

'Exquisite...both fantastical and deeply true.' JANE RAWSON



The Rain Heron

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF FLAMES

PART 0

A FARMER LIVED, but not well. If she planted grain, it would not sprout. If she grew rice, it would rot. If she tried to raise livestock, they would gasp and choke and die before they'd seen a second dawn (or they were stillborn, often taking their mothers, which the farmer had usually bought with the last of her coins and hope, with them). Success and happiness were foreign to her, and she had forgotten what it was like to go to bed unhungry. All she had was her hunger and her farm—and her farm, as far as she could tell, wanted her to starve.

Her struggles weren't due to laziness or a lack of skill. She had been raised on farms, her parents and grandparents had been farmers, and she knew as much about crops and soil and animal husbandry as anyone else in the valley where she lived. She worked hard and long, under a harsh sun and in bone-soaking rain. When she'd exhausted every technique she'd learned from her family, she turned to books, experiments, strange fertilisers, none of which helped. No enemy had salted her fields or cursed her name, for she had no enemies—she was liked and respected by all the people of the valley. There was no reason for her farm's failure. Yet her crops continued to rot, and her livestock continued to die.

Six years after her parents died and left her on the farm alone—six years of hungry, dismal failure—a black storm blew over the mountains and into the valley. Thunder crashed through walls; lightning licked trees; the wind grew fangs and chewed barns into splinters. Worst of all was the rain. Oceans of freezing, sideways-blown water heaved onto the farms of the valley, turning paddocks into lakes and ponds into seas. These wide waters soon swelled the river that ran through

the valley, hastening its current, carrying away topsoil, crops, herds, fences and outbuildings. People took shelter in their stone houses as animals died outside in the chocolate flood. Behind their old, thick walls, they were safe. Everyone was accounted for—everyone but the unlucky farmer.

After the storm stopped raging it took a full day before the floodwaters began to drop. Only then could the people of the valley venture out, in fishing boats and on upturned dining tables, to try to salvage their property. It was at the dusk of this day—a day of sorrowful searching, of fishing with colanders and paddling with hatstands—that they found her. As the weak sun dipped, a group of teenagers, piloting an ancient coracle, saw something strange in the limbs of an old, leafless oak. Paddling nearer, they saw that it was the unlucky farmer, dead or unconscious, her body draped over the branches like a nightgown hung out to dry. But more curious than this was what they saw next: a huge heron, the colour of rain, suddenly emerging from the flood in a fast, steep flight, leaving not even a ripple on the water beneath it. With a languid flap of its wings it came to rest in the crown of the oak, standing over the unlucky farmer, as if on guard.

The teenagers brought their boat to a stop. This water-risen heron was unlike any other they'd seen before—any other heron, any other living creature. Its blue-grey feathers were so pale, they claimed later, that they could see straight through the bird. Its body was pierced by strands of dusky light, and the tree was clearly visible directly behind its sharp, moist beak.

A ghost, one claimed. A mirage, said another. But before they could get closer the heron hunched its neck, flapped its

wings and leapt into the sky. A thick spray of water fell from its wings, far more water than could have been resting on its feathers. Then it disappeared into the remnants of the storm.

The teenagers watched it vanish, not sure what they were seeing, not trusting their tired eyes and waterlogged minds. At that moment the unlucky farmer rolled in her cradle of branches, coughed out a spurt of black mud and sucked at the air with great need, great violence.

THE FLOODS RECEDED. Fences were mended, barns rebuilt, crops resown. Within a few months the valley's farms were back to normal. All except for the fields of the unlucky farmer.

Where once her wheat had refused to sprout, it now blanketed the fields in shining rows of blond. Where her rice had rotted, it now surged forth from the water, pearly, fat and firm. And where her animals had died, they now grew and frolicked—goats, cattle, geese, chickens, every creature under her care. The success of her farm came fast and hard, and soon she was hiring labourers to build fences, harvest grain, herd flocks, which helped the farm flourish yet more. Her prosperity grew; her troubles became memories; a warm pulse began throbbing in her stomach.

On cloudless nights the great heron could be seen flying above her fields, cold rain spraying from its wings, the moon shining clear and bright through its feathers.

Over the seasons her farm continued to thrive, becoming the most successful in the valley. She built herself a large stone house, but that was the only concession she made to her newfound wealth. The rest of her money she shared among the community. The lessons she'd learned while poor—lessons of respect, of kindness, of compassion—she refused to abandon. She helped pay for roads, bridges, a school. Hunters were given free use of her land, fishermen free range of her creeks. Travellers came to know that they were always welcome in her house, that they were sure to find a warm fire and a dry bed waiting for them. She sponsored bright students; she paid for doctors to visit the valley; she hosted grand feasts at the end of every harvest.

Still the heron soared overhead.

Her neighbours were pleased for her, happy that her years of struggle had been rewarded with good fortune. They weren't surprised that she was sharing her riches. She had been a good person while poor; why wouldn't she be a good person now? All were happy; all were content. All but the son of her closest neighbour.

PERHAPS IF HE had been older, he wouldn't have done it. With more winters in his bones he may have been kinder, less jealous, more contemplative. Or maybe not—inside this boy there was a bitter kink, and perhaps no amount of time or experience could have untwisted it.

Where the other valley folk saw well-deserved luck, the neighbour's son saw unfairness. He was too young to remember how desperate she had been; all he knew was that she prospered while he and his father grew hungry. He watched her fields teem with golden wheat as his father's, stripped of topsoil, lay fallow. He heard the music and laughter of her feasts at the same time as he heard the growling of his stomach. He saw her bridges gleam in the sun; he saw the clever students lugging books in and out of her school; he watched oxen drag ploughs through her fertile earth. And every evening, above all these sights and sounds, he saw the ghostly heron.

With each stroke of the bird's wings his vision of unfairness turned closer to envy. Envy grew to anger, and anger gave way to rage. One night he felt that he couldn't wake up another morning to see the shame on his father's face, the shame and the hunger and the sorrow and the misery, against the backdrop of their neighbour's wealth. In the darkest part of that night he thrashed in his sheets as his thoughts twisted in on themselves, losing logic, churning sick. None of it had happened before the heron appeared; if the heron went, so too would the injustice. When he heard his father's breathing steady into a familiar pattern he got up, found his pocketknife and left the house.

The night was cold and clear. He walked beneath a sky studded with stars. The wind pawed at his clothes as he reached

the farm border, vaulted the fence and crossed their neighbour's fields. No dogs barked; no doors opened. He kept marching, the rattling chain of his thoughts just holding together, loose but strong, dragging him forward. Two fields he crossed, then three. A bridge. A creek. Another field, and he had reached his destination: the leafless oak that had saved his neighbour during the storm.

Other children had told him the heron roosted here—children who had been to his neighbour's feasts, who'd watched the bird settle into its branches. The tree was empty now, but the boy wasn't in a hurry. He waited. Hours passed. The wind rushed, raking ice across his cheeks. His legs cramped; his hands shook; his eyes streamed. Still he waited, until finally, in the hour before dawn, the bird shot out of a nearby stream and came to perch on a high branch of the tree. Water trickled from beneath its talons. The boy could see straight through its body, although the bright points of starlight in the sky were rendered watery and distorted. The rage he'd felt earlier came over him again, hot and foul, and he began creeping towards the tree. If the heron noticed him it made no sign, not even when the boy had scaled the lower branches and was closing in on its roost.

When he was within reach of the heron, the boy paused. The wind was as strong as ever, yet the bird's feathers weren't moving. He wondered at this for a moment, at wings that could use the air but not feel it; but again he felt the burn of his rage. He drew the knife, snapped open the blade. Rearing up, he balanced on the branch using his feet alone, and readied to grasp the heron's neck with his free hand while he cut its throat with the knife. Yet when he reached out to grab at the plumage,

he felt no feathers—only a sensation of cold liquid, of wetness, of running ice. And with it came sudden feelings of guilt and sorrow, sensations that plunged from his fingers up his arm, through his veins, into his guts and lungs and heart. Only then, in the howling of the wind and the fullness of the night, did the heron turn its face to his.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING brought unseasonal heat. Harsh light blanched the fields of the valley and warm winds stripped moisture from the grass. The once-unlucky farmer found her neighbour's son wandering in one of her farthest fields. He was moaning, sounds of great pain and horror, and when she approached him she saw that his eyes had been torn out. Dark blood had flowed down his cheeks and neck, spreading in blooms across his shirt, blood that had dried and caked into flaky cherry masses, even as fresh blood continued to pulse from the empty caves in his face. Viscera, veins and cartilage winked out at her, grey-white-blue, from amid the redness in the sockets. He was limping, too; one of his ankles and both his wrists were injured, as if he had fallen from a great height.

She lifted the bleeding boy in her arms and ran him to her neighbour, shouting for help from her farmhands on the way. A doctor soon arrived to treat the boy. He would survive, this doctor later told the people gathered in her neighbour's house, and he was lucky to have been found. In this heat, with no sight, with so much blood lost, he would have collapsed and died within hours.

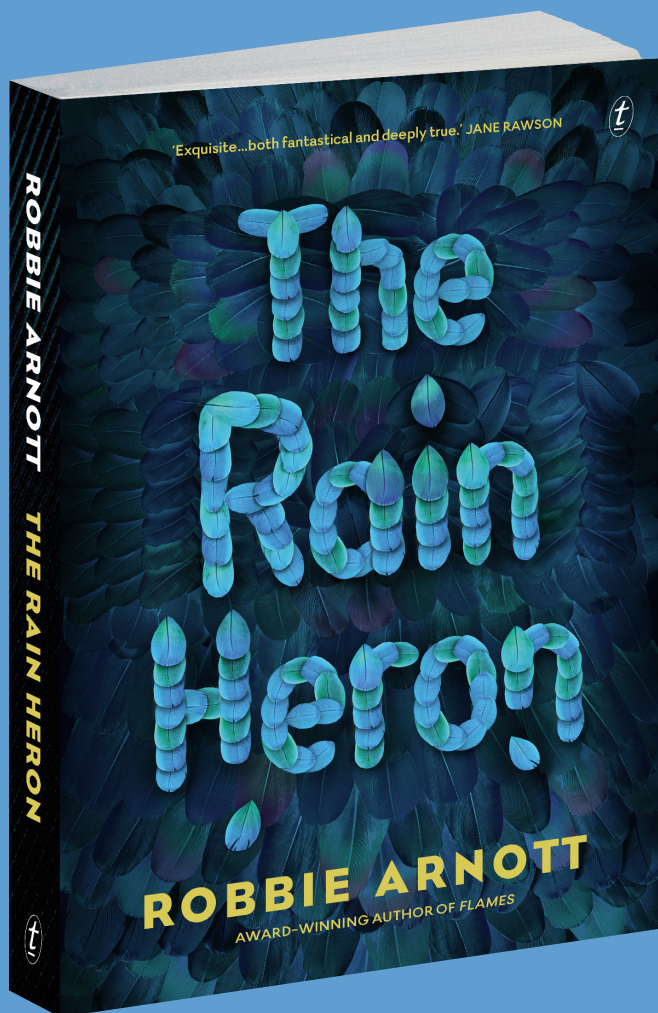
The boy never spoke of what had happened to him; if pressed, he would say that he couldn't remember, that he must have been sleepwalking. Not many people believed him, least of all his father, but as he recovered they relented, largely because they were consumed by a larger problem: the heat that had come the morning he'd been discovered, blind and bleeding, had not left. Instead it had grown hotter and stronger, pelting down endless rays of skin-burning, crop-roasting, pond-parching light. It was supposed to be mid-autumn—cool, rainy, gusty—yet

the valley was a furnace. Dams emptied in weeks. Livestock thinned, panted, died. Irrigation ditches were dug, which only served to weaken the flow and depth of the river while the ditch-running water evaporated before it hit the fields. No farm was spared; nobody escaped the heatwave.

Worst hit of all was the once-unlucky farmer. She had the healthiest fields, so she lost the largest crop. She had the biggest herds, so she lost the most water to their endless thirsts and the most livestock to the drought that followed. After her crops and livestock she lost her farmhands, her wealth, her security. She should have seen it coming, some muttered. After all, they said, nobody had spotted the great heron since the first morning of the heatwave. They sympathised with her, but they all had losses and problems of their own, and they could not help her.

AFTER A FULL season of heat the twice-unlucky farmer woke one morning to see barren fields in every direction, scattered all over with dust and sun-bleached bones. The air shimmered as it rose from the dry ground, distorting everything she saw. She looked up to the wide pale sky and saw nothing but an endless dome of blue-yellow burn. She listened for the harsh cry of the heron and heard nothing but the drone of flies. She reached for a shovel, thinking she might dig a well, but its metal handle, heated by the sun, singed her palm. She threw it to the ground, clutching her hand.

The burn became infected. The valley's doctor had left weeks earlier, and a fever took hold first in her flesh, then in her mind. She wandered through her dead fields, raving incoherently, frothing at the mouth, pus oozing from her hand. Days later she was found by her neighbour, the father of the blind boy. He had seen her roaming and ranting from his window, and had thought to bring her a jug of water. He discovered her body, broken and still, at the base of the leafless oak.



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