

2017



# Master of Creative Writing

University of Auckland



ARTS



This is my third year convening the MCW at the University of Auckland. Once again, it's been a privilege to work with such talented and dedicated writers – ten novelists, one poet and one creative nonfiction writer.

Many of the writers here are creating stories of Auckland – Green Bay and North Head, Waiheke and Te Atatu Peninsula, hospital wards and cemeteries, pharmacies and police cells, bars and bus stops. Other writers take us further afield, to the dense bush of Fiordland, a fishing village in Croatia, the crowded streets of Shanghai, a road trip in the American South, or a train journey in Kazakhstan.

Many thanks to our Dean of the Arts, Robert Greenberg, for his strong support for our growing creative writing programme, and to Malcolm Campbell, Head of the School of Humanities, for his ongoing generosity in funding this sampler of creative work. I'm grateful, as ever, for the support and energy of my colleague Selina Tusitala Marsh, the new Poet Laureate of New Zealand.

Our warmest thanks of all to Sir James Wallace, provider of two generous scholarships and the largest university creative writing prize in New Zealand. We need more patrons of the arts like Sir James, with his vision, generosity, and commitment to nurturing new voices in our contemporary culture.

### **Paula Morris**

Convenor, Master of Creative Writing  
English and Drama, Faculty of Arts



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# ROSETTA ALLAN

Rosetta spent her formative writing years developing her strengths in the area of poetry. Her first novel, *Purgatory*, was published by Penguin Books in 2014. *Purgatory* was received well, remained on the Nielsen Weekly Bestsellers List for two months, and was selected as an Apple iBook Top Ten Best Reads of 2014. Rosetta was recently the first New Zealand writer in residence at the St Petersburg Art Residency in Russia, and the recipient of a Sir James Wallace Masters of Creative Writing Scholarship at the University of Auckland. Currently she is working on her second novel.

*The Crow King* is an historical novel set within three timeframes: 1937 – the exile of the entire population of Koyrosaram (Soviet Koreans) from Vladivostok, into Central Asia; 1975 – Antonina Sharm, a descendent of the deported Koreans is abducted, then returned; and 1993 – Antonina is a student at the St Petersburg Art Academy, Communism has collapsed, the rouble is in free-fall, gangs are running amok, and Antonina is trying to support herself to finish her education at the academy, and discovers she is pregnant. Meanwhile, the old woman who stole Antonina as a child returns – not for Antonina this time, but for Antonina’s child.

## Novel extract

### *Red leather gloves*

Alma-Ata, Kazakhstan – 1975

The first time Katerina Moon stole a child she simply walked up to the bedroom window and held out her arms.

‘Gaiya oneora,’ Katerina whispered, not sure if the child understood the language of the old land; but she did, and she obeyed, shifting the warmth of her blankets to the side for Katerina to pluck her from the bed.

Just that morning Katerina had crossed the tarmac from her flight in from Ulaanbaatar. There was no baggage to collect—a single shoulder bag contained all she needed, including a Mongolian sheepskin coat for the child. Nothing to alarm security, and within minutes she had cleared customs before it was clogged. A young Russian with ‘taxi’

hand-drawn in large yellow letters on a makeshift lanyard looked unconvincing, but he was eager, and said he would get her to the city in quick time.

The moment Katerina settled in to the back seat of his car, she felt the tingle in the ends of her fingers. By the time she reached the child's window, the inside of her gloves were damp from pinhead-pearls of blood that formed on the soft pads of her fingertips. This was how her body alerted her of danger—her own unique warning system, and although she'd rather have chills that ran the length of her arms and legs, or shivers up the back of her neck, she was always grateful for the alarm that let her know whenever the Jackal was drawing near. It was inevitable that he would find her. She had come a long way from the protection of her shrine to risk connection with the child, and it was impossible not to leave some trace of the blood that seeped from her fingers ever since the spring of '37. Smudged red prints tracked her path whenever she didn't wear the red leather gloves, marks that no one else noticed, and neither did they believe her claim of the lone Jackal that persisted in hunting her down. But Katerina knew he was real. She had seen him cross her path from time to time trying to pick her scent. On the odd occasion she had heard him too—his howl muted by distance but perfectly unbroken, reaching her on the stillness of a moonless night.

There weren't many Koreans in Alma-Ata with the surname Sharm, so the child's mother wasn't difficult to find. Her apartment was one in a block of gloomy, repetitious medium-rise buildings near the centre of the city. An old woman sat in a portable kiosk on the corner. Vendors like her appeared to be everywhere—bowed over on their knees in bus stations, scarves pulled over their faces, invoking prayers for a coin, or positioned outside cafes watching spoons being lifted from bowls of hot soup, or on corners under a stretch of oilcloth strung between a metal frame with a dappling of assorted goods spread across the table. Matches, vodka, cigarettes, fizzy drinks, and a few other necessities. Katerina reached for a can of Pepsi, and dropped her ruble note on the table.

'Vodka?' the old woman offered. 'Cigarettes?'

'No,' Katerina said, and waited for her change.

One by one the old woman dropped the kopeks on the counter, prolonging her complaint of having to fish out change from her purse. It was a common complaint – everyone needed small change for quick transactions, and Katerina wasn't going to leave hers behind. Without the courtesy of a change dish, Katerina was forced to drag the coins across the Formica top and drop them into her cupped palm without removing her gloves—careful not to show the difficulty of such a small task when her fingers were ringing.

The path that led to the back entrance of the child's apartment was no longer concrete, but a slick of compressed snow, smooth from tread, and although Katerina was well used to walking in the snow, she held her hand against the walls of buildings when she had to make room for others to pass.



From where Katerina leaned against the concrete of the alley wall, she could see the child's apartment situated on the ground floor, where it had easy access to a large courtyard with trees that were no doubt pretty in the spring. But it was not spring. The trees were all barren, and against the snow-powdered tiers of apartment floors their branches looked like black fleshless limbs—more dead than alive in the milky evening light.

Katerina had been cold all day watching the mother and child come and go from the building. The last hour of waiting took all the resolve she had to stay put, to stay quiet, and out of sight. There were moments she thought about the old vendor and the vodka, but the old woman had scraped her kiosk along the icy path that crossed the opening of the alley long before the day had started dying away.

No one passed her in the alley. No children played in the courtyard. The large shawl she wore over her head draped down and around her neck hiding the details of her face. The face of anonymity, she hoped. The face of all babushkas in their thick winter coats, shawls and galoshes, eyes down, praying that no spears of icicles would fall from the guttering above and hit them on the head.

When the child's mother finally appeared, casting a shadow against the curtains of the bedroom window, Katerina felt the adrenalin rise like mercury in her chest. She patted her hands together to curb the excitement and looked around the courtyard to see who else could view that particular bedroom window. All the curtains of the five floors were drawn against the cold and had been since she'd arrived. Most windows were dressed in respectful neutral tones, the light shining through in an amber glow, but there were the few that burst with the colours of the times. The child's curtains were one of these – a clash of purple, red, pink, and white. Recurring geometric patterns that could have been flowers, or kidneys, or kissing creatures. Ugly. But at least they weren't paisley. Katerina had a passionate dislike for paisley. She didn't really know why.

Katerina tried to deepen her breaths to calm herself down, but it was difficult when the air was so cold. Even through the fabric of her shawl the inhaled air stung her throat. She waited, long enough for the mother to deliver a bedtime story and a kiss. When the main light went out and only a dim light tinted the corner of the curtain, Katarina walked up to the bedroom window and slid it open.

The child peered up at her from the head of a double bed nestled against the outer wall, just beneath the ledge of the window, with pillows that were smudged with mud on all four corners of their slips. It made Katerina want to laugh. Such old and tragic superstitions, yet there was a time when she thought the remnant of her own land would save her too. Hers was a handful of soil from the banks of Golden Horn Bay; wrapped inside a shawl her Russian lover had given her. She

carried it tied around her waist on board the train that transported the Korean community of Vladivostok into exile. The dirt was her gritty token of the place where Alek last kissed her, and she used it to filter the rancid pooling water of Ushtobe when the snow melted away.

Her heart still ached to think of that sweet condensed desire confined within herself. Alek. The peppermint lick at the end of his cigarettes whenever she stole a puff, his moist breath, gentle on the side of her neck when they made love, the cologne that smelt of old leather and seawater, the hardened military stare that softened when they were alone, away from the surveillance of his regiment, the suspicions of her husband, the judgement of her community.

# ROSE CARLYLE

Rose was born and raised in Auckland. She studied law at the University of Otago and practised law in Auckland for ten years.

In 2009 Rose began crewing on small yacht expeditions to New Zealand's subantarctic islands, and following this, she circumnavigated New Zealand with her husband and three young children in their own sailboat. The family moved on board their yacht and sailed across the Indian Ocean to Africa. Rose now lives in Auckland with four teenagers.

*Out of Sight* is a novel set in contemporary New Zealand and Iran. The story involves three young people whose lives intersect in unexpected ways: Parisa, an overprotected Kiwi girl who has forgotten her mother and her Iranian heritage, and Julius and Olga, an alluring brother and sister who have lived a wild, itinerant life in Africa. In this extract, Parisa has travelled with her mother to an Iranian oasis to meet her great-grandmother. Parisa wanders into the desert, seeking memories of a younger brother whom she last saw when she was very young, at the beach.

## Novel extract

I woke late the next morning. Earlier, the call to prayer had probed my dreams, but I had slept on, and now I was alone in the room. It wasn't quite a room, since a wall and part of the roof was missing, which allowed a hint of breeze, a zephyr, to tease me from outside. My mother had told me during the drive last night that it never rained here. Roofs were only for shade.

This would have been the night to have dreamed of Marc. In my ancestral home, sleep might have unravelled the knots in my memory at last, and brought the child from the photos and videotape to life. But it hadn't happened, and now I was awake.

In the sweltering day, it was an act of will to wrap myself in my *manteau* and headscarf. I looked into the other rooms of the house. No one was home. I found a tap and, on impulse, soaked my scarf in it, and then filled my water bottle and headed outside.

I stood in a narrow road on the upper edge of the town, or rather, village. The dwellings were clustered

on a gentle slope, so that I could see all of them from here. The village seemed to be built of mud, both dwellings and roads. There were only a few houses between me and the edge of civilisation, where, without ceremony, the desert began. Date palms towered above me, along with a lone minaret. Garmeh seemed taller than it was wide.

There was no sign of my family. The village was deserted except for two sinewy men who were loading a wheelbarrow with mud bricks. How could they labour in this oven-like heat? If Auckland ever got half so hot, men would knock off for the day, or at least strip down to a loose pair of shorts. These men wore long-sleeved shirts, trousers and formal shoes.

In the quiet, small animals scuttled by unseen, lizards perhaps. I sheltered in the shade and breathed in the greenness of the palms. Beneath their lofty crowns, pomegranate trees flourished with ripening fruit, and under them were crammed plots of crisp cauliflower and broccoli. Had my great-grandmother lived her whole life in this tiny village? As a young woman, had she planted these pomegranates?

The vegetation burst out everywhere between the mudbrick buildings, as dewy and verdant as a rainforest. It seemed impossible—there was no shortage of sunshine here, but water? My mother had said that the town's supply flowed downhill in the open air from a spring inside a cave, and was remarkable for its coldness. She had promised to take me to see it, the wellspring that had nourished the bodies of my ancestors for maybe thousands of years. Now I could see the canals at the streetside, streaming with the life-giving element. I would only need to walk uphill, upstream, to find the source.

But I didn't head that way. I didn't think about where I was going. Leaving Shiraz had wrenched my heart into a limp, worn-out rag, and in the chaos of loneliness, my grief for my brother had welled up again. Of course grief would recur, but did it have to come, each time, so fresh and raw? I almost felt that Marc was out there, in the hazy wilderness. Something drew me, something dragged me towards it. I don't know why I did it. I pulled on my sandals, and my feet took me along the dusty road, and now I was in the great land of which my mother had warned me. *Dasht-e Kevir*. The desert.

The sky was blue and hot and silent, and the silence sank into the shimmering air. All around my feet was white salt, stretching like a geometric plane to a horizon of shadowy mountains. The immensity of it lured me on, and I fell into the rhythm of a journey.

After a time, the blaze of azure above seemed to daub the salt with a dawn pink. Here, the illusion of unending sameness resolved into variety. The sand-salt, baked into hard pan, had split into crazy tiles, like a synaptic map. I shared the madman's obsession with minutiae. I wanted to admire each square inch of ground. They were like cells, like the neurons of a dreamer's brain.

Garmeh was far behind me now, an explosion of green, an impossibility of life in that scene of death. Its fertility, soft and sumptuous, stood defiant against salt and sky and sun. An oasis. Was it some racial memory that made me feel now the ancient traveller's longing for the caravanserai? Or perhaps all human beings, from our prehistory in Africa, know the urge, the need, to keep on, to drive the camel onward, to reach water before the sun kills us all.

The distant date palms glimmered, and I turned away from them. Were they only a mirage? Further on, grasses lay like slain soldiers, dry and dead in the summer. I couldn't imagine how they could ever have grown here where rain was unknown. But here was a desert flower, as pink as a maiden, blooming like springtime in Paris. I stooped, and breathed its honeyed fragrance.

The downy horizon beckoned. This vast salt plain—it must once have been a sea. The ocean, evanescent as all things, had vanished under the force of the desert sun. And the seabed it left behind was the source of all things, and perhaps, the end of all things for me. Because without the ocean, there is only beach, from sky to sky. Here I was, where everything had begun. The beach.

I walked on. There was no sweat. Just as it had dried up the ocean, the sun of Iran sucked the moisture from my skin. My water bottle was empty now and my headscarf was dry. My tongue fused with my palate, my eyeballs rasped against their lids, and the last touch of reason throbbed through my brain, and withered. Drink. Drink. I pressed my hands to my cheeks. They were flaming, burning, ablaze.

I would die here. The desert had called me home. They would find my corpse, stretched out on the salt-baked earth.

I turned one way then another, searching for that far off speck of green. It was glistening now, numinous, alive with heat. And I prayed that what I saw was real.

First my right foot, then my left. I must not stop. I asked my mother for water, but she was not there. I cried, but no tears came from my arid eye sockets.

And now he took my hand. I could not see him by now; there was only a peripheral flash of red hair. My eyes saw only the green of Garmeh. I felt a cool hand in mine, and I knew it was that same companion who is always with us when we dream. Maybe it was an infant, or maybe a great tall boy of fifteen, who led me back. He was a counterpart to my life, one who made me feel whole. The one who sought adventure, who sought fire, who sought great rebellion, while I sought peace, home, water. He had perished, and I would never get him back. But I would never forget him. Never again.

At last, at last, I was near the shade of the palms. I had veered above the village, further up the hill, but someone had come to meet me, someone smaller than my mother, older, much older, hunched inside her chador. The rocks were

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split open before me, and from them, iridescent and blue, gushed the spring. The crone stood, as still as stone, by the cave, her ruined face a testament to bleak survival. I saw by her medusa gaze that this was the ancestress of Olga, and of me, but she greeted me with blessings. I fell grovelling in the dust, and sank my burning face into the sweet canal. Gasping cold, like snowmelt. I drank, while the sun, the rose of the sky, stood vigil. Like the ancient people of the desert, I worshipped the water. I was saved.

# MEAGAN FRANCE

Meagan France was born and raised in Perth, Western Australia to runaway New Zealand parents. She studied Politics at Murdoch University and went on to work for the West Australian Government researching and compiling policy documents for The Department of Community Development. She moved to Waiheke Island in 2005 and has lived there ever since with her partner and two children. She has been writing fiction for the last three years and her work has been published in *Phantom and Billstickers Café Reader* and *Takabe*. She holds a Sir James Wallace Master of Creative Writing Scholarship.

## Novel Extract

2017

Leo heard the door and pulled himself up. He sat on the side of his bed, listening. A female muttering, sinister and indistinct: it was the shadow woman who stole from him. There was another voice, too. The little boy who laughed and lured him into play and mischief, his call distant and far away. Leo knew them both, those and two others. For they had been with him since he was a child.

Metal springs poked through the pit of his mattress. Leo pulled at some of the foam. His mother insisted that he let her replace it but Leo didn't like new things. He grabbed at his stomach. Did this body belong to him? Its form had changed so much over the years. He used to be lean and treasured and light. He used to hear all the songs of the universe.

*The Shadow Woman* is a contemporary novel set in Auckland following three adult siblings across continents, islands and divides of time. It is a gritty, dysfunctional family drama about trauma, the power of blood relationships, and the search for belonging.

The bang at the door, a second knock, a call he should respond to.

'Coming,' Leo whispered. He heard his voice as if through water, subdued and reticent, like that of a shy child.

He skirted the single high mound of clothing on the bedroom floor, and stepped over shards of loose tobacco and ash. On his way down the hall he passed a shelf housing books he could no longer read and a red flowering bromeliad. The books held hidden codes and frightening messages. But he loved the plant, watering and tending to it each day. Plants had voices too; they radiated sounds only he could hear. Sometimes he heard them crying.

Sunlight pulsed behind orange panels of textured glass. It was high summer, but Leo felt cold with sweat. He opened the door to Bede standing on the concrete step with his backpack. Just the med run, same as every other night. It must be around seven, later than Leo had realised.

'Evening, friend,' Bede nodded at him. Bede with his heavy grey black beard and dark knowing eyes, dressed in black jeans, a singlet and leather Converse. He looked hot as if he'd been walking in the sun. Leo felt dead just looking at him.

In the living room Bede sat down on a dirty couch stacked with crusted cereal bowls. Ants crawled in thin lines towards the sweet milk debris. Leo could smell his own perspiration, a peculiar scent that troubled him. Bede passed over the blister pack of meds and chuckled.

'You guys aren't much for clean, are you? Neither am I.'

Leo had lived with Gabriel for coming up three years. They shared a two-bedroom house on Waiheke Island, not far from Leo's mother's place. Gabriel was much like him, perhaps quieter. That's why they'd been paired up.

'Sorry man, you know the score, I have to watch.'

Bede followed Leo to the kitchen. The sink was loaded with more unwashed dishes. Used tea bags clogged the drain and were left strewn across the bench. One had burst open, the gritty earthed innards smeared along the plastic surface. Leo reached for a mug and filled it with water from the tap.

Gabriel's two-minute noodles escaped a black bin bag on the bench. He only ate the chicken ones, nothing else. Leo's price-itemized shopping list was next to the electric jug, written in lead, in meticulous cursive handwriting. He liked to cook. Food comforted Leo and created order. Once a week his mother took him shopping at Countdown. He looked forward to it and spent time writing detailed meal plans and searching the Countdown catalogue for specials. By now he knew how to wring every cent out of his budget and his mother.

Leo pressed open the silver blister pack with nicotine-stained fingertips. Bede lingered behind while he swallowed the pill. Sometimes Leo felt angry that he'd let himself be tamed by this routine. In less than an hour he'd be floored, put



to rest in the vacuous med void, and when he woke he'd have to fight to break through it. But he'd given up on resistance. He no longer spat the pills out and hid them in a vial in his room.

Clozapine. It was the drowning, the chemical force that muzzled his voices and bodily sensations. Nothing stopped them, though. Nothing at all. He had tried numerous times to alert everyone to that: Lin his new psychiatrist, Helen his caseworker, his mother—but it didn't deter them. Leo often felt perplexed by that. Because aside from the minimal relief Clozapine gave him, it made him feel so very sad.

'Where's Gab?' Bede asked.

Leo gazed out the kitchen window. There was blue sea in the beyond. The death call sang out from the foam of white waves. Gabriel's turn next. Two domesticated schizophrenics heavily sedated for life in the community. At least his brain still worked; they couldn't take that from him. Leo saw truths.

'He's out the back smoking.'

Then he padded away from Bede and the kitchen towards his room. There, Leo untied his shoelaces and lay down again on the twisted green sheets. A white rat scuttled across the ceiling. That was normal. Veronica lived here with him some days too. She stopped and looked at him with red pointed eyes.

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His house on Kimberly Street was next door to a Presbyterian Church. The heat of the day warped outside the fly screen, a solid lingering mirage of wavering matter. They were playing with the rat. Leo had his head bent in close to Michael's, showing him how to hold the squirming white animal. Music from the Sunday service floated through the glass shutters of their playroom. The room was tacked onto the side of the house, piled with old toys and dress ups that smelt like earth. The unpolished wood floors felt rough against the soles of Leo's feet.

Julia burst into the playroom, wearing a dress bright with flowers.

'You don't do it like that,' she said, snatching Veronica from his hand. 'Give her to me, I'll show him.'

'Give her back!' Leo yelled. 'I promise I wasn't hurting her. I was showing him.'

He lunged forward and pushed Julia over with tremendous force. The rat fell out of her hand and Leo stormed into her bedroom. He swept Julia's porcelain dolls from their cabinet onto the floor, then pulled the heavy mattress off her bed and tried to rip the sheets apart with his hands. All the while, piano notes drifted like falling water down the long hallway.



# MEREDITH LALANDE

When Meredith was five she and her mother left New Zealand to live in England for a year. There she visited Bath and became enraptured with the Ancient Romans. She brought back to Auckland a love of history which eventually turned into a First Class Honours in Ancient History at the University of Auckland. She has worked in several bookshops and has written stories in her spare time since she can remember.

## Novel Extract

‘So you’re back?’

Mazie’s father stands in the kitchen with sections of the paper spread across the marble countertop. Square reading glasses. The energy-efficient kitchen spotlights are too bright for the dusk outside, dulling the pastel light. His eyes flicker between me and his glossy phone. The “so” must be his idea of a conversation opener. He looks older than I remember, weathered into a lean cliché.

I give him the same blank stare I gave the doctors.

‘Yes, she’s home, isn’t it wonderful?’ Mazie’s mother moves around us, rustling, sing-song like the birds outside, pulling a tin of rooibos chai out of the cupboard and leaning the kettle under the tap. ‘I’m making vegetarian lasagne,’ she tells me, “and there’s a beef one for you,” she tells him.

‘Great.’ Mazie’s vegan not vegetarian but, within such disconnection, I hardly care what goes into this body.

‘It *is* wonderful.’ He’s moving closer now, coming around to coil, all warmth and silhouette.

*The Long Fall Up* is Meredith’s first novel. It explores the complex relationship between two childhood best friends who have drifted apart. When, after attempting to commit suicide, Catherine wakes up in hospital inside Mazie’s body, the line between the two girls begins to blur. In order to make sense of her strange new reality, Catherine is forced to re-examine her memories of their friendship. In the following excerpt, Catherine has just returned to the house of Mazie’s parents.

*Dad*, I ought to say, *Daddy*. Two playdough bodies being pressed unthinkingly together under harsh light. I've never said "daddy" in my life.

I retreat to Mazie's room with my cup of tea. Facing south-east, her room looks almost the same as it did when we first met. There's only the empty parade between her second-story window and the beach. Ship horns boom. You can never see the sun go down, just indigo thickening from left to right until you're blinking in the dark and feel you could run your fingers through the harbour lights and scatter civilisation like phosphorescence. She never closed the curtains, just turned off the lights.

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'We should go for a swim.'

I looked across at her doubtfully. It wasn't summer anymore. The black water would be cold. She sprawled on the bed, her breasts half exposed, leaning forward on her elbows, sock-clad feet swinging in helicopter circles. 'I didn't bring my togs and... you're with Rupert now.'

She rolled her eyes. 'So?'

I'd disappointed her. Whatever. 'So?'

'So he's a boy. It's different.' She sat up, seeing the look on my face, and adjusted her singlet.

I couldn't determine which connection she thought counted for less, but agreed to go swimming because I didn't want to argue. If I were a boy, I thought, as we held hands on the moon-cold sand, would it be different? It felt like a rock beneath the obsidian water, a sharp unseen thing but, really, it couldn't have been more obvious.

'Did you... you know...?' I didn't want to say it.

'Sex?' She laughed. 'It isn't what you think – instinctual or anything. Actually, it's pretty awful. It still stings when I pee.'

'What, really?'

She shrugged, stepping out of her shorts. 'The truth is... I slept with him because his house is haunted.'

'Be serious.' I was reluctant to take off my t-shirt — what if a car came by? They could see us easily from the road. There was only a lip of beach remaining, so precarious we couldn't leave our clothes on the sand.

'Okay, maybe just his futon. No, *listen*, don't make that face, it was a cat ghost...'

I was making the face. 'A mattress haunted by a cat?'

She crouched in the black shallows, head down, her back like a cut almond. 'You don't have to believe me. Anyway, it only makes sense for domestic cats to haunt pieces of furniture, that's where they spend most of their time.'

'All right, what did it look like?' She had to be lying.

'It didn't look like anything. I *felt* it. You know, lying on me, purring, kneading the sleeping bag, settling in for the long haul. Anyway, I freaked out – who wants to sleep on a haunted couch? So, I ended up sharing with Rupert. You would have done the same.'

'Did you tell him about the cat?'

'Don't be stupid! He would have thought I was crazy.'

'You *are* crazy. Shit, it's freezing!'

Mazie laughed again as we edged into the sea. After a few minutes it was still freezing, but I got my joints to move, covering my chest, hissing as the cold ate into my nipples. In daylight I could convince myself I could swim the harbour channel but now, afraid to trust this vast, inky creature, I didn't even want to lift my feet off the shells to let it carry me.

Trembling, we abandoned swimming and our clammy bodies clung together. The light at the distant water's edge seemed like redshift at the opening of a vast black hole; the city bleeding into the sky and obscuring the stars.

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The breath opens like a wound, lungs ripping through layers of subconscious, breaching the dream in a nauseating flip book exit. The port lights blink beyond my pillow, slurred luminaries of a distant galaxy.

'Breathe, idiot!'

It's the ghost of my voice and I close my eyes again, trying to forge a breath that doesn't stutter, planting my cheek into a damp pool of drool. I can hear her silence, the way she would curl against me, a tangle of warm legs, and stop breathing.

The dream is dissolving, but Mazie is still here, her small body heaving back to consciousness after I've yelled at it to remember how to bloody function. I once looked up sleep apnea. It was something that was supposed to happen to men over a certain age and weight.

*It's fine, sometimes my brain just forgets, that's all. No big deal.* That's what she would say.

*What if you never woke up?*

*I've never thought about it.* I can see her shrug as she rolls onto her back, placing my hand in the cavity between her ribs and brushing my fingers over her soft stomach. It's just her fingers now, hers and mine. They cross that same expanse, the five streams of a delta leading down to the sea.



# AMELIA LANGFORD

Amelia's collection of comic essays is titled *Liz Taylor, My Family, & Other Misfits*. She considers 'misfit' an affectionate term — a word that denotes a non-conformist or a rebel. The collection follows the misadventures of her hopeful yet hapless narrator and her eccentric family. It traverses a wide range of subjects including unrequited love in Japan, a family road trip to New Orleans that doesn't turn out as expected, her brother's mysterious love of 80s reggae rub-a-dub, and the fallibility of memory. At heart, it is a story of what happens when romantic expectations meet reality.

Although her material is autobiographical, the pieces are not 'memoir' in any traditional sense of the word. Amelia is more interested in developing an absurdist tone rather than a sense of realism. And her ultimate aim is always to entertain the reader.

Amelia is a writer and journalist who has worked in print and broadcasting. She studied English Literature and Media Studies at Victoria University and later completed a graduate diploma in Journalism at Massey University. She is currently based in Auckland, working for Radio New Zealand, but loves to travel and meet eccentric characters for essay material. She is also a dedicated fan of Hollywood legend Elizabeth Taylor. Amelia is the recipient of the Copyright Licensing New Zealand scholarship.

## Excerpt

My brother has asked me to pick him up from Auckland's International Airport. He's been touring his brand of 80s-inspired reggae in Mexico and America. When I drive into the airport pick up area, I realise that we should have made a meeting point. His last message to me had said his phone battery was going.

But it doesn't take long to spot him. He's waiting by the bus stop near the end of the terminal and easy to recognise in his usual street uniform of grey marl, fading jeans, and blue converse sneakers. He's paired that with a baseball cap and dark sunglasses. He looks like a tall, lanky American. An arrogant one.

I park on the bus stop's yellow lines and lean down to pop open the boot. While Tom is putting his bags in the Nissan, a middle-aged man in a high-visibility vest appears out of nowhere and approaches the car. He looks like he's angling for a photo of my rego. Tom gets in the car and I put my foot down on the accelerator as he's still shutting the passenger door.

'You can't park here,' the man yells at us.

'Sorry,' I mouth in an exaggerated manner.

It's only after we've spent five minutes complaining about the parking options that I remember to say happy birthday.

'Yeah, thanks,' Tom says. 'I almost managed to avoid it by timing my flights so I was in a different time zone but I just missed out by a day.'

'What's so wrong with celebrating your birthday?'

'It's just unnecessary. Something humans feel the need to draw attention to.'

'Fair enough. Well, let's at least get a coffee to celebrate.'

During the drive into the city, my brother complains about some Mexican music promoters who didn't pay him for a gig. Apparently, the guy responsible for selling tickets at the door got a little inebriated and forgot to charge guests entry. The organisers then refused to pay Tom so he is planning to name and shame them on Facebook.

'Oh, don't do that,' I say, 'You don't want to make them angry. Just cut your losses.'

'Are you kidding? They owe me money, there's no way I'm going to just accept that. I'm a professional and should be paid for my music.'

My brother seems outraged. But I worry that he might put himself in danger with the Mexicans even though he's back in New Zealand. Who knows how far their networks reach? We argue about this for some time before moving on, as usual, to our default topics of debate. My brother's pet topic is feminism: Has it gone too far?

'I consider myself a traditional, or second-wave, feminist,' my brother says.

'What?'

'Third-wave feminists have become way too radical. They're demanding everyone check every possible privilege they have and it's getting ridiculous.'

By the time we get to Westmere, I'm ready to talk about something else. I park near a hipster café on the corner of Garnet Road, near Cox's Bay. The place is a little bit pretentious with its high rate of customers with beards and/or tattoos seated against a backdrop of Scandinavian minimalist decor, but Tom doesn't complain, which is out of character.

I find us a table in the sun outside - it's a wintry kind of warm but we've got a view of the sea. A few other people are sitting at tables outside, most with some kind of dog at their feet, and I wonder what they all do for a living. It's mid-morning on a weekday after all. But then I realise my brother and I are here on a weekday morning too so they're probably wondering about us.

I get my pen and little red notebook out and tell Tom I'm hoping to ask him a few questions. I keep it casual and decide against calling it an interview. That might put him off. The waitress comes by and we make our orders. Tom asks



for a triple shot coffee. He seems in a good mood, despite the problem with the Mexicans, so I know I need to make the most of his good humour. There will only be a short window of time.

I grew up knowing that I saved my brother's life. The incident happened at my father's 40th birthday party in Karori, Wellington. My parents were hosting a barbeque on the deck at the back of our two-storied weatherboard house, which overlooked a wild unkempt garden with a dribble of a stream at the bottom and punge trees that my brother and I would use to scale imaginary cliffs.

At the time of the party, as I remember it, I was eight years old and Tom was four. There were lots of adults chatting and drinking on the deck as the afternoon turned into evening. I had invited some friends over from Karori Normal School and we had all put our swimsuits on, ready to have a spa. My brother wanted to join us, to be with the big kids, but my mother said it was time for his bed. I still remember that spa: the reassuring heat of the water, the pungent smell of chemicals, the bubbles.

The next memory I have is some time after the spa with my friends — it's just me walking down the deck towards the spa pool. I see a little person floating in the water, face to the sky. A blonde boy in baby-blue pyjamas with colourful sheep on the front. My brother's eyes are closed and he looks like he's sleeping; just resting on the water. I remember yelling out to the adults. The man barbequing by the spa pool turns around. There are people everywhere — how has my brother managed to avoid detection?

'Tom!'

'Oh my God. John! Look!'

A nurse and doctor both happen to be guests at the party and give Tom CPR until an ambulance arrives. My distraught parents go with my brother to Wellington Hospital and I'm left at home with the last remaining revellers. What a dramatic way to end a party.

In this story, my story, I have always been the heroine. I saved my brother. I saw him floating in the spa pool and alerted the grownups. But years later, when I reminisced about this story with my family, not everyone remembered it that way. My mother didn't have any recollection of me in the story at all.

'What? How could you not remember?' I said to my mother. 'I saved him!'

But she just shook her head. 'Sorry, I've got absolutely no memory of that.' My father has a differing account.

'I remember you calling out "Mum, Tom's in the pool",' he said.

'Really?' I wonder if my father is just humouring me.

My version of the story may well be based on truth. I believe it is. Well, I did. But after hearing different versions, I'm a little unsure. Wellington's now

defunct newspaper, *The Evening Post*, covered the story and thirty years later I find the yellowing newspaper clipping while going through some old boxes of photos and letters in my mother's house. I was relieved to find it: I could finally check the details.

The article is dated January 16, 1987, and titled: 'Near drowning 'real nightmare'' and features an interview with my parents. There's a black and white photo of my brother with a Friar Tuck hairdo standing next to my father, who's in his summer work uniform of short-sleeved shirt, trousers and loose tie. They're posing next to the covered spa pool and my father looks seriously at the camera. The caption reads: 'I thought he was dead'.

Some of the details in the story are surprising. It turns out I was only five at the time and my brother was 19-months-old. My father had been turning 36, my own age now, not 40 as I remember. And what's most disturbing is that my mother is the heroine in the tale.

'Last week, Karori mother Belinda Langford was welcoming visitors to her husband's birthday barbeque when she realised her toddler was not about.

'She rushed down to their outdoor spa pool to find 19-month-old Thomas floating face-down in the swirling water.

'I pulled him straight out and just yelled.'

In my view, the reporter missed a big opportunity here. A five-year-old girl rescuing her baby brother from drowning would have been a much better angle.

Later in the article, my mother tells the reporter: 'I still close my eyes and can see it.'

Below that story, there is a picture of Princess Diana with a four-year-old Prince William. He's wearing a little cap and uniform and the headline reads 'Off to School'. It's a short little article but descriptive.

'At lunch time the prince missed out on the school fare, including traditional treacle pudding and custard, and left for home, clutching a collage he had made during the morning.'

The next page over, there is a small story announcing that Liz Taylor has launched a line of perfume called *Passion*. She is also quoted as saying that she and fellow Hollywood actor George Hamilton have no plans to marry: 'We are very happy as we are. Why do anything to mess it up?'

# MICHAEL LAMB

Originally from Mount Maunganui, Michael has an extensive background as writer, mainly as a copywriter and creative director. He graduated from the University of Auckland where he also edited *Craccum* and bFM's *Monitor* magazine. He self-published the first ever café guide to Auckland, called rather originally *Café*, which included an offbeat fictional narrative. He wrote the NZ Film Commission-funded short film called *The OffSeason* and has directed short films and music videos. He has written for a number of publications including six years as lead film reviewer for the *Sunday Star-Times* and travel writing for the *NZ Herald* amongst others. He now lives in Auckland.

For the MCW course Michael is writing his first collection of poetry, with subjects ranging from natural world poems to poems inspired by local history and family roots.

## **Poems**

### **Mount Taupiri**

The shifting clouds of rock  
as we drive past Mount Taupiri  
you always say, turn down that radio  
they're trying to sleep up there.

*Kia okioki ratou i runga i te rangimarie  
May they rest in peace.*

The shifting clouds of rock  
a mountain of rain  
we kiss history goodbye  
heading home  
to watch the news.

*Kia okioki ratou i runga i te rangimarie  
May they rest in peace.*

All we have is here now  
beneath the wandering souls  
of the pohutukawas  
their tired boughs  
kneeling in the soft water.

## **Stonegut**

The ship has the word Wisdom painted  
in 10 foot high letters along its side  
I watch it being hauled up the harbour  
in the thin early light  
to the sugar works  
riding low in the waterline  
heavy with raw cane  
and good advice.

The Stonegut Sugar Works Baxter called it  
wasn't too pleased with the place  
Hone Tuwhare got him a job there  
only lasted three weeks  
enough to write a rant cursing the company men  
with sugar dust on their shoes.

At least he got a poem out of it  
now I live with those old buildings on my horizon  
a touchstone of sorts  
busy 24 hours a day for a thousand years  
tufts of steam semaphoring across the bay  
saying: sticking around is half the battle.

My friend's grandfather used to work there  
when work was labour  
he was the champion sack stitcher  
they'd sting each other with bees  
to ease the back pain and arthritis  
of real work  
my friend says she went up there as a child  
and fell in the pond.

Now the boat marked Wisdom  
lifts as she unloads  
revealing rust red under royal blue  
maybe this is the day she'll sail away empty  
finally unburdened.

**This Room Contains An Animal**

Horizon line of black fur  
undulating up, down, up, down  
cheap sliding doors  
allow a rush of sunlight to  
prism shards of endless colour  
off that black dog.

He's floor low, ground-dwelling  
breathing in clumsy gulps  
alive in each beat of the day  
wandering without moving  
running wild  
through some interior terrain.

Domesticated, reprogrammed  
repurposed, reduced  
rewired, relaxed  
yet tense  
98.9 percent wolf  
now a constant companion  
like black clouds.

They darken the day  
those black clouds  
but the absence of sunlight  
means he is pure black again  
a prop in the roomscape  
animal suspension of time  
and that stillness is  
all I want.

**What I did on my holidays: political realism**

After election night  
the high-pitched whine of political machines  
grinds though our days  
coy leaders meet in secrecy  
to horse trade ideals  
doorstopped by young reporters  
looking for blood in the water of democracy.

My experience reaches back to a time when  
facing fractures in the usual archaeology of youth  
I went on a search to the Peloponnese  
walking five miles from Sparta to the village of Mystras  
following in the footsteps of Thucydides  
pondering the articles of war.

I slept in a gravel pit under full moon's cold glare  
waking in the night to see a distant fire  
in the ruins on the hill above the village  
I saw Woolf's words floating in the silver light above me:  
"What an accidental affair this living is,  
after all our civilisation."  
and for the first and only time in my life  
I dreamt of my father.

Later, living as a stranger in the village  
in a house abandoned  
to the call of a better lives in other countries  
I fell in with a partly visible woman, an insomniac artist  
who slept in the afternoon  
leaving time in the cool evening  
to walk through ancient olive groves  
until the day the snakes emerged and one  
reared up, coiled in the shape of the omega  
readying war on us and our species  
and after that we stayed in the courtyard  
rubbing our bodies with olive oil  
turning nut brown  
and now I can't remember her name.

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The realism of that mad story  
came to and end one morning  
a small skirmish and  
she threw me out.

These days a moron surveys the White House lawn  
the dreamers have packed away their dreams  
a madman calls for war in the north  
it is war that tears down civilisations and  
there go our political masters  
ignoring Thucydides at their peril  
his Melian dialogue  
a rough conversation  
between greed and fear.

Look to history  
look to the abandoned ruins near a small Greek village  
because we already know the truth.



# AMY McDAID

Amy is an Aucklander of Rarotongan descent. She completed a Bachelor of Nursing at the University of Auckland in 2002. Currently, she works part-time in Auckland's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit while balancing motherhood and writing. She completed a Bachelor of Arts in English and History at the University of Auckland in 2012. Her short story *Kowhai* was a finalist in the 2008 Novice section of the Katherine Mansfield Awards. She lives with her partner and her two-year-old daughter in Titirangi. This is her first novel.

## Novel extract

Titirangi, a suburb on the fringes of West Auckland's rainforest, home to pole houses, bohemian ideals, and placard-toting residents who clambered up doomed trees on building sites. These same residents, the worst recyclers in the city, did not speak of the election results, which time and again revealed them as leaning further to the right than their protests would indicate. Despite its art gallery, numerous cafes, and five-metre algae sculptures, Titirangi was not the place for swanky bars and late night tipples. Nor, it seems, was Titirangi the place for successful first dates. Not for Lucas Trout, anyway.

Perhaps it was the thick black tables that made Forest Bar and Restaurant feel cold and unappealing. Perhaps it was the green barstools or the wall print declaring 'help yourself to happiness.' Maybe it was the Sunday night patrons creating the tense mid-evening atmosphere.

Lucas and Lucy were drinking wine and sharing a cheese platter. In an attempt to avoid the clanging

*Nine Days in the Long Peace* is a darkly funny novel following Lucas Trout, a socially awkward pharmacist, Jaanvi Gilfillan, a grieving mother, and Stephen Beauchamp, a mentally ill homeless man. A dangerous error, a stolen 'reborn' doll and a dead father's evil presence will drive their disparate lives on a collision course. A novel about loss, mental illness and anxiety in modern society.

noises from the kitchen, Lucas had booked a table outside on the deck. On arrival, Lucy's eyes flicked from the plastic tarpaulin overhead to the patio lamp and the encroaching Manuka trees. It was cold, she said. Lucas stood up and suggested they move inside. She set her jaw and sat down. From the trees, a hidden Morepork called out: *more-pork, more-pork*.

Lucas's heart sunk with the realisation that the niceties were over before they'd even begun. His best white shirt, dry-cleaned and pressed the day before, seemed too formal now. And in the dim light, Lucy's black polo disappeared into the curved edges of the chair, giving her a distinct rounded appearance.

A bit of music would help with the ambience, Lucas thought. Perhaps, if they played music, more people would come, and Lucy would not look as bored and reluctant as she did. The silence stretched out like a rubber band. It was his turn to speak. To ask a question or make a witty comment. Lucy had already posed a series of quick-fire questions to reveal her originality and test his: what animal would you be? What was your favourite age? What's your biggest fear? His answers: Dog. 28. Heights. But Lucy was 28-years-old and hated her age. She hated dogs too, and only last week, she'd bungee-jumped off the sky tower.

Lucas picked up a cracker, smeared a lump of Camembert on it and popped it into his mouth in order to underline just how relaxed he was feeling. Witty. Witty wasn't so hard. He took a deep breath.

'Our names are similar, aren't they?' he asked. 'And we both moved to Green Bay last year. We're both single. We're practically mirror images of each other.'

This did not go down well with Lucy. She leaned back into her chair and glowered at him as if he were a piece of dirt under her thumbnail. Their glasses of red wine reflected the flames of the lamp and from the tree closest to them, the invisible Morepork cried out again, *more-pork, more-pork*.

'I would say you are older than me,' she said eventually.

'I'd say so.' He took a sip of his wine. He wouldn't tell her he turned forty tomorrow.

'Do you rent or own?' he asked.

'Rent,' she said, as she folded her paper napkin into a series of triangles.

'I own a pharmacy in the city, in the Albert Street Mall,' he told her. 'I'm a pharmacist.'

She screwed up her napkin into a ball.

'So you count pills.'

*He who takes offense when none is intended is a fool.* (Where had he heard that? Someone at the shop? Stella perhaps).

'The profession of the community pharmacist is an extremely important one,' he said, 'their role far larger and more complicated than you may expect.'

Nothing thrilled Lucas more than talking about his job. So seizing the opportunity, he enlightened Lucy on the world of the community pharmacist.

A world of careless doctors and rampant hypochondriasis, a world in which the pharmacist was a teacher, a weaponries soldier, the last line of defence in a war on the modern lifestyle. He held the safety of the people in his hands every time they popped a pill in their mouth or rubbed a cream into a rash. Yes, he said with a nod, the amount of prescribing errors he had encountered over the years beggared belief. No, with a shake of his head, a pharmacist's responsibilities should not be underestimated.

He stopped. He had been talking too loudly and for too long. Carried away by his own excitement.

Lucy signalled to the waiter and ordered herself another glass of wine. While they waited, her eyes drifted from the top of his head, over to the waiter and to the people sitting alongside them hoeing into seafood chowders. He touched his receding hairline self-consciously. Was he making a fool of himself? Probably. But he wanted her to like him so much. Could you fault him for that? At his core, he was a good man, not arrogant or boastful but diligent and caring. How to show her that?

Lucy's phone appeared from her lap for the tenth time. She stared into it with wide eyes, as if in disbelief at how slowly time was ticking over. Lucas licked his lips and chicken-winged his arms so that air could pass beneath them and dry the growing damp patches.

Lucy had seemed warmer when they met a week ago at the Green Bay Village Park, down the road from his house. They had been sitting at the opposite ends of a bench, both eating filled rolls from the bakery and watching children chasing and hitting each other with sticks. She had asked, 'Which one's yours?' and without thinking he had said, 'I haven't decided,' and she had laughed out loud and said 'me too.' This gentle banter, much to Lucas's excitement, led to a discussion on what it was like to live as a single person in Green Bay, with its four playgrounds, three schools, two kindergartens, one café and zero pubs. A middle-class suburban paradise, she called it. Who wouldn't want to live here? she asked.

The sound of screaming children behind them was drowned out as Lucas became lost in Lucy's blue eyes, which were the colour of slow-release morphine tablets. We could always meet for a drink in Titirangi, he'd suggested, ignoring her sarcasm. Titirangi is just up the road.

And so here they were, one week later, without a thing to say to each other. He would not be disheartened yet. The time he'd spent revising first date etiquette would not go to waste. He had high hopes. The default state of Lucas Trout's heart had always been optimism.

'I have something for you.' He reached into his jacket pocket and drew out a small plastic bag.

She took it from his hand and pulled out a bright yellow soft toy.

‘What’s this?’

‘When we met, you mentioned you were going to the Minions movie with a friend. I saw this in a shop window and it made me think of you.’

‘That’s very thoughtful. Thank you.’ She placed it in her handbag by her feet. ‘I didn’t like the movie,’ she added.

‘So what do you do?’ he asked her. He grabbed another cracker, but it was an awkward size. Too big for a mouthful, too small to bite in half without getting crumbs everywhere. He managed to fit the whole thing in his mouth. But even though he tried to soften it with his tongue first to minimize the noise, the crunch was still loud and offensive. She looked out towards the trees. When he’d finally finished, she coughed, took another sip of wine, and spoke.

‘I’m a stripper,’ she said.

# PIP MCKAY

Pip's nomadic life around New Zealand, as a child and teen, sparked her love of travel. Shortly after graduating from the University of Otago, Pip left home shores for an extended period of work and travel. Her journey through the former Yugoslavia, in 1989, has influenced the writing of her first novel. Back in New Zealand, Pip applied her food science training to roles within the sensory evaluation field. She has conducted taste testing research on products as diverse as butter, chocolate, and beer. Her work with beer testing took her on further travels to Shanghai and surrounds. Most recently, Pip worked in the not-for-profit sector, and held the role of President at Coeliac New Zealand. She has now settled, for the time being, in Auckland with her husband and three sons.

*The Telling Time* is a historical novel, about family secrets and the power of discovery. It is set against a background of war in both New Zealand and Yugoslavia. Nineteen-year-old, Gabrijela, yearns to escape her small life on Korčula. In 1959, she travels from Yugoslavia to New Zealand with a secret. In 1989, her daughter, Luisa, makes a covert journey to Yugoslavia wanting to embrace her Yugoslavian heritage and re-unite her estranged family. The challenges she encounters however, threaten to reveal all that her mother holds close.

## Novel extract

### *September 1989*

The policeman at the front desk wears a blue uniform. He speaks to Yannis in hushed tones, then motions for them to follow him past the front desk, through the room with four desks and out through a rear door. He pushes open a door down the corridor and they gather inside a small room that resembles a packing crate. The walls are ply-thin with no windows. A bare bulb dangles spider-like from a long cord. A small ornate crucifix hangs from a nail on the wall between the two beds. The policeman speaks and Yannis translates.

‘He will call the doctor. Luisa, your clothing.

The waist down, please. You must lie on the bed. Bex, come please, for the paperwork.'

'I'll be there shortly,' says Bex. 'Let me get Luisa settled.'

Yannis and the policeman leave the room and Bex reaches for the sheet folded at the end of the bed.

'Last step, hon. Get yourself undressed. We'll use this to cover you.' Bex sounds like a nurse, and Luisa does as she is told. A means to an end. All she wants is to have a shower and wash that bastard away.

She lies down on the bed and Bex drapes the sheet across her middle. It's farcical; she's never felt so exposed. Bex leaves and Luisa lies there – tired, sore, scared. She can't believe she's been left alone again. The crucifix is in the Greek Orthodox style, all four arms rounded off and brightly gilded with religious icons. Plastic comfort.

She thinks of her mother and the prayers she would recite. Luisa can't imagine her reaction. Sex is a no-go topic in their house and her mum has led such a chaste life, following the Catholic rule to a T. The closest they came to talking about sex was when Mum advised her as a teenager that *the best contraceptive is no*. Full stop. Subject closed. She hadn't even told Mum that she and Mike had been sleeping together. Telling her mother would necessitate peeling back the layers of Catholic guilt. Exposing the rules for what they were – well-meaning in principle, but at times a sham.

The mattress crackles every time she makes the slightest movement. It reminds Luisa of the many times she slept on the bunks in camping and tramping huts in other backwater places, back in New Zealand, back when she still felt clean. She thinks about a shower again. All morning she has allowed herself to be led by the hand, complied with instructions. Gone through the motions.

Minutes tick by. That word. Rape. Always her worst fear, carried secretly once she understood what the horrible word meant. She had dodged the reality until now. How many times had she left the pub, or the home of a friend, and walked alone? She had always been relieved to push her door open. Always lucky. But not anymore. At least she did something right. She won't be pregnant. Regardless, she counts back to when she last bled. She wants to affirm this good choice. Antalya. How many weeks since they were in Turkey? Three at least. Past the danger period but there's always a risk. And you can't rely on luck. Not anymore. From what she's seen of this place she's doubtful they'd even have the morning-after pill.

A short man – thinning hair, tired brown suit; the doctor, Luisa presumes – strides into the room shadowed by Bex. He taps her brusquely on the shoulder and indicates with a rolling hand that he wants her lying on her back. Luisa complies and the mattress crackles again. Her body aches as though all the stiffness has

been carried through her on spidery threads, a giant web transporting the dull pain to her furthest away nerve endings. The smell is back.

Bex introduces him. A complicated name. Only the doctor part sticks. Bex sits and reaches down to squeeze her hand. It is clear the doctor has no interest in pleasantries. He lays his suitcase on the other bed, clicks it open and rummages through the contents, muttering to himself. Luisa shudders at the rubbery screech as he pulls first one hand then the other into disposable gloves. He turns back towards the bed and sniffs loudly as he approaches.

Luisa stares up at him. She might be glued inside a movie. He takes her by the chin and shines a bright light at her face, twisting her head from side to side. He listens to her chest with a stethoscope then lifts the sheet and pushes on her stomach, listening again and muttering to himself. When he moves to the foot of the bed he pauses and Luisa raises her head to watch him. He taps at her ankles and moves his arms as if they are held by an invisible elastic band. For a moment, she feels as though she is back in New Zealand having a smear test: slide your ankles up, bend your knees, splay your legs wide. She knows the drill.

The doctor sniffs again. Luisa tenses up and her breaths come in short sharp bursts. Bex squeezes her hand. It all happens so quickly. She lifts her head off the pillow and checks him again. The doctor is extending his index and middle fingers, holding them like scissors. Without warning he inserts these two fingers inside her vagina. The pain is hot and searing and she squirms and cries out. Her eyes fill with water and she takes a deep breath. The doctor takes no notice. He continues to poke and prod. When he withdraws his fingers, he speaks. It is like a bark.

‘No, married?’

Bex shakes her head. ‘No. No.’

The doctor comes close, staring at Luisa. He frowns and enunciates his words.

‘Not ... first ... time ... then?’ His look is steely. Not a hint of compassion.

Luisa erupts. ‘Bloody hell! What’s the difference? He’s raped me!’

Bex leaps up and points at the door.

‘You’re meant to be swabbing for semen,’ she says. ‘Get out!’

The doctor rips off the gloves and tosses them on the floor. He grabs his bag and marches from the room. Luisa turns towards the wall.

‘Oh, Luisa, I’m so, so sorry,’ says Bex. ‘I thought it would be best. I should have stopped him.’

They are all just words. Fruitless, futile words.

‘Get me in the shower.’ Luisa forces the words out through her gritted teeth.

The shower helps. The warm water courses over her body. Luisa stares as all the evidence washes down the plughole. She doesn’t care. It’s the price of feeling clean. When she steps out of the shower box she expects to feel some change,

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but there's none. Bex hands her some clean clothes from her pack and helps her dress. She tries to walk without shuffling but the stiffness is worse now, and her mouth feels dry. She runs her tongue over her lips and flinches at the raw patch at the side, remembering his bite.



# HEIDI NORTH

Heidi North is a writer from Auckland, New Zealand. Her poetry and short stories have been published in journals and anthologies in New Zealand, Australia and the UK. She won the Feile Filiochta International Poetry Competition (Ireland) in 2007, and the Asia New Zealand Foundation 20th anniversary Short Story Award in 2014. Heidi's debut poetry book *Possibility of Flight*, Makaro Press was published in 2015.

Heidi joined the Shanghai International Writers Programme along with ten other writers worldwide as the NZ fellow in 2016. She was awarded the Hachette/NZSA mentorship for 2017 to work on her first novel. She won The University of Auckland Magazine Craccum Short Story Award in 2017.

*Plum Rain* is a creative non-fiction hybrid fiction work about leaving home behind. In it, a woman runs out the day before her wedding and returns to a place she remembers being happy, Shanghai. This woman is Rachel. Another woman is left by her husband. When she is accepted into the Shanghai International Writer's Program, it means leaving her two-year-old daughter behind and spending two months in Shanghai. That woman is me.

## Novel extract

### *Rachel*

The heat is ramping up. It must be midday – four pm at home. The ceremony would be finished. We would be standing on the lawn, bird-seed confetti on our shoulders. Pale rose-petals crushed on the grass beneath our feet. David would be hovering beside me. War medals glinting. One hand patting my shoulder, the closest he ever got to giving anyone a hug.

My mother would be trotting around in her lilac silk two-piece, the fabric shot through with gold flowers. She had started shopping for her outfit as soon as we announced the engagement. 'It cost an arm and a leg, lordy, I can tell you.'

I can't bear this park bench a second longer. I stand up. The world spins. Bleached out sky swirls. A drink stand comes into focus opposite me. I buy a lemonade. Suck on the straw. The sugar brings me back to my surroundings. The brittle grass of the park. The noise of the traffic spiked with the mechanical birdsong pumping out of the fake rock speakers near my feet.

The last time I ate or drank anything other than beer was hours ago. By now, they should be serving canapés. Soggy salmon and cream cheese blinis, mini angus beef hamburgers, their plump little buns stabbed through with toothpicks and vegan sushi in tight, precise curls. I spent so long selecting the options – gluten free, vegan. My mother. 'But darling, don't forget about the poor meat lovers.'

Buoyed by the lemonade, I decide to head to the Bund. I feel unmoored, unhinged, afraid I might float away here. There on the edge of that river, there can be no more denying where I am.

+

The underground mall at Nanjing Road station is new. A whirl of shiny glass and smooth tiles. I spin around and around looking for something to hold on to but nothing is familiar. There are more people than I remember when I push up a staircase onto the street and emerge onto Nanjing Road. Bodies are everywhere, spilling onto the traffic, traipsing through the streets. I fight my way through tour groups with their obligatory little orange hats and tiny plastic flags waving. I'm heading, I hope, towards the Huangpu river, eyes fixed on a patch of blue sky.

To escape the crowds on Nanjing Road leading to the Bund I duck into the open doorway of the Artist's Peace Hotel. No one is around so I take the lift to the top floor and find myself alone on the deserted terrace. The heat is exquisite. Chinese flags flap into my view. The circle of yellow stars flashing against the red.

I step over the remnants of last night's party. Empty beer bottles, bent cigarette butts, scraps of shiny gold paper. It's not until I've picked my way over the carnage to the railing that I see the fake red roses, their snapped stems, crushed plastic petals and I realise – I'm standing in the wreckage of a wedding.

I freeze for a moment, caught between the whip of sea and sky. This is the moment I would be his wife. *I give you this ring, a circle without end or beginning, as a symbol of our everlasting, unbroken love.*

At the edge of the building my fingers curl around the hot metal railing. Grip. The sky is bluer than normal, stretched white clouds streak past in the wind. Like tulle. Off white. Ivory. Bone. If I jumped from this height I might not die.

People, so many people crowded on the Bund promenade. The Pearl Tower rises behind them. Solid, glinting pink, garish in the light. Then the Huangpu river, the old-fashioned barges heavy with sand, cement, a giant pile of logs almost dragging through the murky water drifts past. My breath shudders in the salt-tinged air. I'm back.

Even from this distance I can't avoid them. The usual cluster of wedding couples dotted along the Bund. Getting their photographs with Pudong rising, steel and glass towers, neon and so much shine behind them.

A bride hoists up her frothy ivory skirt and treks off the pavement into the road. She's tightened into her bodice with long strands of satin ribbon. The photographer, a skinny man in ripped jeans and glowing white sneakers, lies down in the middle of the road.

Fools, I want to shout down at them. Can't you see the cars coming?

The shutter clicks. The bride picks up her skirt again to move to her next picture-postcard position, revealing her cheap purple plastic slip ons. Her dress drops again. Smile!

Click.

Slipping my feet into my white satin shoes, ruched, decorated with hand-sewn pearls. The blisters I got on my toes wearing them in.

Click.

My beautiful wedding dress, layers and layers of off-white silk tulle; the secret tiny blue satin bow, snipped off a pair of Mum's knickers, sewn in the thinnest thread inside the finest layer of silk next to the skin at the final dress fitting.

Click.

Introducing the happy couple, Mr and Mrs Josh Stevens.

I jump at the vibration in my pocket. By the force of habit my phone arrives in my hand: Josh grins up at me, shirtless in Oriental Bay, half-propped up on his All Blacks towel.

It happens in a heartbeat – the shock, the hot railing, the ripple of release. It only takes a second to fall five floors. My arms go too far over the railing, clutching at the empty space. How will anyone reach me? The world bends, blurring under the weight of my tears. Furious, I stamp them out with my fists. I could run down there, fumble about on the street, but the phone is gone. Swallowed, shattered by the rush of traffic.

+

By the time I get back down from the Bund and stumble back out into the street at Jing'An station the day has gone. I don't know where, but the clock at the station tells me it's 8.05 pm. 12.05 am. Tomorrow.

*Master of Creative Writing*

I stand for a moment under the pathetic pink flower balls that float down from the mall's ceiling outside the station exit, blinking in the neon glow of the street.

The most expensive dress I'll ever wear.

The best day of my life.

And I missed it.

# KIRSTEEN URE

Kirsteen was born in Auckland and spent her childhood in Papua New Guinea. She holds Bachelors of Laws and Arts from the University of Auckland. She has worked in publishing and in communications roles in Auckland, London and Hong Kong. She is mother to Libby and Rosie and wife to Edward. The coma strand of her novel is informed by her own experience, waking from a medically induced coma in 2015.

## Novel extract

### *Eight*

*Silver Girl* is a novel about the way we perceive danger. When Marie Waters was small, she learned to see threat in unlikely places. Now, a mother to her own small child, she is in real danger. She lies, dreaming in a coma believing she is wired into a game. This novel follows three strands: Marie's childhood; the events that led to her medical danger; and her coma dreams and awakening. This extract is from the coma strand of the novel.

Her mother has answered her call. Before the pale Head's eyes opened, as its image gathered inside her, bursting through every capillary, she cried out, 'Mum, Mummy.' Now there is a voice next to her, disembodied by the darkness.

'Darling,' it says.

Yes, this is her mother. There is a light pressure on Marie's hand. The voice is clear and gentle. Close yet somehow far away.

'Silver Girl,' her mother whispers. She hums a song she used to sing when Marie was a child and frightened in the night. Marie cannot remember the lyrics but she has the sense of it. It is a slow, mournful comfort. The warmth of her mother's voice helps. It is still deeply dark but she feels she can almost see the curve of her Mother's chin and the wisps of hair near her ear. A scrap of lyric comes back to her as her mother hums: 'I will ease your mind.' It hits her, above her breastbone, sending shivers into her and

water to her eyes. It has a similar effect on her mother's voice – which wavers and cracks, mid-hum then stops. She is silent, though the darkness is not. It is filled with beeps and static.

Something is wrong, Marie has known it since she opened her eyes to the blackness. It is such a strange place, wherever she is. She puts together these pieces: darkness, her mother, this song. The way they fit makes her wonder whether she has ever really grown up. She could be in the bedroom, at the top of the stairs, beneath her duvet with the girl and the puppy printed on its fabric. Opposite, would be the small triangle window and against the far wall, the peach pageantry of her doll's house. Could this be? Has she dreamed Bear and Jamie? And, twisted in her pink and white bed sheets, has she screamed for her mother, to take the dream away?

The details of dreams never last after she has woken, only the sense of them. Many things about her home will not come to her easily, but Bear is clear. The lines that smile when he does, at the corner of his eyes, the way he pleads with her turning his palms to the ceiling, so that without uttering a word, he can say to her 'be reasonable.' These things are very clear.

'We were worried about you,' her mother says. Now that she has stopped singing, her voice is different. She sounds as though she does not expect anything back. She says the words but that is all. She could be talking to the air. She places each word carefully – and this is odd too. Her mother can be careful, with some things: paint colour, cushion fabrics; but not often with words. Marie begins to wonder what it is that she has summoned.

The voice says something more but its words are drowned out by beeps, one of the noises of this place, playing around them. Marie's chest heaves, she believes that this noise will deliver her to the Head. But it isn't the same. It is shorter. She tries to put together what it is that she has not heard. A fragment: 'given the circumstances.' There is something about these particular words that draws the hairs on the back of her neck up. They remind her of something. Are they a warning? Something is not right.

Marie sniffs at the sticky air, searching for lavender, for the smell of her mother. Nothing.

'You're doing so well,' the voice tries again. Marie does not like this either. She cannot get to why but it makes her want to stamp her feet and shout. She tries to see through the dark to her mother, the way she almost had when the voice was humming. How would her mother look, what would she do? She might smile at Marie and then her eyebrows would disappear in the white veil of her heavy fringe. It would be such a relief to believe it – that her mother is here and that her smile is only hidden in the darkness. Her mother's voice would be a good torch.

The realisation breaks into her, she feels it sharply, between her ribs. It is a trick, the Head's sleight of hand. Though the tone and the quality are perfectly copied, the flat careful cadence is not her mother's.

'Go! Get away,' she screams into herself.

It is cleverly done but the voice lies where her mother would not. She has not done anything well here. She has done nothing at all. If this was really her mother, really her voice, pushed from her throat, her larynx, her lips she wouldn't let this, whatever it is, this state, this place, this inside, continue. She would take Marie's hand and guide her home.

The air in front of her is as black as it ever has been but, at the edges, it fizzes, as if something has given it a shake.





# MICHAEL WILSON

Michael has worked in the media as a journalist and TV presenter for companies such as TVNZ, TV3, Radio New Zealand and the National Business Review. He has a BA in Economic History and Psychology from Victoria University and a Diploma of Journalism from Canterbury University. After more than thirty years in the media he has sought salvation in Creative Writing. He lives in Auckland with wife Joanne Jianhong Lu and two sons.

## Novel extract

*Taking Pagoda Mountain (By Strategy)* is a novel set in early 2000s Shanghai and New Zealand. After a failed marriage in Auckland, Mark Webster heads to Shanghai seeking adventure, romance, riches and a chance to indulge his painting ambitions. His artistry is focused on a pagoda and a local beauty. A clash with authorities and a rival sees his love disappear and his time in China cut short. With the pagoda set for demolition he ships it back to Auckland as a souvenir. Concealed in the pagoda's Buddha is a mysterious woman. Has the pagoda been imported for love or money?

When I entered the fortune-teller's room, he was seated behind an ornate antique desk, eating sunflower seeds, with Lanlan standing beside him. He was far younger than I expected, looking little more than mid-forties, with a clipped goatee beard, and hair that crept over his collar. His face glowed with good health and his handshake was strong and inviting. A long red silk robe worn over a black turtleneck jersey, gave his appearance a touch of the mystical, while the curling smoke from sticks of incense placed in front of a Buddhist shrine, added to the transcendent vibe. The background music was mesmeric, as though a Chinese erhu player had learnt to play his two-string bowed instrument with a Memphis Blues sensibility. It ached and cried. Lanlan could see I was impressed. She came up to me and gave my hand a squeeze. I wanted to give her a hug, but had learnt from experience that it was generally best to keep excessive displays of affection to a minimum.

'Ah Bing,' Mr Jin said.

I looked to Lanlan for explanation and she said, 'The musician is called Ah Bing. He's playing 'Moon Reflected In The Second Spring.' Very famous.'

Mr Jin looked pleased at my reaction to the music. He said something to Lanlan in Mandarin. 'Blind Ah Bing,' Lanlan said to me. 'Homeless, opium addict, lung disease, not a good fortune.'

His life sounded like a script for the Blues. 'I hope my fortune is better,' I said.

Mr Jin gestured for me to sit down. I was struck by the art work on the walls behind the desk. There were several classic mountain and water masterpieces, some beautifully crafted calligraphy work and a Picasso. It was from Pablo's Blue Period and despite being an obvious print, its colours seemed to burst out of the gilt frame. Mr Jin could see I was intrigued and said something to Lanlan.

'It's not a print,' Lanlan said. 'Gift from a client.'

I felt overwhelmed and unworthy. What could I give as a gift? *My Pagoda and Princess*? What sort of client could give a painting worth ten, twenty million?

Mr Jin smiled at me. He held out his open hands and gestured I should do the same. He examined my hands and gave Lanlan some feedback. 'Complicated love line. Does get better,' was all Lanlan said to me in her translation, even though he had spoken to her in Mandarin for at least a minute.

Master Jin said little for the next half hour as he put me through a rigorous testing schedule. I had to shake a bamboo cylinder full of sticks, each bearing a large character, until one stick dropped out. Mr Jin noted the one that did fall, and wrote down some characters in a leather bound notepad. Then came the face and head examination. He traced his finger down my nose, opened my mouth to check the ivories and placed his hand on my cranium to measure its shape and size. I felt like a horse being checked for breeding potential.

Lanlan had asked me to write down my date of birth, including the hour and minute, if I knew it, the season and place. Thirty five years ago, yesterday, 10 pm, summer, in Auckland — I had written on a piece of paper and passed on to Mr Jin. After referring to numerous charts and texts, he prepared some sort of life map for me.

Next was a word test. He would say a word in Mandarin, Lanlan would translate it and I would have to respond with whatever came into my head.

'Yellow,' she said.

'River,' I replied.

'Money.'

'Honey.'

'Love.'

'Shack.'

'Rice.'

'Nice.'  
'Peace.'  
'Love.'  
'House'  
'Proud.'  
'Happy.'  
'Together.'  
'Beauty.'  
'Lanlan.'

Mr Jin gave a sigh, and stopped the exercise. My responses were immediate and instinctive. What would he draw from them? His sigh suggested he thought I was a hopeless case. At least Lanlan seemed pleased, as she gave me a big smile after my last reply.

'What's a shack?' she asked. 'I said it was like a hut. Right?'  
'Sort of. The third level of our pagoda is like our love shack.'  
'I see,' she said.

His last test was the most puzzling. A dart board hung on the wall just next to the Buddhist shrine. In front of a small porcelain Buddha were various offerings, an orange, some bananas and a luscious looking melon. I remember the latter well because of what happened when Lanlan said Mr Jin would like me to throw three darts at the board. I hadn't thrown any darts for years and my first attempt was a disaster. It hit the wall a metre or so adrift of the dartboard, bounced off at speed and plunged into the melon. Mr Jin thought it was very funny and burst out laughing. Embarrassed and apologetic, I plucked the dart out of the melon and had another go. This time I hit the number four, which of course is a harbinger of doom. In Mandarin, four is *si*, which also means death. *Si* is the unluckiest of all numbers for the Chinese. Mr Jin did not seem alarmed.

My second attempt was a ten and the third a double three. Four, ten and six. What did it mean? I saw Mr Jin jot down the numbers, reach for a calculator and write down the result in his notepad. He then referred to a newspaper. His eyes hunted out a particular page and after a quick perusal, he added another note to his pad.

Mr Jin took some time to assemble his data, then spoke to Lanlan at length. Just as she was about to translate his findings, Mr Jin looked at me and asked what sounded a serious question.

'Do you remember your dreams?' was Lanlan's translation.  
'Sometimes.'

'Have you dreamt of being in China and saving a woman or a girl from danger?'

Lanlan had already asked me a similar question, and I gave the same answer.

‘No.’

He did not react at all, just nodded to Lanlan that it was time for her to tell me his findings.

‘Summary. You are going to lose all your money, fail in work and love, and be run out of China. And you are very unsuitable for a Chinese woman you might have some interest in. Any questions?’

A feeling of desolation overcame me. Was this to be my fate? Then I saw a hint of a smile emerge from the corner of her mouth. ‘Actually, it’s not quite that bad. He says you have the hands of an artist, and honestly, I did not tell him anything about your art. He said you will be successful. From your palm he sees many ups and downs in your love life. But when you meet the right person it will be for life. You will not be prosperous but you will not be poor, and you will have more good luck than you will have bad. That’s about it. Oh and that will only cost 1000 yuan. Special discount because of me.’

I thought about it for a while, then asked the obvious question.

‘But what about you and me? Did he say anything?’

‘You are a horse and I am a tiger. We are compatible. I have told him I feel attracted to you, as if I have met you before. Maybe in another life. He says that past connection could come out in your dreams. He believes the old ancestors can talk to us through our dreams.’

So that was what all this dream stuff was about? I didn’t say anything, but it sounded like hocus-pocus to me. So all I had to do was pretend I had dreamt of saving her in some ancient soap opera of dreams and we could hold an engagement party straight after?

# SONYA WILSON

Sonya grew up in Southland. She began her slow shuffle north at 18, studying Broadcast Journalism at the NZ Broadcasting School in Christchurch, then working for RNZ and TVNZ. She moved to Wellington as a reporter for the Breakfast programme and One News, then on to Auckland where she became a reporter and presenter for the 20/20 programme. She took a couple of years off to do her O.E in the middle of all that, working and travelling extensively through Asia, Western and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. She now lives in Auckland with her husband and two young boys and works as a freelance journalist, most recently for TVNZ's Sunday programme.

*The Forever Forest* is a children's adventure-fantasy novel, set in Fiordland. It follows 13-year-old Nissa Marshall, who takes off from her school camp at Deep Cove and gets lost in the bush. She finds a forest full of secrets: long-lost explorers from Fiordland's mysterious past, and an entire tribe of forest creatures who've been hiding there for hundreds of years. Nissa thinks she's discovered some sort of forest-utopia, but everything is not as perfect as it seems in this NZ native fairyland. Threats loom in the dark forest and Nissa must battle predators, rescue a species, and then save herself, before part of the forest is lost forever.

## Novel extract

In the warm, woody darkness Nissa slept. She slipped in and out of it, roused sometimes from her nothing-dreams by the sound of voices: birds singing, leaves chattering, creatures arguing. She remembered, vaguely, being shaken and given something small to eat, when it was still dark, when the rain was still falling. But then nothing more until she woke properly some time later, with the bright light of morning knocking at her eyes.

She found herself cocooned in some sort of nest; curled up in a bed of woven branches, covered by a blanket made from thousands of stitched-together feathers. It was like an antique korowai — the kind of chief's cloak she'd only seen before in museums — and it was so warm, she felt as though she was wrapped in somebody else's skin. Underneath her

was a mattress of ferns and moss that was soft and fragrant. No wonder she had stayed sleeping. Weeks could have passed, for all she knew.

She tried to sit up. The bed swayed a little when she moved.

‘You are awake, Nissa Marshall!’

Seraphine sat perched in a nook in the wall, looking a little worse for wear. Light was still glowing from her stomach, but her blonde hair was muddy and tangled. There were scratches on her legs and a substance that Nissa would have called blood, had it been red instead of a pale translucent sap, trickled from a gash across her collar-bone.

‘What happened to you?’ Nissa asked.

Seraphine just pointed a purple finger at her. ‘You fainted,’ she said, before pushing herself out of the nook and dropping into the unseen space below. She appeared again over the edge of the bed almost immediately and Nissa felt the warmth of Seraphine’s core light as she leant over her, pressing their foreheads together.

‘I am with you,’ she said.

‘Where are we?’ Nissa asked, still not entirely sure that this was actually happening, that she was really awake.

‘First, you say, *We are together, Seraphine.* And then we talk.’

‘We are together, Seraphine.’

‘That’s it! You are in my house-thing.’

Nissa must have looked confused.

‘You name them houses, do you not? This is where I sleep. And where I keep the things that I do not want to share with the Collective. I would have named it my nest but then you might have thought that I was incubating eggs.’

Nissa looked over the edge of her bed and saw that the walls of the room they were in were also made of knitted-together branches and vines. Above her head, chrysalises dangled from the thatched roof. Down below the floor was solid; thick planks of knotted timber, but in the middle it sank down into a small fire pit. Flames licked the sides of a pot hanging over the middle of the fire. Its rising steam carried a sweet, muddy smell. Peppermint-green mosses like woollen throws were draped over the wooden bench seat that circled the fire and tiny, spiky plants grew along the edges of the room where the walls met the floor.

The nest-house was so lovely, so cosy, that Nissa forgot to be scared.

‘Your nest is *beautiful*,’ she said, lingering on the word. It really was beautiful. Seraphine touched the tips of her purple fingers to her forehead then opened the palm of her hand out towards Nissa. *Thank you*, the gesture said.

It was only then, when she returned Seraphine’s smile, that Nissa noticed what was wrong. She was looking at Seraphine eye to eye. They were the same size! She had grown smaller, or Seraphine had grown larger — she wasn’t sure

which. She knew she should be alarmed by this — some part of her brain told her that *frightened* would be a reasonable feeling to have, but it was as if her body couldn't summon the adrenaline, couldn't sound the alarm.

'How did this happen?' She held up her hands to check that they were still solid, still hers.

'It is easier this way.' Seraphine's voice was calm, her tone matter-of-fact. 'Now we can warm you with our blankets, feed you with our food, house you in our burrows and nests.'

Nissa pulled her blanket back. Her legs were still there, her feet too — shoeless and small, but still hers.

'Do not worry,' Seraphine said. 'You are smaller, but you are still you.'

*Really?* Because Nissa felt like a moth, emerging from her cocoon after a long and metamorphosing sleep. Did she *feel* smaller? Less of herself? She wasn't sure. After everything that had already happened, she seemed to have exhausted her ability to feel shocked.

'Will I ... grow back?' she asked. 'After I leave here?'

Seraphine hesitated. 'Of course,' she said.

With the fairy's help, Nissa clambered down from her bed and they sat together next to the fire. Questions began tumbling from her mouth: 'What are you all doing here? Why are you here? How long have you been here?'

Seraphine answered simply. 'We are living. We are here because the forest is here. We have been here for as long as the birds, as long as the trees, some of us — as long as the mountains.'

Nissa took the answers in but they swam around inside her head, never really settling in place. 'And, what happened to you, after I fainted? You look like you've been in a fight?'

The pot hanging over the fire gave a loud hiss and Seraphine jumped up to take it off the heat.

'No more questions for now. You are in shock. You must drink something,' she said, grabbing a cup from one of the nearby shelves.

There were vessels of all sorts poked into the nooks and shelves around the room: large gourds, pods and cones, some stacked in piles, others filled with stuff — a bunch of white daisies in one, a pile of seeds in another, and one with what looked like a sling-shot lying in it, black rubber dangling down over its edge.

Nissa couldn't help herself. 'Is that a sling-shot?'

'Yes,' Seraphine replied.

'May I look at it?' She felt the urge to hold on to something solid. Seraphine studied her for a moment before picking the sling-shot up and handing it over. Tiny, intricate carvings of lupin blossoms covered the handle. The wood inside the carved lines was well worn. It had been held, a lot.

‘Ahi made it for me. He is our weapons master.’

A weapons master? In all her childhood dreams of forest fairies, none of them had been *armed*.

‘What do you shoot?’ Nissa asked.

‘Berries and seeds,’ Seraphine replied. ‘Mostly.’ She busied herself with pouring whatever was in the pot into a cup, then handed it to Nissa. ‘This will warm your stomach, and take the weather damage away. Your insides are probably still full of rain.’ She smiled a big, encouraging smile, as though she thought Nissa might turn the drink down. But Nissa couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten or drunk anything, so she took the cup and put it straight to her lips, thankful for whatever was inside.

It was unlike anything she had ever tasted before. Like one of those chilli-hot chocolates you could buy from the Patagonia cafe, spicy and thick and rich, but with a herbal, earthy tang. And it was good. It was really good. She felt it light a little fire in the pit of her stomach. The heat moved from her inside out, warming her body and limbs right out to her fingers and toes, right up to behind her eyes.

‘This is wonderful,’ she said.

Seraphine seemed relieved. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘Good! I was not entirely sure how you would take that. Our forest tea has not been given to humans many times before. Certainly never to a girl-child one.’

‘Oh, so it could’ve killed me?’ Nissa asked with a smile.

‘Yes,’ Seraphine replied.

Nissa couldn’t tell if she was joking, but she told herself that she was.

They sat quietly next to the fire while the Nissa finished her tea. She let the warmth and spice flow through her body. All the fear and anxiety from the dark and the storm drained away and she let it all go willingly. Her brain wanted nothing to do with those memories. Instead, she tried to concentrate on this new, wonderful world she had washed up in — this place she had been dreaming of, in one form or another, since she was small. Nothing from before mattered now.

‘I cannot believe I am actually here, Seraphine.’ She looked at the fairy’s starlight stomach, her crystal-cloth wings and her beaten-up but beautiful, crazy-coloured body. Seraphine returned her gaze with eyes that were so big, so blue, that Nissa felt small under their scrutiny and a little incomplete, like some of her humanness had shrunk away with her physical size. ‘This place. It’s amazing. And you — you are beautiful. I cannot believe you are actually ... *you*.’

Seraphine laughed. ‘I’ve been me my whole life, with no particular skill. There is no cleverness in being born beautiful you know, if that is what you think I am. But I can see that your intention is to pay me a compliment and for



that, I thank you. It is good of you to try and be kind like that. You are a good person, I think.'

Nissa smiled. She *felt* good. Especially with this tea in her belly. She felt so calm in fact, that she didn't even jump when there was a loud and urgent banging on the door to Seraphine's hut.

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