the fly he had bent over for hours the previous night
tiny colourful feathers a tantalizing morsel
two big trout were more than enough for a meal for him
and Mum Gran and me fried in a dry frypan
sprinkled with salt
farmwoman

I would lie on the flat black rocks at the edge of the creek
water over my elbows  wiggling my fingers like spiders
until the speckled trout would let me touch them
shimmering  in the crinkly sunlight / the sun shone
all the time /
Dad said I could take the trout by surprise with my
tickling and grab it out of the water  but I didn’t
if I rolled over and stared upwards I could see the sky
through overhanging silver aspen leaves  sometimes
clouds

to be silent as a child was not hard  not for me  my
world was full of noise  no need for words  words
turned noise into sound shriek  the dogs barked
/ yelped when I rode them /  panting great slobbery
breaths after racing up the rocky hillside  farm
farmwoman

machinery rattled and growled when it worked and when it didn’t Dad would tinker and swear the magpies in the morning made me long for a voice like theirs I practiced quietly up on the hillside singing gently rocking rocking Mum and Dad grew used to my silence startled as I was if it broke we were a quiet family

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Mum didn’t talk much to Dad and Dad didn’t talk much to Mum as if they didn’t need to after Gran died when I was little they became quieter a friendly silence and comfortable easy with each other no need to shout either my silence not remarkable
they yawned with friends and neighbours  I liked to listen  there was plenty of laughter in the quietness

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Meg and Rosy were my childhood playmates  one lanky as a tomato stake the other plump and giggly and full of ideas  unfazed by my silence  we boosted the school numbers from twelve to fifteen when we started together  Miss Anderson had *more mischief on her hands*  there were never more than sixteen all the way through that tiny one roomed school and only Miss Anderson to teach us  I never think of school with unhappiness  I think of skipping on the long rope lunch under the peppertree  tadpoles in Fowlers jars in the summer holidays the kids mostly went on camp to Portsea  meeting others from little schools in country Victoria  Mum and Dad couldn’t afford for me to go
I don’t suppose I would have liked it anyway the other children said the sea was big and cold and made them shiver they drew pictures of big ships sailing past with white lifeboats and smoke coming out of funnels but high school was less happy we traveled a long way down the valley on the school bus and were all three of us targeted cocky kids peasants tit tuggers and me especially dumbo

out of school we did everything together me and Meg and Rosy acting out scary bits of The Phantom in the forest sliding down steep grassy paddocks on sheets of cardboard tumbles and prickles and barbed wire chalking up hearts and initials of boys /real and imagined/ on the back walls of farm sheds risking
the snakes in the long grass  taking all our clothes off to
swim in the creek  shrieking with the possibility that
boys might see us  might see the little growing knobs
on our chests  might see the little wisps of hair
might see

sometimes I went to Meg's house for tea  sometimes
Rosy's  sometimes they both came to my house  and
Mum would bake special things for us  chocolate
crackles  oat fingers that we called *scramchum*
because they were crunchy and sweet  once a square
cake covered in marzipan that her mother used to make
her own mother not Gran  Gran was my only gran
Meg's house was calm and tidy  set in the middle of an
ordered apple orchard  a big red International truck
parked inside the orderly shed  "Wilson and Son"
the sign on the truck door said before Jim had completed Primary school
Meg’s mother taught chemistry at our Secondary school Myrtleford High Meg’s house was full of books which were always available to me my Mum and Dad with no time for books always flat out working the farm always scratching books on science and philosophy Bertrand Russell’s Principia Mathematica with his picture on the inside back cover he looked like one of our roosters gardening books and travel by women to exotic places with Bedouin Sherpas Red Indians for guides and donkeys camels llamas to ride and unmentionable toilet facilities women in bulky Victorian dresses how did they piss? not a question to ask Meg’s mother
farmwoman

Tyndale

Rosy’s house was chaotic – a tumble of unruly children
wild gardens full of organic vegetables long before they
were fashionable – Rosy’s dad would come to our dairy
with an old squeaky wheelbarrow – its metal wheel
buckled and wobbly – cart off the slurry from the cows
almost licking his lips with delight – household scraps
would be interred with reverence – the whole family part
of the ritual of digging and planting – growing and
eating
Rosy’s mum’s head would appear above the sweet corn or
silver beet – the celeriac or the artichokes – pretty blue
beebalm or cherry rhubarb – pushing stray dark
streamers of hair from her eyes – dirty but beaming
always welcoming and easy – not needing me to chatter
plenty of chatter in that family

Reds – my Dad chuckled but never stopped me going
Rosy’s dad always had a fag attached to his bottom lip
it never fell out – shop steward in a milk factory or a
timber mill when he had work – not often
Mum would send me down to their ramshackle cottage
with newlaid eggs fresh milk in a billy forequarter chops when we’d killed they were a happy mob I loved going there we played pick-up-sticks on their big kitchen table all leaning over and trying to breathe the sticks to budge knuckle bones and hopscotch tag and even postman’s knock

then Mum died just suddenly didn’t say she felt sick just sighed and keeled over in the kitchen early one morning I hadn’t thought how much work she did until I had to do it before and after school she always was quiet Mum was
Dad needed my help in the dairy. I had to get up so early, what with the chooks and geese and taking such ages to get to and from school. It became hard staying awake in lessons. Dad said I could leave school if I wanted. Work full time on the farm, I would've but I was doing well at school, would miss my friends. Dad was already talking of selling up, no son to inherit. I didn’t know to argue.

when Mum died, I used to think out there in the dairy or getting dinner for just Dad and me or sitting staring at my homework but not seeing a word of it. I used to think did she know about my secret? so quiet herself did she sometimes wonder she said nothing when my periods started she asked no.
questions I didn’t pester her with adolescent concerns
didn’t have many really did she worry did I kill her
with my silence?
I wanted to talk to her

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Meg’s mother encouraged us into science all three of
us working together most children already back on the
farm
now we traveled into Wangaratta every day for senior
school no demand for matriculation at Myrtleford
High Meg’s mother set us challenging homework
Rosy’s mum and dad were all for education for the
workers my Dad watched with a kind of puzzled
amusement proud of his only child the silent child
bright enough to matriculate
farmwoman

Meg's mother suggested university Meg had decided
to be a teacher like her mum Rosy wanted to do
voluntary service overseas in Ethiopia or Peru
preferably a war-torn country always a romantic
our Rosy
I fancied being a vet eventually liked being around
animals

I topped my class got a shire scholarship no one
more surprised than me the University of Melbourne
accepted all three of us to live in St Hilda's College
I'd never been out of the valley

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I missed the cows when I went to Melbourne uni I
missed my home I missed my Dad I ached for the
valley its lush meadow hay bubbling trout streams
forested rolling hilltops many times in the first year I
thought I must go home to the farm
but Meg and Rosy were at college with me we had
such fun real department stores instead of the Myers
catalogue cinemas milk bars with huge servings of
chocolate milkshake scholarship meant I didn’t have
much to spend but it was all so different I was used to
making a little go a long way

Dad wrote me that he’d sold the farm Oh Dad I
wish you hadn’t I would have liked to I guess he
wanted a son to work the farm with him of course I
didn’t say
then he wrote that he was going steady with Aunt Ada
who? then he’d moved in with her in Wodonga
farmwoman

they’d set up a little florist’s business together I stayed with them in the holidays it wasn’t like the farm not like home Aunt Ada kept trying to catch me out see I knew you could talk just need a bit of practice lovey

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I did what everyone did at uni I went to parties I studied hard I met Dave at the Melbourne branch of Rural Youth had to keep some connection with the land Meg and I both enjoyed Rural Youth meeting other people off farms Meg went out with Dave first then he was intrigued by quiet me Dave was studying economics hating it but enjoying his freedom I might have wondered about that I sang in a choir I went to folk nights at the pub I learnt my way round on public transport
so I got my Science degree I got my farmer I got pregnant to a red headed farm boy in silence mostly I’d got used to being quiet
I knew about sex. Uncle John had been a good teacher anyway I was surrounded by it on the farm. Roosters rough-housing the hens. Then the communal dust bath. Benny our enormous almost black Friesian bull was daily courted and humped by the herd. When he put in turn found a receptive cow he followed her for hours salivating licking her swollen vulva. Putting up his broad head and bulling. Savouring the air she walked through. Then up he would go his forelegs scrabbling for a foothold on her back. Slobber drifting from his open jaws his long thin pointed red penis jabbing jabbing she soon back to quiet grazing. The germ of the next year's milking already growing. I asked no questions about sex. About touching about loving and touching and passion and arching my back and
farmwoman

Tyndale

touching about losing myself about throbbing and
burning about crying out in ecstasy
no one told me about crying out

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I could not know when I gave myself to Dave I could
not know what that meant for my future how could I
know that I was giving myself body and soul to his family
his farm as well as to his insistent provocative desire
in the sweat of the sheets I could not see the domination of
his parents in the slippery coming and going I did not
think in terms of other people's farmland other
people's homesteads other people's ways of doing
things in the scratch of the fingernails down flushed
skin I did not recognize the sharpness of my loss
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when he took me in college he knew I wasn’t dumb
when he whispered sweet nothings he knew I could
whisper them back but when he took me to his family I
was dumbstruck I carried the seed of their next
generation but they misunderstood my silence for
insolence

I have married his family and they do not want me and I
stand mute before their dislike

a boy must sow his oats but he shouldn’t have got her in
the family way she hasn’t got any land what’s her
family? any number of nice girls just waiting to be
asked should have kept him on the farm well
what’s done is done

I have kept quiet for so long that I don’t know what to say
our new home is the sprawling homestead nothing's
done to acknowledge the change in his status or mine
he has to ask for the money to buy a double bed we
squeeze with silent laughter into his old single until it
arrives on a Co op truck from Wangaratta

can you milk? asks the sister in law looking at me
sideways not to meet my glance I nod so does she
in the direction of the dairy she can spend more time
off the farm escape to city cafés in my smiling
pleasure at getting my own dairy again she sees an ally
within this tough family she doesn’t appear to dislike
me I’m useful to her

you can cook says the mother in law leading me to the
wood stove the meat’s hanging the wood’s in the
tank behind the old dunny breakfast at seven
smoko at ten dinner at twelve thirty smoko at three
tea at six supper at nine I love cooking she
farmwoman

Tyndale

hates it she’ll have more time to embroider she does exquisite cross stitch we’ll rub along OK I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to have a mother she’s never had a daughter only the wives of her sons

now I’m here the women are no longer outnumbered

she a good lay? leers the hog of an elder brother Chris I’ll have to watch that one

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doesn’t take me long to see Chris’s frustrations generations of expectation laid on the eldest son to produce sons for the farm but his wife seems unable to to enter into the spirit keeps miscarrying and Chris hates farming he will inherit the gracious old homestead but he and his wife like modern things and
privacy  a pregnant healthy farm girl on the arm of his young brother is an unbearable provocation

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no privacy on the family farm and no lying in bed of a morning  sex becomes furtive both of us silent the joy we had in each other threatens to unwind my bridal mistakes in the unfamiliar kitchen are hard to bear the undercooked roast not laughed away the runny jelly a shouting matter I am not used to our home hadn’t worked in this way and no one ever shouted Dave’s dad doesn’t swear he shouts and gets his own way he doesn’t like me finds my silence as threatening as I find his shouting this family is like a farmyard and he’s the cock of the heap I’m at the bottom as new wife of second son if I don’t rock the boat keep quiet and work well I might
change things round here quietly though I won’t deny he’s a good farmer

Dave’s mum / Mother I have to call her / loses no opportunity for spite sharp little digs about my cooking about the baby trapping her son into marriage about my so called progressive ideas trying to spend all their hard earned money I just wanted to try some fruit trees or some rare breed chooks showing my blockie upbringing I’m easily silenced my silence infuriates
half cock for careful instructions to mix a hazardous pesticide have you filled the tank? don't bat an eyelid at the calf auction another quarter turn of the valve into an easy camaraderie a gossip a phone link unwound to fully open the valve will vomit the complete drama queen gunning for attention and holding the weekly meeting of the farm family spellbound the cat out of the bag but not yet

in the dairy they can't find fault and I increase the yield within weeks I scrub and sweep and polish and disinfect until the whole dairy is spotless and stays that way the milk truck driver never kept waiting the books all in order soon the mating charts are left to me
farmwoman

Tyndale

I come to the dairy when things are tough and Dave knows
he can find me here alone the rich cuddly smell of the
cows as comforting as the familiarity of his body this
is not what he had imagined in college nor me he
sees now he will always be the second son his brother
who hates the farm will inherit it because he was born first
and that's how it is and always will be amen
primogeniture rules
his sister in law who wants the city will have the
homestead we will always be second best but loyal

it's not hard to love this farm with its always green valley
and forested hilltops trout streams and waterholes
good rainfall and all perfect for dairying
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this farm I've married into is not like the one I grew up on a constant struggle with marginal land high up in the valleys we were happy and had enough to get by this farm has been in the family for over a hundred years has expanded with each generation now it's nearly ten times bigger than ours was

32
the homestead and sheds are on the Dairy Block east of the river first Australian soil for many postwar European migrants branching out from Bonegilla Dave’s family was here long before they would have ousted Indigenous owners no doubt without conscience terra nullius had the pick of the land 800 acres of rich river flat with water meadows for the milkers higher ground for weaners and dry cows
farmwoman

Tyndale

forested hilltops owned by the state for logging big old
gum trees long gone now patterned with interwoven
pine and regrowth the pine dark green diamonds
among the grey bush logging trucks / driven by
Czechs Latvians Georgians Balts Dave's dad
and plenty others call them / churning up the hill
roads grinding of gears in the still air

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meadow hay cut in October the air sharp with pollen
and grass seed some hay baled and stored in hay sheds
some sold some for storing in the two big silage pits
dug into the hillside behind the homestead not too
close it smells ripe as it settles the riper the better
for the cows they love it best of all
farmwoman Tyndale

several miles of river frontage for trout fishing rights and unlimited water the clear fast water lined with aspen willow eaten off to cow height like trees in a child’s farmyard set but good shade room for twenty or more cows under swaying tendrils chewing the cud chewing chewing I’m sure those cows are thinking

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thirteen hundred acres up the valley the Hill Paddocks for merinos triticale for the piggeries wild ponies brought down from the High Country by leatherbrown horsemen to be quietened for a life of pony clubs and sugar lumps Dave is a wizard with those horses talks to them like I sing to the cows by the time children come wide eyed to choose one they’re as docile and gentle as any mum could wish still with the fire of the wild to add a sparkle to ownership pretty horses ready to be named Blaze or Striker or / of course /
farmwoman

Black Beauty highstepping from birth on
mountainsides rough manes and sturdy

35
two and a half thousand flat dry acres out west beyond Benalla two big grain paddocks no water no power no living when first he brought me home grown accustomed to his freedom at university Dave was brazen enough to ask for a house to be built out on The Flat not pouring money into bricks and mortar boy running a business here you know not welfare plenty of room in the homestead which is true in the homestead they’ve got us where they can see us at least I have two other women around to keep the house clean

36
how will the next generation add to the landholding? a
tradition to maintain I’m full of bright modern ideas
but am not heard if Dave puts forward my ideas
/shaped to his own design but mine to start with / he is
mocked
been getting ideas from that bush housewife of yours
let’s hear that you learned something at that university
cost us enough to send you there where’s your broader
vision where’re your management skills push the
farm forwards boy not back into the hill country
I may not be able to contribute land but I can produce the
next generation more than my poor sister in law can
the brother in law uses her sterility as an excuse for trying
to feel me up whenever he can he can’t possibly find
me attractive in this condition I can’t even see my own
feet
I wanted my mother when I went into labour little local hospital in Beechworth knew all the nurses Clara Jones the midwife had been visiting for months teaching me how to breathe for the different stages of labour watching my diet Meg was with me men were kept out of the labour ward but Dave felt squeamish anyway heaven knows he’s pulled enough animals into this world

Meg knew about this baby from the start Meg was Dave’s girlfriend before me those college days were great / miss the freedom love marriage to a good man love having my own dairy /
farmwoman

Tyndale

I knew what it was the pain of birth I had helped many cows as they fought to expel had seen the magic of dawning life crooned with the mother at the newborn calf in the bloodspattered hay had helped my sister in law as she bent double with the pain of yet another miscarriage but this time this first time just for me I wanted my mother
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at this moment as I push and scream yes scream
this silent one screams for her mother I want my
mother I want I don’t want help me I can’t
Oh Mum

I have a son a fine son the first grandson for the farm

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motherhood is great oh and the feel and the smell of
that fuzzy head nuzzled into my shoulder now I know
why the cows mother-murmur to their calves now I
feel guiltier taking away their calves after twenty four hours when I hold my boy

my Sam goes everywhere with me in his bassinet in the kitchen while I cook and in his bouncer in the sunshine while I weed the vegetables and in a pouch on my tummy when I bring in the cows I can’t bear to be parted from him

the family want him called Richard after his grandfather but I don’t want him branded ‘Dick’ I want to call him Samson to grow strong and tall a golden boy he is christened Richard David
to me he will always be Sam at least they didn’t want him to be John
we chattered to each other  Sam and I  when no one else was around  I had no secrets from my baby crooning happy little songs  mother songs  singing to my baby

my little family grew and still we chattered  Sam and Robbie chattered to each other as they grew  Sally chattered with Sam and Robbie as she grew  three lovely babies  all close  all with variations of their father’s lovely curly pink champagne hair  / will they hate me drawing attention to it as much as he does  I wonder /

my silence in the world must have been like my own mother’s quietness was to me  an unremarkable intimacy  comfortable  no need to share my secret with my children
when I tell Dave my secret  / it's not a secret when it's told /

Dave is so angry with John  but I don't want him to be angry with John  I want him to be angry with me  for not trusting him with my secret earlier in our life together  as if I was scared whether he would still love me

but you were just a little girl  but I enjoyed it I say he was my special friend  I didn't know I was supposed to feel violated so I didn't

his arms around me now in the quietness of the dairy / we still have all our intimate times in the dairy / you stay as quiet as you like my love  but no one  no one gets anywhere near my daughter

Dave needs to be a strong dependable man  he gets a rough time of it on the farm
Dave does most of the work around the farm and I do the rest until the children are big enough to pitch in. Dave’s father tells him what to do; he knows perfectly well for himself but he lets his dad be in control. Father thinks he is still boss while enjoying bowls in Beechworth.

Dave’s brother Chris disappears off shooting, says he’s going out to The Flat but he rarely does any work there other than at seeding or harvest. He spends most of his time down the pistol club or the pub. Dave’s mum holds the purse strings; she clutches them tightly to her chest and she’s tight. Dave doesn’t grumble; neither do I. We just get on with it. Farming’s like that. What with the seasons and the weather and the markets...not much point grumbling about family as well. Some things you just can’t change.
farmwoman

Tyndale

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thank goodness for breasts  I lay down the fencing
pliers out of Robbie’s reach  lift up my shirt and feed
my red-faced babe  in the sudden sucking silence
contemplating the satisfactory gleam of a new sheep fence
the Hill Paddocks are a great place to work in autumn
bronze tinge of turning leaves lighting up the valley below
like evening sun on water
my new daughter’s soft wisps of red-tinged hair lift gently
in the warm April breeze  eyes closed / her
pleasure joining mine /  my carrot-topped toddler at my
feet  deeply immersed in a tumbling tower of pebbles
and mud

farmwork doesn’t wait for motherhood
one year when my babies were still small we tried some young heifers in one of the Hill Paddocks one year when water was short the water meadows needed it all to keep the milk yield up the heifers sickened quickly drooping their heads not feeding we tethered them instead along the roadside one poor little one Loppy Lugs the kids called her with her sad drooping ears wound her rope around and around shorter and shorter against the star dropper lay down and stayed down couldn’t budge her cows in the paddock over the fence lowed in distress they knew death did they smell it? at the post mortem with the vet puddling around in her insides the flesh pockmarked with bracken fern poisoning lucky we only lost one didn’t I tell you the Hill Paddock’s no good for beasts Father shouted hard to bear when he’s right

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sometimes I pause as the shadowlines elongate across the Home Paddock the sun a pale battery hen’s egg nudging the horizon backlighting the clump of scribbly gums pasted as an afterthought onto the bare paddock I stand hand to my eyes squinting to catch the last drops of daylight then I fling my dairywoman’s voice to the machinery sheds to the green hillside behind the homestead to the empty silage pit calling my lightfoot children to their tea I wouldn’t live anywhere else

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once at school the children have to get used to loss of freedom growing up they go everywhere with us childcare is the latest catchcry of women it won’t happen in the bush always watching non stop for our
kids so many dangers rivers dams silos to
drown in machinery to fall off or under sprays to
drink and gunshot never far from our minds

Dave joined the search for a neighbour’s youngest child
missing only an hour or two they’d called all over the
farm phoned all the surrounding farms checked the
school post office the local store must be here
somewhere can’t have gone far only popped inside
for a second
twenty three men left their work to comb the paddocks
before little Damien floated to the surface of the dam
he was only four the whole district grieved
how easy it would be it could happen to any of us

but when the children all go to school just a little local
primary I miss them with me as I work
Sam is first to go to school—he loves the chance to brag and make new mates even though he’s grown up with most of the other kids—some new hobby farm kids coming through though—he likes to think he knows all about farming and can show off him with his red hair and his temper to match—gets into a few fights those city kids know a thing or two—he never says but sometimes I have to wash bloodspots off his shirt

one by one I lose my babies to the education system at least I can relax my vigilance during the week—they all have my large build and their father’s hair—and Sam and Sally have tempers to match—maybe they’ve inherited more from their grandfather than I realized Dave is as mild as a spring day and has never laid a finger on them in spite of his own father’s urging
49

the extra labour on Thursdays around the mundane
milking chores fifty pasties for tuck shop on Friday
homegrown vegies minced the night before the meat
from the latest menopausal cow we eat all our own
meat cows and weaners come home from the
slaughter house in cardboard boxes straight into the
new freezer saves Dave a job he hated and me a lot of
cutting up the pastry thrown together in the Sunbeam
all the lighter for the careless custom
one and a half pasties for each child plus the Principal
two teachers and a teacher’s aide each pasty with
tomato sauce from a squeezie bottle brown paper bag
enough funny face cupcakes to feed an army they all
get eaten
three of us mothers raising money for books for the library
a child starving in Somalia sick kids in Chernobyl
the cause of the moment
time gossiping in the tuck shop every bit as precious
swapping dress patterns recipes remedies for
childhood ailments

50
I’ve seen ads in the Women’s Weekly with shapely
women pumping iron in the gym to develop their abs and
their pecs all kitted out in highcut lycra their legs
waxed to the bikini line their make up on
I think to myself they should come out here and have
dust brown legs without need for sunlamps bulging
muscles from pumping diesel fiftyeight handpumps to
fill the ute to go to the calf auction no need for the
bikini line either or the make up
no one takes a second look
farmwoman

51
townies seeing me once a month in Wodonga for the
grocery shopping a trip to the library maybe the
doctor
see a caricature of myself dressed in my best clothes
sheer stockings Fletcher Jones skirt the pearls Dad
gave me for my twenty first one of those nice shirts
with plaid collar and cuffs
they see a woman who isn’t there townies know the
legend Tammie Fraser the myth of squattocracy
of landownership townies see me as idle rich as
stuck up
I can’t sell the farm to come to town can’t come in my
everyday mucky-been-on-the-quad jeans and sweat-
stained T shirt down at heel one-pair-lasts-for-years
Blundstones anyway Dave wouldn’t let me out of the
gate looking like that
I’m fit because I work hard brown from fresh air I
wish they’d see the real me
I enjoy the drive into town very little traffic on our narrow roads time to catch the views and my breath each time I go into Wodonga or Wangaratta I see the changes new forests planted bits of gravel road graded houses and sheds going up on hobby blocks how the family sneers at the hobby farms maybe people don't realize what a hard life it is out here get a bit of a rosy view from those eco magazines and then let the land run down not bred for it they pay good money for the land though hobby farmers plant interesting crops often make a fist of it at least they try walnuts that will take ten to fifteen years to come into bearing cherries on a slope they'll never get a tractor up bronze sculptures of horses galloping look almost real in the paddock gave me a shock first time I saw them with coloured sheep
farmwoman

Tyndale

grazing among their hooves snotty nosed kids running
bare and barefoot happy though healthy
we avoid change in the country hobby farmers unsettle us
I drive with my head over one shoulder as do all
farmers got to see what the others are up to

53

on a shuddering indrawn breath the old pump down by the
river wheezes into action as the clean cold water is
sucked up the trembling metal pipe out into the
channels of the water meadow forcing water into roots
pasture to grow keeping up the milk yield cash in
the bank
sweet grass for the cows to wrap their rasping tongues
around when moved into a fresh meadow they rumble
and dance kick their legs in the air udders flying
farmwoman

like rubber gloves hanging on the washing line in a sharp breeze quick snatches of goodness before standing under the willows ruminating their heads up their eyes closed

I give the pump a proprietorial pat on its heaving sides dip my fingers in the water flick a blessing walk away whistling

54

steam rises off dungclogged lane pushing behind the murmuring herd on my quad bike in the mud often as not with a child or two up beside me before they’re big enough for their own dirt bikes as contented as the cows waiting to be milked I love my work seventy-odd big-boned Guernseys placid as lake water letting down their milk to the tone
farmwoman

of my voice    dairying is my life    all thought of being a vet forgotten
deregulation the rough politics    prices uncertain
nearby factories build a reputation for good cheeses    I make sure my milk is what they want    a smooth running operation that makes money    keeps Mother happy
and the cows    well the cows are like family to me

some farmwomen approach me to help set up a dairywomen’s association    an offshoot from the Farmers’ Federation    well me imagine that!    so busy on the farm and with the kids and all    I wouldn’t have anything to say    but I join anyway when it starts don’t get to meet many new people    interesting women too
when I first came to this farm a green girl
I wouldn’t say boo not just because of my secret
because I knew by then that this was a silly reason to be
silent I was quiet anyway and shy and uncertain and
pregnant I was captivated the land was lovely
in a perennially green valley acres of pasture and
croplands and wooded hilltops farm well-established
and big no need to scrape and make do I thought
the family well-established too fourth generation
fifth with Dave and his brother Chris I was carrying
the sixth generation all that handing down of
knowledge would make a farm family wise and generous
I thought
Dave’s parents considered themselves above the migrant
families in the district patronising hosts and
ungenerous not popular not particularly wise either
as far as I could see how come they had such a nice
son as Dave
I thought
other than the midwife and Meg and Rosy I found it hard

to make friends  no home of my own to invite them to

conversations rushed at the school gate and tuck shop

it was refreshing to belong to an association of women

with the same skills as me  I could feel my silence

thawing

if I could speak out loud  speak my mind  if I could

just open my mouth and let words fall out knowing that

they would listen  if I could only say what is on my

mind but I can't
each has a voice which will be listened to but me each can say their piece

Meg and Rosy know my secret for years we have met on a Friday morning at the Beechworth café for years they have put up with my silences for years they have known I can talk but not the reason for my silence the telling is painful they are angry with John but I have always been complicit I enjoyed it then and have used the silence and continue to use it Dave knows my secret Meg and Rosy know my secret the family knows I can talk even if I rarely do how shall I break my silence with the world?
by the time the children are all at High School in Tallangatta Dave’s losing his lovely red hair and mine is needing some help Dave’s father gets more tetchy by the day and Mother is doing some very strange things I wonder if dementia runs in the family goodness knows how we will manage if that happens with the kids filling their own days now I’m busier than ever and I get to thinking as I’m asked to join more farmwomen’s organizations I’m just as skilled as anyone else on this farm I love Dave dearly but I’m as much a farmer as he is I don’t want to push the point he has such a tough time with his Dad don’t want to lower his self confidence he’s such a good solid farmer careful with his decisions and knowledgeable I reckon I am too
I am never bored more things to do than waking hours keep the Esse burning to feed nine people all day and again next morning our clothes may not be new but they are always clean no one going to school or college smelling of cow shit I don’t mind ironing I enjoy cooking I love my work in the dairy I’m happy driving for spares and taxiing sons to footy daughter to netball growing vegies is not hard I love to get my fingers in the dirt and see things grow I move sprinklers all summer to keep things green hard work never did anyone any harm / the Devil makes work for idle hands my Gran used to say but I’m just going to Gran I’d say the road to hell is paved with
farmwoman

Tyndale

going to's she would retort I think she taught me a
good work habit crabby old thing that she was /
I am intent on keeping the bookwork up-to-date and the
mating charts and the mending and bottling and cutting
everyone's hair while watching the ABC / we can't
get those other stations in our valley / and writing up
the minutes of the farm meeting in which I have no voice
but she can still write up the minutes can't she
but Gran you said actions speak louder than words

61
I drive the tractor whenever required I don't get to
drive the header that's men's business I drive the
car a lot and the ute and the cattle truck and I drove the
grain truck one year when Dave had broken his ankle and
Chris had commandeered the header air conditioned
and with CD stack the grain truck is not air
farmwoman

conditioned is accessed through the passenger door because the driver’s door is so battered by hitting the loading bay that it doesn’t open the grain truck holds twelve tonnes and really gets going down to the silo the truck has brakes that needed replacing years ago but it doesn’t get used much and heck they’ll last a bit longer eh the guys at the silo are not comfortable with women but I don’t talk to them so it doesn’t matter that they don’t talk to me it’s like that at the stock and station agents as well and the bank and the field days there are other farmwomen who fill in same as me

62

when the grain harvest is on nasty things get said and done in the blaze of anxiety will we get it all in before the break will that cloud drop some rain will the
farmwoman

Tyndale

track break down  will the header last another season
will the price drop / probably / it usually does / a
bumper crop and the market is glutted  no rain for
months and the stalks dwindle and fry  a market in
Russia opens up  trade talks with the US shut it down
the tension building and building and the heat oppressive
temper boiling over little things  the brother in law
feels me up  the sister in law shouts at me and Sally
Dave almost cries when the truck blows a tyre on the way
to the silo
I don’t feel like singing

63

he says it drives him mad  Dave’s brother  my
brother in law  Chris says it drives him mad when I
don’t answer him
when he gets hopping mad I have a little secret grin
farmwoman

he can't get at me in my silence but I can get at him
but when he is cut away from under the rolled-over grain
truck / it was just meanness not getting the brakes
seen to / when he is taken away I think it is me that
has made him mad me that has caused his frenzy
me that has caused his death silence is not golden

64

Dave is no longer the second son
sobering enough to lose a family member in such a shocking way but when I see how they treat my sister in law food for serious thought about my own position my sister in law is told not kindly to find somewhere else to live she discovers that there is no allowance made for her widowhood that these two people whom I have to call Mother and Father are turning her out without a cent Dave and I plead with them even the children beg them to reconsider the sister in law who I admire now more than at any time before is too proud to grovel takes them to court the ensuing settlement is longwinded grudging mean
66
Dave and I sit down one day with a community lawyer in Wodonga / not the family solicitor / discuss options to avoid this happening to us unbiased. She advises us on succession planning says such matters are often neglected on family farms not really meanness she says just anxiety about the viability of the family farm lots of tips and leaflets and new ideas getting through to the parents is not so simple we'll have to wait until they die.

67
Mother has dementia not just losing her glasses losing her grip on reality sad but funny almost always so particular now undone don't know how much longer we can cope with her certainly can't ask the sister in law to help.
no aged care facilities nearer than Tallangatta and they’re full to bursting country women in particular strong and longlived
Father distressed angry unable to help her
he also frailer by the moment often almost catatonic with fury
Mother’s on several waiting lists for nursing homes in Wangaratta and Wodonga waiting lists that often go on until death quite out of daily visiting range she will lose herself as well as us
my own Dad growing old meekly under the thumb of Aunt Ada accepting rare visits of grandchildren with apparent pleasure gruff stories about the farm never was one for talking
all of us getting older Dave’s curly red hair just a wavy
watermark on a shiny brown skull still a big gentle
bear of a man still hard working making his own
decisions about a farm which will one day belong to
him
Father keeps reminding him that it doesn’t yet

Robbie works in tandem with his dad no shouting
between these two it’s good not to have to do so many
heavy things on the farm time to dream up alternative
crops persimmons maybe chestnuts even
Robbie’s not quiet like his Mum not hot headed like
his brother not snobby like his grandparents except
for his red hair I’d say he’s like my Dad even his hair
is more sunset gold than carrot and he’s just crazy
farmwoman

Tyndale

about anything to do with farming and dirt bikes and girls
and footy I think there’s a bit of Irish in him

70

Sam is off at uni in Brisbane learning to be what I thought
I wanted to be a vet / St Lucia the only place he
can study large animals / inheriting his dad’s way with
creatures but not his gentleness flame tempered and
temperamental Sam doesn’t always come home for the
holidays he and his Grandpa have always rubbed each
other up the wrong way terrible sparring partners
my Sally growing more beautiful every day
Sally loves High School big boned energetic fiery chestnut
hair in curls that are usually scooped into a ponytail no
ribbons or fuss for this one a regular tomboy not
silent like me an outgoing child and popular with a
total passion for agriculture learning it like a trade

I'm not going to marry a farmer Mum
I'm going to be one!

Dad and Ada come out to visit from time to time they
never stopover Mother and Father always go out
they do it to be rude but we all enjoy catching up with Dad
while they're out the children are really fond of him
he and I are still awkward and quiet with each other
I wonder if he is happy

73

when it rains in our valley quite often the grass
greens and the cud sweetens the milk flows and the
grain inches up
I put on my black wellie boots and slick black oilies and
my current beanie shining the maroon and gold colours of
Robbie’s footy team
I slip down the hillsides and slosh along the cow tracks
singing into the mist
the milking takes longer in the rain cows reluctant to
leave sweet pasture dung and mud clinging to their
tails flanks hooves their udders plastered
the dairy and yard filthy the run-off water a rich
sludgy brown
I take the user friendly quad bike up into the forest. I feel safer on the four dumpy wheels of the quad than on a dirt bike. Leave those for the young. Great views where the forestry workers have clear felled out to the Riverina between the rain squalls, chink and clank of bellbirds where they’ve left the native regrowth. Water dripping from long eucalypt leaves down the neck of my Dryzabone. It keeps me out of the house dark on rainy days and overfull all of them eating non-stop to fill the dreary can’t work hours.

Much better to sing in the rain.

When I’m up there feels like on top of the world. I look out over the land which I love. I think about the
Aborigines who once lived here did they too sit on these hilltops and survey their land with pride did we steal it from them? I'd like to ask them but there are no Aboriginal women in our farmwomen groups they've been invited but don't come maybe they never thought of themselves as farmers maybe they don't feel welcome I've never met an Aborigine face to face got to be careful what I say at home we paid for this land we've worked for what we've got not racist exactly

this family belongs to the land which has been farmed by them for five generations they belong to the local church and hold positions in it think of themselves as good Christians
farmwoman

Tyndale

across the generations men have been councillors one
a mayor even
women have taken prizes at the local Agricultural Show
for their alarmingly tall sponge cakes and their decorative
bottled vegetables and their cross stitch and their dairy
cows
dead they are buried in the local cemetery
even in death they belong here
I live on this farm but I do not belong other women
have lived on this farm who were not born here did
they belong?
maybe I have to speak up to belong

76

where do I belong?
the children /hardly children any more/ belong to
the farm family and this community they were born
here
farmwoman

the cows belong to the herd they have a leader and
hangers on they each know their place and stick to it
I don't know my place and if I do I don't want
to stick to it I don't want out I want to be more in
the family more in the farm more in the world
if I talked about Uncle John I'm afraid of being
laughed at they'd be so taken aback at me talking
let alone talking about that
my voice belongs to Uncle John and I want it back

77

how did she know? she's never heard me sing you
old witch Rosy catching me off guard like that I
thought singing was my own secret the way it makes
my heart zing and blat and dance a jig the way the
cows let down their milk when I sing to them softly
they murmur to me like they do to their newborn calves
farmwoman

motherlove songs of welcome and recognition they
murmur and let down their milk it’s supposed to be a
secret Rosy

will I join her choir? I’ll have to ask Dave but he
doesn’t do anything on a Wednesday night likes to
watch TV I don’t know
she says there’s no audition all women singing without
accompaniment she says a capella she calls it how
did she know

that Rosy!

78
can’t think why I’ve been silent for so long I love
singing in the choir women’s songs and songs about
peace not war and about Mandela and Chile and love and
songs for sons and daughters and songs about the goddess
farmwoman

Tyndale

even whoever she may be I don't always understand but that doesn't matter it makes me happy I don't think I knew I wasn't happy but now I think perhaps I wasn't quite

not unhappy with Dave or farming or anything but now I have a voice maybe I can speak up at family farm meetings

79

it's just for me wonderful Wednesday nights just for me no family here no one who knows me except Rosy and I can sing out loud I can sing
so wonderful to have a voice and not just at singing
at Dairy women’s meetings too and at Women in Agriculture
I find I’m an outgoing person just like Sally
time to learn new skills at TAFE with other farm women
learning to call ourselves farmers not just farmers’
wives farm book keeping computer skills
networking I’m no feminist but I can see that us
women need to have more input into government not
politics as such but policy making policies made
by people who know what’s needed out here on farms
like safe child care aged care facilities
I think I want to do a company director’s course Dave
is excited about my getting so involved really
supportive mind you I haven’t opened up yet at the
farm meetings they’ll get a shock when I do
farmwoman

81

in summer the wind blowing sour from the desolate north
smelling of offal and blowflies and the bitter
muskiness of longdead driedout cattle carcasses and
roadkill the sun searing the sweat off my skin
eating its way into my soul burning my mousy hair
bright white my plump pink arms brown as the Italian
women cutting apricots on the fruit blocks in the Riverina
in summer the milking takes less time the cows
drowsy in the sun the tanker through with his round in
half the time
in summer I can work on my own crops no one else to
make decisions for me picking the tiny gherkins daily
/wading through the prickly green watery leaves /
stooping again and again riffling my fingers through dark
secrets always finding my booty day after day after
sunny day / the pleasure of the trip into the factory the
cash into my own purse and into the Commonwealth
farmwoman

Tyndale

savings account that no one but me has access to I don’t know what I’m saving for

no matter how hot in summer I pick gherkins and strawberries and potatoes and beans carrots parsnips onions zucchinis parsley and basil and oregano and thyme apricots nectarines peaches plums and olives asparagus artichokes rhubarb when I’m through picking I put the sprinklers back on the veggie patch and listen to it all growing again

82

in summer I bottle and make jam I pickle freeze and cook apricot crumble and zucchini cakes and pickled onions and glazed baby carrots and basil pesto and lemon and thyme stuffing for homekilled meat chook and quince jelly to drown in the hollows of Yorkshire Pudding and rich tomato sauce brightening our own beef mince and
with the wood stove still blasting heat the family sits
around the kitchen table and scoffs the lot but I have
the pleasure in the making

83
it was a terrible misunderstanding I should have said
something but it was left to simmer and now my poor boy
at one of the family farm meetings my Sam said he
didn’t want to come to the meetings anymore he’d
been offered a place as a junior partner in a veterinary
practice in Myrtleford specializing in large animals
/ what he had trained for / he was so proud

you would have thought the end of the world had come
Dave’s dad / Father we all still call him / sprang to
his feet red in the face and bulging eyes and shouted
hoarsely never! never in a thousand years! the
eldest son always works the farm have I done all this
work and my father and his before him to see you throw it
away? never!
he didn’t swear he never did he didn’t have to
what he said went
no more was said

so the young hothead took his Grandpa’s gun no way
anyone could pretend it was an accident into the
hayloft above the dairy and he propped the gun on a
hay bale and cocked it with twine it had a hair trigger
he knew he had shot rabbits with it any number of
times he was twenty two and knew what he was doing
he sat on another hay bale in the line of fire and
he pulled
we heard the explosion from the kitchen who was out
shooting tonight?
when I found him in the hay I screamed oh no my boy
Sam no I got blood all over me his blood as I
kissed him
but most of the wet was tears I wanted to end it all
Mum he wailed in my arms thank the Lord the hay
bale shifted as he pulled he missed the blood was a
graze along his cheekbone
this close to permanent silence

85
having recently questioned my own happiness I never
thought to question my children’s I have always found
family meetings irksome with no voice they must
have tortured Sam maybe Chris even
living with Father so many years I know his tyranny as
one-eyed concern for the family farm
farmwoman

my Sam’s misery is hard for me to bear the farm splits
my loyalty
Sam has made his escape not the way he planned
months of difficult psychotherapy his lovely red hair
gone snow white with the shock gone to start afresh in
Queensland

86

how I need my friends Meg stayed lanky and now
greying and tall she looks quietly elegant she has
taught all of my kids chemistry yet through all the difficult
years she remains calm and efficient and such a dear
friend
Rosy has had her wild moments has done things
neither Meg nor I would dare traveled through India
on her own gone ballooning in Arizona with a
handsome but morally questionable man from an
farmwoman

Tyndale

enormous ranch in Texas married and divorced three husbands picked up and adopted a gorgeous girlchild in Burma another in Bali and twin boys in Samoa all four of them now swelling the ranks of our threatened two-teacher primary school as they live in happy chaos in a run-down vacant farm house down the road Rosy sweeps everybody off their feet I wish I was more like Rosy

87

promised time and time again I'll dig out those water colours gift from Aunt Ada must be fifteen years ago she's dead now Dad alone again as I stand outside the dairy waiting for Robbie on his mud slathered dirt bike bringing in the cows I promise myself I'll paint the way the rays of the sun angle up over the hillside behind the homestead magic and unreal
like some health advert in a woman’s magazine then
spread sparkling fanwise until the sun’s up and I can’t
look any more even squinting and the cows are
here anyway but my heart feels like busting
the pleasure of it
above me two wedgetail eagles float circling circling
on the thermals couldn’t I just get that lazy flight
above the clearfelled hills the dark forest up up
the tops of the trees flame orange in the break of day
sunlight
the light movement the colour paint to brush
brush to paper if I had the time

88

it was tiny just the size of a split pea Dave found it
I never would have too busy dealing with cows
tits to think of my own but as soon as Dave found it I
felt invaded I was frightened so was Dave
farmwoman

embarrassed when I had to lower my bra for the local GP to feel it he said have your breasts always been lopsided? ask Dave I should have said but of course I didn’t that was the first embarrassment of many after surgery / with one breast smaller and lighter than the other if not lopsided / I am calmed by nurses who seem to know more than doctors

89

no local hospital we did have one before the ‘eighties only used for emergencies now broken wrists bee stings things that the sister can deal with for anything serious it’s the base hospital 100km away and think yourself lucky not to have to go to Melbourne when I’ve had the operation lying stiff and sore on my rubber-sheeted bed wide awake with the constant noise
before I see the doctor I wonder if this is my allotted time how will they manage without me? I worry and retch and retch and worry until I’m sedated afterwards when he says we got it all I recognise my arrogance but it took a while Rosy visits me each day a quick hug and sparkling conversation Rosy knowing my silence Rosy always sparkles Rosy is such a good friend I love them all but am tired so tired this is my first holiday since our honeymoon strange to be sleeping alone strange to have nothing to do that bloody hayloft is always in my mind always in my mind I should have broken my silence at that meeting and said something to support Sam
90

Meg has me to stay for a couple of days too lively at
Rosy’s she murmurs and they’ll have you working if you
go home
I wander round Meg’s tidy house one person with a
house all to oneself how would it be playing the
piano reading novels having friends to dinner
hard to imagine I’ve never done these things
do I miss them? I haven’t until now

Saturday afternoon Meg gets on her gardening gear and
reaches for an old cotton hat says I’m off to a
Landcare meeting d’you feel up to coming?
I’ve known Meg nearly all my life and hers
how come I hardly know her?

I would have asked you to join says Meg quietly as we
drive home but I knew you would say you had no time to
spare
Meg told me the talk was of nothing but sludge pumps the first year she went to Landcare all men of course when local farmwomen started taking an interest they rolled up their sleeves for some serious environmentalism involving the whole school community using school gardening and computer facilities getting good speakers to explain ridge ploughing for waterless planting of native species keyline irrigation fauna conservation the men still go to the front bar to talk about sludge pumps

when I came home good thing I didn’t expect them to make allowances and the milk yield had sunk into the subsoil
farmwoman

Tyndale

scared me though and I thought it was only stressed
people who got cancer

93
cancer helped me see the world differently at the time
I was just fighting to survive to stay in a world I was
not ready to leave
but now I see that I work hard to be a good
dairywoman but the farming world sees only dairymen
I see there’s more to a feminist stance than meets the eye
and I don’t need to be afraid of it
I see my children and their mates not convinced by
outdated assumptions
farmers make many mistakes politicians make many
mistakes on our behalf I have made many mistakes
I see John was mistaken
I do not need to keep his secret any more
when my Dad died not that long ago bent with hard work and puzzled by a world he had not expected to know when Dad died he had outlasted both his wives so he left his estate to me but his estate was not our farm that was long ago sold because there was no son to inherit when Dad died he was so old there wasn’t much estate left he’d lived it what was left was poured straightway into the bottomless hole that is the family farm what’s yours is his / and what’s his is his too by their standards / I did get Dad’s treasured fountain pen engraved with his own name the same as his father’s and his old farm ledgers which are comfortingly terse cleared new paddock

crop down must have been that late hard frost mechanic repaired thresher it went again first time round the paddock
farmwoman       Tyndale

rain'd better stop    creek overflowing    sheep drowning
girl child   hard calving  won't be any more doctor says
paddock full of parrots eating   seed
bumper crop   —  cleared mortgage
why has the child stopped talking?
I loved her chatter     was it John?

I never knew it bothered him

95
I was uncertain about Landcare    greenie in our valley
far ruder than dumbo    even farmers growing plantation
blue gum careful to avoid confrontation    there's a huge
pride that bolsters the agriculture of this country    a
wilful pride that says this is the way it's been done for generations if it was good enough then all the same there's headscratchings at lowering yields and weed infestations and foxes and spray resistance and phytophthora and trade barriers and removal of tariffs and ticks and heartworm and BSE and CJD and foot and mouth lots of headscratchings and opportunities for government inspectors and young men straight out of college calling themselves agricultural experts and even the stock and station agents now always a farmer's best friend even them talking about leaving old growth forest natural ecosystems genetic modification alternative crops and going to Landcare would set me against the family
farmwoman

Tyndale

96

you stupid dumb woman you'll bring fire down the valley

vermin parrots will eat all our crops

but the fire has gone out of him out like the fire in the
eyes of his spiteful wife dead these two blissful years
Robbie and his dad are making decisions now and he
can only watch and rant apoplexy closing in
I go up into the forest to collect seeds of the mountain
pepper river peppermint messmate and red box
yellow gum silver wattle and eastern leatherwood
lay out the trays water carefully prick out the sharp
odoured seedlings into used pots

Robbie and a fencing contractor put in new fencelines
new gates deep rip ready for dry planting I'll be a
grandmother before it's finished it'll change the face
of this farm
she'll only marry a farmer why send her to
Agricultural College? in my day they wouldn't let
females do such things and quite right too
my Sally big-boned and tanned her curly red hair
in a pony tail bounces as she strides around the farm
she always strides she always wears jeans
blooming with health and vitality she makes me feel
old and tired but she’s lovely Father expects her to
settle down and breed
Sally has other ideas but he won’t take any notice he
took no notice of what Sam wanted my Sam so far away
Sam’s not spoken of now at farm meetings and Father’s
will says that Robbie will inherit in line from his father
nothing for Sal though she’s a girl
at least we can change all that in our own wills but not
until the old man dies I don’t see why being a girl
means you can’t inherit neither do her brothers
she so much wants to farm she’ll do well at Dookie Ag
I know that Sally and her girlfriend Steff are saving like crazy both of them working all hours of the day and night they've got their eye on a little farm over the mountain good water good pasture belongs to an old bachelor in his nineties they want to run bobby calves and grow persimmons good luck to them I say I loved growing up in the hill country I think they'll have a hard time not a tolerant district when I first realized my children have given me such pleasure that Sal might not have children makes me sad but all Dave and I want is her happiness she sees no need to be silent not about loving women not about farming not about succession not about anything really but there's no way she will come out to her grandfather
the way he says that about Sal makes me see red
not like me not usually a hothead I've always
avoided conflict and communed with my cows got
enough redheaded hotheads in this family without me
but I see red in front of the whole family

I got out the wrong side of bed she did my Gran would have said /

I yell at him him and his farm and his precious
inheritance him and his firstborn son and firstborn
grandson his firstborn son is dead I say and my
husband has always done all the work round here he
has driven Sam away so far away yet Robbie and
Sally want only to farm can't you see what you have
done to this family shrieking now you wicked old
man

my hand to my mouth
I sit down suddenly

the silence in the farm kitchen is complete
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silent tears stain his weathered face  the farm  he stutters

the farm

I go and stand behind him  my arms round his hunched shoulders  I lay my grey head against his white mop

run my wet nose through his hair  weep silently with him  croon at an old man I have humbled

I make us all a cup of tea  Dave comes up behind me at the woodstove  his arms right round me cupping my breasts  in front of everyone  whispers I'm so proud of you

I turn into his arms
farmwoman

Tyndale

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the farm family has been so trapped in our own little world
so caught up in the business of farming everything
we do revolves around us and our farm our land
our inheritance and passing it on in the right way to the
right son and doing everything the way it has always been done

heading for a quiet revolution maybe
I put down my name to represent farm women on boards any boards but mainly agricultural. I’m asked to be community rep on the syllabus board for the ag science department at the Wodonga campus of the university. They meet in the Senate Room round a table bigger than our milk vat with arm chairs, water jugs, gold framed dignitaries staring down at us all men of course. Dr This and Professor That don’t ask who I am, they don’t even look at me while quoting figures, bottom lines and quality assurance. I’m just a dairy farmer, I am overawed by my first board meeting by the Senate Room by the men in suits until they rise to leave when I break my silence.
farmwoman

Tyndale

in a small woman's voice that carries across the paddock
to call in the cows I say *what is the agricultural content of your course?*

in the icy silence they sit back down they look at me

I hold their gaze and ask again *what are you teaching our sons and daughters?*

but they don’t know and I come away knowing us farm women must sit on more boards

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they can’t stop me talking about dairying and forestry agripolitics and content of agricultural courses about fishing rights and value-adding farmstay and tourism about Women in Agriculture and women at farm gatherings conferences about the future of rural women workshops on succession planning lobbying in Canberra last year I was named Rural
farmwoman

Tyndale

Woman of the Year for the state nominated by the Dairywomen’s group for my new methods of rearing bobby calves what a way to start the new millenium this year I got a Dairyfarmers’ scholarship to go to a worldwide conference of farmwomen in Spain Dave came too and Robbie had all responsibility for the farm first time either of us had been overseas there were fifteen hundred farm women at the Spanish conference so many new experiences farming gets more and more exciting as I get older and since I have broken my silence I talk talk with talk to anybody who’ll stand still for long enough one of these days someone is going to tell me to shut up
Dave and Robbie and I don’t need to add more land to the farm, got more than enough already; our contribution to this family farm / now we can speak for ourselves / is to carry through on new ideas for the land we have: high fat content for cheese; strong breeding stock; careful water management; safe ponies for children; fine Merino wool; grain that crops well whatever the weather; we’re good farmers and we love our land.

when I was a little girl I was violated by Uncle John but didn’t recognize it as such; I was not his victim but my voice was
a young girl   I was wronged by my father when he sold
the farm but didn’t recognize it as such   my Sally is
finding her own way around the dilemma of primogeniture

as a pregnant wife I was not welcomed into the family but
have served them well

my children have broken the family mold but still have a
way forward in the world   two farmers’ children Dave
and me   have produced two more good farmers and a
vet   with a deep respect for the land

I have found my voice

when I get a good price at auction for a hand-raised
weaner   I think yes   and when I plant out a
farmwoman

Tyndale

windbreak of indigenous trees along the curve of the paddock I think yes and when I make a batch of strawberry jam that sets without pectin and when my latest sketch gets hung in an exhibition when my daughter buys her own farm and when I pass a TAFE course with Distinction at forty nine when my own specialty chooks take champion at the local show and my persimmons that everyone laughed at fetch top price at the Melbourne wholesale market I think yes for farm women and for me too yes I have a voice now I do belong

I am a farmer

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I can speak out loud speak my mind