2019/20

Master of Creative Writing

University of Auckland

For the first time, beginning in 2019, the MCW sprawled over a summer: the course moved to a July start, to permit four months of writing time between semesters. This is the new shape of our MCW, and enabled a number of our 11 writers to present complete books.

This 2019/20 cohort had COVID-19 challenges to face. Most of our second semester fell during lockdown, so workshops and seminars were conducted via Zoom. We place high value in meeting kanohi ki te kanohi, so this was not ideal. Many of our writers had to deal with home schooling, family responsibilities, technology issues, and general anxiety and isolation. Yet the camaraderie of the MCW prevailed.

This cohort was all prose: two memoirists, one flash-fiction writer, one short-story writer, and eight novelists.

As ever, the books are wildly different. They transport us to a world of birds, or to a world of the future in which only a few birds seem to have survived. We observe campus intrigue and the fracturing of a marriage; we flee family secrets—and parties—to find new mysteries in Italy. We learn what it means to grow up Irish in West Auckland, or to grow up headstrong on a farm in South Taranaki. In Zimbabwe we escape from snakes and soldiers; in Auckland we fall into a swimming pool or join a protest march.

Many thanks to our Dean of Arts, Robert Greenberg, and Malcolm Campbell, Head of the School of Humanities, for their ongoing support of our creative writing programme. Thanks to my colleagues Selina Tusitala Marsh and Alex Calder, and to writers Adam Dudding, Ruby Porter and Diana Wichtel, for sharing their expertise with the writers in masterclasses.

Congratulations to the writers in this sampler: Shelley Burne-Field, Jack Remiel Cottrell, Melanie Dixon, Paula Gosney, Joanna Hill, Turene Jones, Tsitsi Mapepa, Sarah Murray, Wendy Parkins, John Prins and Deborah Robertson. I look forward to the work here finding new readers, a wider circle of admirers. Some of the writers here already have publishing deals or agent agreements, as well as publishing work in journals and anthologies. Radio NZ has recorded a number of stories and extracts for broadcast on Nine to Noon.

We are proud that these writers are part of our creative community now. I wish them every success.

Paula Morris MNZM
Director, Master of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND
Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau
NEW ZEALAND
ARTS

Master of Creative Writing

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Shelley Burne-Field

Hawke's Bay writer Shelley Burne-Field (Ngati Mutunga, Ngati Rārua) was a finalist in the 2021 Voyager media awards and is a regular writer at e-Tangata. Her work was 'Highly Commended' in the *Landfall* Essay competition 2020, her essay published in *Strong Words 2: The Best of the Landfall Essay Competition* (Otago University Press 2021). She has published various works of fiction on Radio NZ, Vines, and Newsroom; in the 2019 Hawke's Bay *Shorts* anthology, and in *Huia Short Stories 14* (2021). Shelley's short story 'Meatless' will be broadcast on RNZ late 2021.

Tungāne is a bilingual fantasy novel for upper middle graders. It's an animal survival story featuring two very different kāhu (harrier hawk) sisters, their special tungāne brother, a pair of weka, a gorgeous kārearea, hordes of blood-thirsty kiore rats, taniwha, and even a massive flood. Trying desperately to save their tungāne in the wilds of the bush covered valley, the kāhu whānau must also face a group of makipai whose leader is merciless, driven, and quite mad.

Windmills

The morning of the murder, Poto was dodging windmill blades in the hills. She flew with Whetū and they dared each other as sisters often do. Who could spot the pūngāwerewere crawling along its cobweb on the giant metal tower? Who could use the churning gusts of wind to spiral dive? Who could hear the squeak squeak of the kiore rubbing its whiskers below?

Her wings felt strong. Poto glided silently, teasing towards the long windmill blades that flicked past her body. The air was chilly. Beyond the windmills, the first sprinkling of snow had covered the peaks of the pae maunga. Breath steamed from Poto's nostrils and melted an ice star at the end of her beak. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Whetū dart past. For a moment Poto lost sight of the blade tip which whooshed behind her tail and sucked her wings back. She

panicked, flailing towards the gigantic machine and certain death, but Whetū appeared and knocked Poto out of harm's way.

'You're welcome, sis!' called Whetū. She sculpted the air with broad wings, then rolled and flipped upside down, her legs and talons thrusting forward.

'Whetū, look out!' Poto screeched, and another whirling blade nicked Whetū on the rump, ripping out two tail feathers that floated down to land on the grass.

'Whoa, that was too close!' Whetū squawked, rolling away. 'Way too close to my feather holder.'

'Feather holder?'

'My kumu. My butt.'

'Oh, I get it,' Poto groaned. 'Let's fly.'

They'd been at the hills most of the morning and were hungry for a meal. Staying high on a nice current of air, they glided away from the snow and back towards their swamp by the sea. Along the way, Whetū pointed out a flowing wairere that tumbled off the side of a cliff and poured into a deep, glistening pool at the edge of a forest. The water spray drifted up and coated their feathers.

'A taniwha lives there,' Whetū called. She was much larger than Poto, and liked to think she knew more too. 'It roams the ngahere, under the trees,' she whispered mysteriously.

Poto ignored Whetū and flew faster. She'd never met a taniwha and she didn't want to meet one today! Salty clouds drifted in from the coast. It would take half a day to fly home, over the low scrub and prickly mānuka bushes. Poto wanted to return before Māmā got back from the hunting grounds. If they were late, they'd be in big trouble. All the way home, Whetū moaned about her missing tail feathers.

'I can't fly straight now,' she squawked.

'You couldn't fly straight before,' replied Poto.

They laughed and teased each other until at last they reached their whānau nest back at the swamp. The nest was built in a clump of cutting grass, surrounded by murky water. It had been their home for the past two years, but right now it was empty. Māmā had not returned.

The sun hung high and Poto and Whetū looped in a circle around

the swamp, tired but ready to eat and play some more. They dived down to their usual place: a dirt wallow sheltered by bushes and clumps of dying raupō. The tips of the raupō leaves drooped low and sent ripples further out into the shallow water, gently rocking the mist that floated at the edges. The sweet smell of seaweed and dried cockles wafted up, and a familiar call reached up into the sky. *Kee-oh! kee-oh!* Poto's best friend, Nīkau, swayed at the top of a ragged kānuka tree.

'Your beak glows when you see him,' Whetū teased.

'Quiet or I'll pluck your neck!' Poto hissed back.

'You two look like you've been up to no good,' Nīkau drawled and flapped down onto the ground.

Something about this tāne sent Poto's stomach gurgling. Nīkau was small and dark. His feathers weren't smooth, especially the messy swirl that fluttered on his nape, yet his beak had a nice hook and his talons curved sweetly into points. Poto had known him since they were nestlings, their home nests a short flight away from each other. He was as dopey as a plover, but one thing set him apart: his visions grew stronger every day. He was matakite, a visionary, a seer. Poto and Whetū believed his visions: they'd seen them come true.

Poto could beat Nīkau in any fight. When they hunted hea and rāpeti, Poto would come away with the kill in her talons. Yet Nīkau always seemed older. He'd flown first and his moult had finished long ago. It set her beak on edge.

'We'll fly to the Island together, don't worry,' he'd reassured her when his eyes had turned kōwhai, the colour of growing up. Yet she was still annoyed. Her irises had only shown a glint of kōwhai, like the outline of a buttercup, but the rest of her eyes were still parauri as mud. Ugh!

The air had cooled and the earth looked dusty and dry. Fat poraka leaped about and croaked, while clouds of midges swirled over the reeds. Whetū and Nīkau each took turns rolling about, yanking feathers, and grinding their beaks into the whenua. The next fight was Poto's and she shook out her wings, stretching them back and flicking the tips out. Her shoulder joints lifted and she spread her wings slightly, then bobbed her head side to side. Nīkau took his chance and flew forward, snapping with his beak, yet he missed Poto

who knocked him off balance and pinned him to the ground by his head. He screeched and wriggled under her toes. It was too easy. Nīkau squawked and Poto let him go. He flapped up to perch on a tōtara tree branch, nursing his sore neck.

'Feel better now that you beat me? Eh?' Nīkau held his neck to the side so Poto could see a tiny patch of blood spread across his feathers. She called, *chit! chit! chit!* and beckoned to Whetū.

'Come on! Get your kumu plucked!'

Whetū didn't look very impressed. She was younger by a full day, yet bigger than a ngeru, one of the feral felines that roamed the Valley. She was huge. Her brow feathers swooped low, set in a permanent frown since the day she'd hatched. As a fledgling, she'd fly off in a rage over nothing and Poto would find her at the top of a cliff, squawking, yet trying to sing like a tūī. That was Whetū: raging and singing. Still, she had her reasons for being angry. When they were tiny pēpē, their Pāpā had chosen a favourite, and it wasn't her. For reasons they never knew, Whetū could never please him or do anything right. Poto was the perfect one.

It was time for tuakana and teina to fight. Younger and older. Sister to sister. Crisp breaths of wind flicked past Poto's ears, as though a storm was pushing in from the coast. Poto held her beak high and sniffed the air. A rāpeti hopped close by, wiggling it's fluffy tail and dropping tūtae pellets in a heap. Poto could smell the strong scent. The rāpeti was taking a chance twitching its whiskers beside three hungry kāhu – it was lucky they were all in a sparring mood. Poto's eyes blazed. She tasted bile, her tongue rough as a bramble bush. Her eyes were glossy and wide and her feathers gathered heat from the sun. She spread her feather shafts just like Māmā had taught her and lifted her wings. She had to get in the first strike.

Whetū's new plumage had grown in sleek and glossy, making her fly faster than ever. Quick as a tuatara's tongue. Poto darted above the clearing then dived low when Whetū took off from a standing start. They knew each other's favourite moves, yet there was always room for a sneaky bite, or a secret twirl. Poto had been practicing a somersault for weeks and she moved quickly and caught Whetū's back feathers, scratching deeply into her skin. *Crawwwww!* They flipped together

and spun down, down, down, twirling around, speeding towards the ground. In an instant Whetū gripped Poto's thighs, switching her onto her back. Oof! Then she pinned Poto into the dirt and held up a talon-full of feathers.

'I win!' Whetū called out as if she couldn't quite believe it.

The fight was over. Poto paced in the dirt and feaked her beak to get the dust off. She spat a wet ball of feathers onto the ground and stayed silent. She wouldn't give Whetū the satisfaction of uttering a squawk.

'Victory! So much for Poto perfect!' Whetū rolled in the air to drive home the point.

'Whetū won,' murmured Nīkau. 'Should've seen that coming.' He'd perched out of the way on a high kānuka branch. The end of the branch sagged and Poto flew up to join him, nibbling and cleaning her feathers. She didn't look up. Her eyes felt heavy. She was suddenly tired of the whole thing. Over it.

Poto's moult had not grown in and was still hideous as ever. Feather clumps from her back had fallen away leaving bare patches and pimples, and her wings were full of gaps. They hung, dull and crumpled and as if that wasn't enough, powdered down puffed out from her skin whenever she moved. When she preened, the powder, saliva, and un-shattered feather shafts stuck in her beak and sliced her tongue. And now Whetū had wiped the ground with her head! Bleh! Her life would transform in the spring, but not yet.

Part of today's fun had been freedom from looking after Āri, their little brother, their tungāne. He'd gone hunting with Māmā. It was his first time. Poto was supposed to help Māmā look after him, but she'd moaned so much that Māmā had agreed to let her stay back at the swamp. That was ages ago, at sunrise. Māmā? Why hadn't she returned?

A plump cricket dropped onto Nīkau's toes, oblivious to the silliness of landing on a set of kāhu talons. He pecked it and held it out to Poto. 'Snack?' he mumbled through the tip of his beak, but she'd straightened up, suddenly alert.

'I wonder where they are?' Poto asked, looking around.

Whetū landed above them, her eyes glinting. The bush swayed under her weight. 'Māmā and Āri? Do you think they should have been back by now?' she mused, her brows sitting low over her eyes.

Poto searched her brain. 'Maybe they went to catch eels? Anyway, don't panic.' She kept her voice calm, though she was beginning to worry. 'Māmā may have flown to Te Kōtumu to find us?'

Te Kōtumu was their old meeting place. A large dead tree, half-buried in the swamp where lots of kāhu met and some slept. Perhaps Māmā had caught enough kai to share with the others?

Whetū stamped her foot. 'What about the hunting grounds?'

'We're flying to Te Kōtumu,' Poto replied sternly. She willed Nīkau to agree, and swallowed hard to moisten her tongue and throat.

'Really?' Whetū called back. 'The hunting grounds sound way better.'

Nīkau was at Poto's wing, yet he looked worried – and that was never a good sign. Yet they weren't far away from Te Kōtumu and Poto wasn't about to change her mind.

'We're going.' Poto didn't wait. Something pushed her forward. A feeling that every decision from now on was already made for her. That her future had arrived. She had to fly.

She beat her wings twice then glided until a rush of air lifted her higher into the sky. Whetū screeched and Poto could feel her sister glaring at the back of her head, but she knew she'd follow. She always followed. Poto climbed up, up, up towards the sun with Nīkau at her side. Behind their tails flew Whetū, rolling through the air, grumbling. But it made no difference. Poto blocked out any of her teina's angry squawks. Her heart was beating so fast that the tips of her wings fluttered in fear. Please be at *Te Kōtumu*, she prayed to the sky-spirits. *Māmā, please be there.*

Jack Remiel Cottrell

Jack Remiel Cottrell (Ngāti Rangi) was born in Wellington, then moved Dunedin to study psychology. He now lives in Auckland and works as a freelance copywriter. He was shortlisted in the 2020 Sir Julius Vogel Awards for Best Short Story, and his work features in *Ko Aotearoa Tātou* (Otago University Press 2020) and *Year's Best Aotearoa New Zealand Science Fiction & Fantasy* (Paper Road Press 2021).

Ten Acceptable Acts of Arson and other very short stories was published in August 2021 by Canterbury University Press. It is a collection of flash fiction pieces ranging in length from 280 characters to 300 words. Organised through the days of the week, the stories cover diverse themes including childhood, cricket, magic, time-travel, folk-tales and unrequited love. He specialises in writing super-short stories which reflect the weirdness of the times we live in. He also referees a lot of rugby and forgets to update his website (jackremiel.co.nz).

The practical downsides of accidental necromancy

It was life-changing, the day her brother almost drowned.

Not just the sudden, terrible presence of mortality in their midst — but because she had saved him. Hauled his lifeless, floppy body from the pool and performed CPR, while their cousin called an ambulance.

He wasn't breathing. She started humming 'Stayin' Alive' to time the compressions, like she'd read on Facebook. By the time the paramedics arrived, he was conscious, with only a concussion from falling and hitting his head.

That day, she decided she wanted to become one of those paramedics.

Except she couldn't pass the first-aid course. Twice she had been too weak to do compressions on the dummy to the right depth for long enough.

She couldn't understand it — her brother was 18, well-built, and she'd resuscitated him easily enough. She supposed it had been adrenaline.

Then a second accident. The little boy from across the street, rushing into the road. The car, going too fast to stop. A screech, a thud, and her neighbour hit the ground like a broken toy.

'DRSABCD... DRSABCD...' she muttered, trying to find a pulse. She couldn't. She checked his airway, mindful of spinal trauma. Then, there it was! A fluttering in his neck, where thirty seconds ago there was nothing. Again she met the paramedics, and accompanied her neighbour to the hospital.

She sat on a plastic chair in the waiting room for hours, until the boy's mother emerged, hugged her tight, and sobbed that he was going to be okay.

'I still can't pass that dummy test,' she complained to her brother.

'Maybe you only save people who've actually died,' he said, 'That would explain everything.'

The next morning, she signed up for her third first-aid course.

Reasons why I called in sick rather than go to the mihi whakatau for new employees last Friday

1. When I did kapa haka at primary school, one of the leaders asked who in the group was Māori. I raised my hand and a teacher told me not to be silly.
2. When I was 11 my cousin Justine, who attended kura kaupapa, laughed at my accent after I said a karakia.
3. In my first year of uni the RA asked if anyone on our floor was Māori. When I said yes, a guy yelled 'What tribe are you from, Ngāti Ginger Ninjas?'
4. The aunties at my marae have often told me I don't know anything. I'm not sure if they're right, but I believe them.
5. Two years ago, my journalism class had a lesson on te reo Māori in the news. We prepared our mihi, but when I spoke, I tried to sound more Pākehā so no one would think I was pretending to be something I'm not. Then I sat down and burned with shame.
6. Last Wednesday, I told the organiser of our mihi whakatau that I had been to pōwhiri before because I'm Māori. He laughed at me.
7. Because I didn't want another reason.

They probably play the viola

Kia Ora Students,

University administration has noticed higher-than-normal numbers of time travellers appearing this semester.

The Vice-Chancellor's Office would like to take this opportunity to reassure students that Everything is Fine.

The Head of Department for Physics, Dr Amanda Wu, is keeping us informed about the implications of time travel. She warns that students should not approach any time-travel device that appears on campus. Disrupting these could maroon our visitors from the future or cause a universe-ending paradox. We want to assure students that a universe-ending time paradox is very unlikely, but in the interest of openness and transparency, you should note the possibility.

Some students have asked time travellers for information about their upcoming exams. This is a breach of your Academic Integrity Policy, and anyone using information gleaned from the future to gain an unfair advantage may be subject to disciplinary processes.

We are not being complacent about the possible consequences of rogue time travellers. Sanitiser stations are available around campus, and we encourage you to use them if you feel anxious about super-bacteria from the future to which your immune system has no defence.

Sadly, it has also come to my attention that a small number of individuals have spread rumours that the time travellers visit the Music Department because one or more music students will commit horrific acts of genocide in the future.

These rumours are hurtful and go against our university's commitment to fostering an inclusive community. *He waka eke noa.* #BeKind

If you are worried about paradoxes, super-bacteria, deadly futuristic weaponry, or the possibility you will be subjugated by a brutal dictatorship originating from a cabal of musicians at this university, the student counselling service is always available to you.

Yours sincerely,

Professor R. Serling
Vice-Chancellor

Promise to meet me at the seventh stream where the waters run away to the sea

'Stop picking.'

My nails, cut so short that the tips of my fingers are red-raw, cease trying to lift away the scabbing on the inside of my elbow. I know Mother is waiting for me to say it itches, so I keep quiet.

It doesn't itch, not really. Instead, it is a tightness; my skin feels as if there is something underneath, trying to get out.

The lake is cold at this time of year. It is deep, but very clear — in the right light I can see glimmers of silver, just at the point where the water becomes too dark to clearly make out a sinking stone.

I keep trying to touch the bottom, but I haven't been able to yet. I think I am getting closer, though it is hard to tell, with nothing other than a watch on the jetty to tell me how long I can hold my breath.

Mother wishes I would stop swimming, because afterwards my skin gets even worse. Huge flakes slough away, revealing flesh that is smooth and firm. The cracks disclose a skin which is not really skin — too grey and too cold and too sleek.

After I come back from the lake she slathers on moisturiser, but it doesn't do anything other than prolong the process. Then she tells me to stop picking while the top layer of my skin gets tighter and tighter. It falls off anyway, whether I pick or don't.

I love the water. And I don't care about my skin. I'm certain I will reach the bottom of the lake soon, and no one has skin down there.

Is it still just a bromance if you daydream about seeing him naked?

You've tucked your daughter in, kissed the baby, and promised your wife you won't be out past midnight. You text your brother a second time before you leave, to apologise for being late — although you don't say what's taken you so long.

But your brother already knows you spent half an hour trying to get your hair right, and the tiny shake of his head when he hands you a beer makes you feel more pathetic than ever.

'You have to stop trailing around after him,' your brother tells you, though you barely hear it because you keep craning your head around to look at the door.

You want to argue that you've never trailed around after anyone, but you can't bring yourself to tell a lie that obvious.

So when you don't tell him to fuck off, your brother leaves you to your silence — forces you to look away from the humiliating pity that shows in his eyes.

And it is a crushing, infinite five minutes while you drink a handle of Speights way too fast and wait for the arrival of the man you will never admit you love. In that infinity you run through all the reasons it is impossible and twice through the reasons that impossibility must be, has to be, a good thing.

Then he walks through the door, and in an instant you've fallen again.

Microfiction

Lavishing attention on the droids didn't bring them out of their sullen moods. So we tried to find a better term than 'robot puberty'.

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* *

I wasn't sure which was worse: trackers beaming ads into our REM sleep, or when copyright notices arrived for the contents of our dreams.

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* *

Empathy generators worked on most people, but not all. We voted the outliers into power anyway. Probably because we felt sorry for them.

*
* *

Spring is sprung! The grass is riz, I wonder where the boidies is?

No, seriously... Where have the birds gone?

*
* *

Bushfire season came earlier each year. Soon every month had fire restrictions, as we tried to make sure there was something left to burn.

*
* *

3D printing only became ubiquitous once the machines could print using any material — plastics, plants, stem cells, dreams.

Melanie Dixon

Melanie is a graduate of the University of York (BSc Hons), Oxford University (MSc), and Hagley Writers' Institute (cum laude). She was a recipient of the Wallace Scholarship during her MCW year. Her writing and photography have appeared in a number of journals, magazines, newspapers and anthologies, including *takahē*, *Flash Frontier*, *Bonsai: Best Small Stories from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Canterbury University Press 2018) and *Ko Aotearoa Tātou* (Otago University Press 2020). She served as editor for three issues of *Write On Magazine: New Zealand's Best Writing for Kids by Kids*, and teaches creative writing at Write On School for Young Writers. Her web site is melaniedixon.com

The *Darkness* is Book One of a speculative young adult trilogy, set in a future, post-climate change New Zealand. The year is 2360. Huge covers have been placed in the sky to protect the world from the sun, plunging it into a state of permanent semi-darkness. Fifteen-year-old Merel and her best friend Ren discover an otherwise unknown species of bird while out of bounds. This discovery triggers a sequence of events which force Merel to question the world she lives in. Who can she really trust, and who will end up betraying her?

I clutch at Ren's arm and he gives me one of his idiotic grins.

'You okay?' There's a hint of worry in his voice. For all his bravado, he must be feeling nervous too.

'Sure. You?' I don't want him to know I'm terrified. There's no shelter up here, no shade. What if the sun really is as bad as people are saying?

'Never been better.' He smiles again then stares up, open-mouthed.

The whirring grows louder, followed by a tiny chink of light. A sliver of brightness hits the sea just beyond Littleton, expanding into a beam of sunshine that tracks across the town and through the

tree-tops lighting them in a bright, vivid—

'Green.' The word escapes from my mouth before I can stop it. It's green like I never imagined. I've seen green before, under lamplight, so I know what green is. But despite all the pictures in the Books of Knowledge, despite all the descriptions, I didn't expect this. It's intense and striking and wonderful. As the chink of light widens, the whole world turns green. And so many different greens.

It's too much. Too much light, too much green, too much colour. I look away and shield my eyes with my hand. What if it really is dangerous?

I glance at Ren. His mouth and eyes are wide open, his face lit with joy.

'Wow.' That's all he says. 'Wow, wow, wow.'

When I see his face, my fear vanishes. His joy is contagious. I'm with Ren and I'm not afraid anymore.

'This is amazing!' I laugh with the excitement of it all. I should have brought a hat. I should put on those eyeshades that Mum made me pack. But I can't tear myself away from the sheer beauty of it.

Then the sparrowlings start to sing. Sunshine fills the sky and the forest comes alive. I've heard sparrowlings sing before, but never like this. This is pure joy. Even Corvus lets out an exultant caw, as if he's only just realised what he is. That he's a bird. I stare at him. He looks shocked at the noise he just made. Then he does it again and I laugh.

'Dawn chorus.' I gasp. 'They're welcoming the sun for the first time.'

Ren looks confused. 'What do you mean?'

'The Books of Knowledge tell of a birdsong called the dawn chorus. It used to happen every morning. When the sun rose, the birds would go crazy with singing. And here it is. The first sunrise. The dawn chorus.'

The sparrowlings aren't exactly tuneful, but they tweet and chirp madly, as if they've finally figured out what it means to be alive. I can't stop myself from smiling.

Then the sun tracks across to the platform. Closer and closer.

I grab onto Ren's arm. 'Do you think it's safe?'

He grips my hand and smiles. And before he can answer, I am hit by light and heat.

Sudden brightness.

Deep warmth.

It's like nothing I've ever felt before.

I have to close my eyes. I tilt my face upwards and my eyelids glow pink and red. I lift my arm to cover my eyes with my elbow. Warmth seeps into my legs and arms and body. Every muscle relaxes.

'Wow! Look! Wow!' Ren again.

I open my eyes. Beneath me the forest is bathed in endless greens. I spin round and watch the sun expand past us. Beyond the forest and the Ōtautahi Strait, the hills of the Main Island light up in the sudden sunshine. Row upon row of hills, stretching to mountains in the distance. I never knew there were so many. And above the hills it's blue. Deep, endless blue. Like the pictures in the Histories. Blue upon blue upon blue. Boundless blues, up and up into the atmosphere.

'Blue.' I can hardly catch my breath. It's so wondrous, and even though I knew it would look like that, it's still utterly unexpected.

'Beyond the blue.' It's the first line of a poem we learned in pre-school and I never understood what it meant until today, until right now. It's the richest, deepest colour I've ever seen. I never thought it could be like this.

'Look!' Ren nudges me. I turn to look where he's pointing.

Down below, Littleton is basking is sunshine. Light reflects off the roofs and streets. And beyond the town is the blue of the sea. The endless ocean stretching away to the infinity of the horizon. There's nothing else out there. Nothing but waves and saltwater. And somewhere, sinking into the depths, is the body of Albany Reese.

I lift my binoculars to my eyes. There's something there, on the horizon. My heart skips. Is it Albany?

'Careful,' Ren says.

'It's okay,' I reply. 'I'm not going to look at the sun.'

With my binoculars, I scan the sea. There it is. It's not Albany, but a wind-ship. Now that twenty-four hours have passed since the send-off, wind-ships are allowed to come back into port. But there's something unusual about this one, it's different from any wind-ship

that's been here before. The three slim masts are sleeker, and its sails sharper. Its pointed hull cuts through the water leaving little wake behind. Trading ships come and go with supplies, but there's something odd about this one, something sinister, though I couldn't say why.

'What is it?' Ren asks.

'Just a wind-ship,' I say.

'What else can you see?' He can't contain the excitement in his voice. I drag my binoculars off the wind-ship and scan the town. I can see the colours of the turf roofs, the brown of the muddy paths, the Main Street, the port. I search for my house and find it. I'm too far away to see Mum, Dad and Bexley, but I imagine them awestruck like I am. I scan across for Ren's place, then the school, then...

That's when I hear it. I'm sure I hear it. A solitary, piercing, bell-like note.

'Hey!' I grab Ren's arm again. 'Did you hear that?'

'What?'

'Shush. Listen.'

There it is again. A high note, a low note, then three in the middle.

'What is it?' Ren frowns. Even Ren, who usually couldn't care less about birds, seems interested, for once.

'It's... I don't know. I've never heard anything like it. It's some sort of bird, something different though, something new —'

'Something new?'

My body twitches involuntarily. It can't be possible. There can't be something new out there. I've got to find whatever's making that sound.

'Let's go.' I whisper.

Ren seems to understand. He swings down the ladder without asking any questions.

I tear down after him, launching myself down the metal frame as fast as I can without risking falling. Corvus follows me, flapping and cawing.

I jump the last metre, hitting the ground hard. Then I run.

I bolt through the bush, branches and leaves whipping my arms and face. I'm following that plaintive bell-like sound — I've got to find

that bird. Ren is behind me, his footsteps thumping as he runs.

'Where is it?' I stop and listen.

My heart is thudding, my lungs heaving in my chest.

There, ahead.

I run again, slower now. We're getting close.

'Hey! Bird-g—'

'Shush!'

Three plaintive notes. That's all I need. I raise my binoculars and search the treetops. It's all too bright. The branches are nothing but black silhouettes against the bright blueness of sky. Damnit. I'm not used to this light. I hear it again. I'll have to get around the other side if I'm going to see it. I need the sun behind me. I scrabble across the roots, slipping and almost falling over.

'Where are you?' Ren calls.

'Shush!' I don't mean to sound grumpy, but I can't risk scaring it away.

Three bell-like notes.

I raise my binoculars again. And I see it.

The bird is sitting in the lower branches of a low-light rimu, just a couple of metres away. I can't believe how beautiful it is. Its feathers gleam in the sunshine, shimmering grey and green at the same time, with a deep blue wattle beneath its throat. It looks like some sort of ancient being.

It is beyond exquisite.

Then it opens its beak and sings. I actually see it sing. Its throat moves in time with the sounds coming out of its beak and I can almost feel the notes as they surround me.

'Woah! What's that?' Ren is beside me. I glance sideways. He's shaking.

'I don't know,' I whisper.

'But—'

'I don't know,' I snap. I've got no idea what it is.

'So, how—?'

'I don't know.' How can this bird, something I've never seen or heard of before, turn up here? On Sugarloaf? Today?

'Is there only one?'

'I don't know—' As soon as I say it, it dawns on me. There must be more than one. There must be a whole population, living out here in a tiny tucked away corner beyond Littleton, where nobody ever goes.

'It's incredible.'

I can hear the joy in Ren's voice.

'I know.' I laugh. 'It's singing because it can see the sun.' I grab my notebook out of my bag and start scribbling, noting down the time and place and doing a rough sketch of what I've seen. It's my job as scientist to record everything. This is the most exciting thing I've ever seen. I can't stuff this up.

Paula Gosney

Paula set up a couriering business at age 20, employing only young women on bikes dressed in lime green to deliver packages around Wellington. This was the beginning of her entrepreneurial life and her commitment to feminism and empowering women. She has been coaching, speaking, writing and hustling ever since.

In 2021 Paula was longlisted for Newsroom's Surrey Residency. Her work has been published in *Villainesse* and *Good Magazine*. Work is forthcoming on *The Three Lamps* and Radio New Zealand.

Paula's descent into hard drugs and dangerous sex is the story she tells in *Bitches, Bikes and Honeys*, a memoir that explores the hidden impact of our cultures pervasive sexualisation of young girls.

I am sitting in front of my big round scalloped mirror perched on top of the mahogany dressing table I found at an Erskineville second-hand shop. The tabletop is scattered with clues from my colliding worlds: studded bracelets, lipsticks, trinkets of love, and Terumo syringes with their distinctive little orange caps. Draped over one side of the mirror are chains and belts and jammed into the claw that holds the mirror upright is a strip of black and white photos from a photo booth of Diana and me; she's laughing, and I've got my tongue in her ear. This is my alter—my favourite drug-taking spot.

It's 12.30 am on November 17, 1996. I'm 28 years old, alone in my room, in my inner-city Sydney flat, playing Russian Roulette.

I'm shooting cocaine into the best vein of my left arm, and within seconds I soar so high my skin feels as though it is conducting its own electricity: my heart racing way beyond what it is built to handle. Minutes pass, the high subsides and the inevitable hunger rolls in.

Will my heart stop if I have another shot? Will it collapse. Or explode inside the cavity of my chest, painting my ribs with ribbons of flesh?

It's 1.03 am. Here we go again—I don't care.

Fuck, this is full-on. My hearing turns metallic and distant. My chest tightens and my heart bucks as though it is trying to escape. I think I might puke. God, how many times have I been here? How many times have I taken drugs by myself, right here?

1.34 am. Time for a bigger shot.

Holy shit, I think my head is going to explode. Ecstasy—so fierce, ragged breathing—trying to get air—tummy swimming. My feet start to go. I'm in trouble. Twitching.

Is this it?

I'm holding on. Riding the high that is no longer pleasure yet does not feel like pain. Have I gone too far? My phone is open on the floor next to me, triple zero ready on the screen. Will I be able to hit send before it is too late?

A very fucking nice rush. Every nerve ending in my body part of a holy choir singing hallelujah in perfect harmony.

Slowly coming down.

Surviving.

I read a Johnny Deep interview once; he talked about drugs and how one day his heart started to race at 200 beats per minute for 45 minutes; they took him to hospital and gave him a shot to stop his heart for a couple of seconds.

I'm safe; I'm only at 130.

Not for amateurs though. But I'm no amateur am I. Dancing out here on the edge, lost in a suicidal current, obsessed with being this close to death, playing with it.

The hunger creeps in.

It's 4.10 am.

Coming down.

Misery.

The intense high and adrenaline of the cocaine have gone. I mix up the small taste of heroin I saved to cushion the fall. Loosening the tourniquet, the blood seeps from the new puncture wound, and I sink into the safety of a slow downward roll.

I'm sprawled on the floor, the empty chardonnay bottle next to me. I've given up using a glass and have finished the last third straight from the neck.

I'm passing in and out of consciousness. I lie here, my face melded to the rough carpet, cold dribble pooling against my cheek. The heavy lids of my eyes closing and then randomly pulled open by an unknown puppeteer. I'm facing my wardrobe mirror that extends from the floor to the ceiling; I look at myself across the weave of the wool and the accumulation of debris and fluff on the speckled carpet: not pretty, not rebellious—pathetic. Red spider eyes and black kohl streaks smeared across my face. This is where I belong.

I try to lift my head but the weight of it is too much. My body is boneless; my muscles liquified. I need to call for help but can't hold on to that thought. Reality has fled; my brain is feeding on self-pity and chemicals. I'm caught between living and not caring. In a fleeting conscious moment, it registers in my scrambled mind that this is as close as you get Paula. This is the edge where the black god of serendipity steps in, and with a gentle nudge of his bony finger he tips you into the land of never-coming-back.

Two days earlier, I was in a boardroom at Microsoft on the North Shore, presenting a marketing strategy for a new product launch. The day before that, The Australia Aids Federation discussing our recent safe-sex campaign. Even though my head is almost shaved and dyed scarlet red and my nose pierced with a tiny diamond chip, and my nipples sport rings with fiery red balls that make them continuously erect, I manage, with modest make-up and impeccable suits, to pass as a corporate devotee.

My company is called Storm Communications, and I work collaboratively with an assortment of renegade graphic designers, photographers, and video editors based out of an industrial warehouse in Redfern, the latest suburb to be swept up in the hungry growth of Central Sydney.

Storm is a small virtual marketing agency; we flit around the edges of the big agencies, picking up the medium-sized jobs they don't want. I'm the suit, bringing in projects, getting them done, taking a cut. I'm a natural and intuitive saleswoman. I drive a bright red, late-model, short wheelbase Pajero. Some friends call me Pats—after Patsy in *Ab Fab*—because I don't think the rules apply to me and often

park her with a wheel on the curb looking like a drunk has brought her to a stop.

My life is divided into two. One half, a smart young professional earning a six-figure income, who lunches on Fridays at the fashionable MG Garage, drinking Chardonnay and slugging oysters. The other, a woman in deep pain, stabbing her body as she tries to feel something; a junkie who will shoot water or wine into her veins when there is nothing else to use, just so she can pierce her skin, stick the needle in, watch the blood pull back and then push it home again.

I share a flat with two women on the fringe of Sydney's soon to be gentrified Inner West, in Erskineville. One of five semi-detached houses squeezed between high industrial walls, each with a surviving tree out front resisting the concrete. Hardly anyone comes our way after dark or on the weekends; there is a forgotten privateness to our location. Mine is the big room at the front with windows that snatch the morning sun through the mandatory bars that secure central Sydney properties.

The plan had been nothing special that night; meet friends at a pub, play pool.

I got changed into my favourite going-out leather pants and sturdy don't-fuck-with-me boots: a look intentionally orchestrated to communicate no men. I'm five foot seven, with a coat-hanger body—square shoulders, long neck, if not a little heroin skinny. Safe in my room, behind closed doors, the music on and a glass of wine poured, I laid out my gear and began my ritual. I like starting the night alone—with solemn, solitary worship to the drug gods.

I had purchased my speed earlier from a dealer and stopped at the friendly chemist up the road—the one committed to harm-reduction—picking up a brown paper bag containing half a dozen syringes, sterile water ampules and swabs, also grabbing two bottles of wine from the local: one for now, one for later.

I mixed up a gram, heating it, stirring it in, pulling the liquid through a clean cigarette filter to strain out any chunks. The butterflies in my stomach had threaten to boil out of my throat. I used to think my brain caused the butterflies from eager anticipation, now

I'm sure my body is protesting the poison about to be injected. Tying my arm off with my belt, I ran my finger over the plumped-up vein, sliding the needle in, feeling for the space inside so I could pull back and watch the swirl of crimson that signalled it was okay to send the amphetamines flying up my arm.

IV speed raced to all the sweet spots of my body, brushing my skin with the sensitivity reserved for an orgasm. The instant clarity that always follows the initial rush slows and expands every blink and heartbeat. Colours and sounds crowded my senses, and the exhausting destructive chatter inside my head that I live with every day was silenced. Speed is the sweet gift that, for a few hours, allows me to be fully present in my body. Put a pool cue in my hand with a tank full of speed and I am a demon. I crave this feeling above all things: to be calm, clear, and bulletproof.

My ritual done, I headed out into the world. But I couldn't settle; there was an agitated dissatisfaction in me. I couldn't shut out the noise. The pub and the people annoyed me. I wanted to use more drugs, to be alone. I went to the Cross and bought coke from a bouncer; not my usual thing, but I couldn't find anything else. Then back to my room, on the other side of those bars, on my floor, in my house, I invited death in.

It's my mother who saves me. Not physically. She doesn't bust down the door, splash water on my face and drag me off to rehab. Her love saves me. I don't love myself enough to give a rat's arse what I do to my body, but my love for her is steadfast. There is still a sliver of something inside me that cannot bear the thought of her living through the grief of my death. In the desolate, lonely hours, barely able to move, my brain severed from my body as only a large amount of drugs can do, I can see her. She keeps flickering in my mind. She is a feeling, a tiny thread holding me connected to my past and the possibility of a future.

If I tell you she appears as a light, you'll think of a near-death experience, but it isn't that. It is the accumulation of everything we had been through together. Of her showing up when it was rough, standing in the storm of my anger, doing the best she could when she was as lost as I was. Layer upon layer, laid down over decades, not perfect, and not just words; hundreds of deeds that light up a tiny

part of my brain that carries the colour of something good, stopping me having one more shot.

'I've tried, Mum. I've tried so hard to get it right,' I whispered from the side of my mouth that was not muffled by carpet. 'I'm sorry,' are my last slurred words as the feeling of her slips away from me into nothing.

Hours pass before my consciousness returns. I am still on the floor, in my leather pants and bra—very Christiane F. The sun is fiercely stabbing between the wooden blinds I've forgotten to shut, and the night's paraphernalia is spread around me, evidence of my suicidal dance. I roll over, my head is thumping. I open my eyes, then close them against the reality of the morning. I'm so bilious that I'm heaving; my mouth is sandpaper and glue. I try to sit up, something registers as wrong but I can't work it out. Half sitting, I realise that my left arm hangs lifeless at my side, as useless as a shot possum hanging off the back of the farm truck.

I'm still totally fucked up on drugs, groping around the floor for something to drink so I can swallow while staring in confusion and disbelief at my arm that is coming along with me but not participating. This is all happening in seconds, not minutes. I will it to move, but nothing happens. I lift it up with my other hand, feeling the dead weight of my arm; panic is rising. As soon as I let it go it drops to the floor, the back of my dead hand hitting the carpet with a thick thud.

I scream.

And I cry. I cry for what a fuck-up I am. I cry because I'm terrified that I have really done it this time. I cry because I am scared and broken and ashamed.

I call my brother. 'Aaron, I'm in trouble,' I croak into my phone. 'I think I need to go to the hospital.'

'Ok. What's happened?'

'I dunno. I've had too much to drink. I've done something to my arm.'

Scraping myself off the floor and using the shaking fingers of my hand that works, I undo the buttons and peel off my leather pants. I bump and lurch along the hallway towards the bathroom, my

shoulder keeping me upright. Turning on the shower inside an old high-sided tube, I half-climb, half-collapse into the enamel cradle. Steaming water runs over my body, and for a moment, that is all I allow myself to feel, the hot water pushing away the pain, burning away my disgrace.

Joanna Hill

Joanna Hill grew up in the UK. An interest in hand-built sculptural ceramics in her BA in Fine Art Sculpture shaped a career in studio pottery production and ceramic painting. In 2004 she moved to New Zealand with her husband and two children. Joanna loves sailing, going cruising on the Hauraki Gulf with her husband in their traditional wooden boat. Working as an activities therapist, Joanna set up a discussion group for terminally ill patients to share life stories. This prompted her to start writing her own memoirs and poetry. In 2017, she joined a writer's group and began writing short stories.

Blue Water is a tale of the emerging journey into adulthood of two sisters, who set off from England together to explore Italy during the summer holidays. In different ways, Ana and Katrine are haunted by shadows from their troubled past, but each girl must face her own demons. The influence of friends they make along the way, combined with their individual struggles, puts pressure on their relationship, and they find themselves on very different paths. Travelling plunges them both into new experiences, and they discover more about their inner worlds, and those of the people around them.

Their picnic consisted of a squat, white loaf of local bread with a hard crust that hurt Katrine's teeth. And goat's cheese that was white and messy, with enormous tomatoes that were so red and sweet they tasted of the sun. Giorgio proudly produced a tiny bottle of dark olive oil with an earthy scent to drizzle over everything. They washed it all down with watery rosé from a thermos flask of ice cubes, refreshing in the heat.

Cooling cloud shadows passed across, and dense masses began form. The wine made Katrine sleepy. Bronze sunlight sparkled darkly on the water, hazy and obscure. Sabatino reflected a different mood. Giorgio told them how the lake was volcanic, but not a crater lake, and the water was thought to have special properties since ancient times.

Katrine said she was named after a lake in Scotland, near where her mother grew up, Loch Katrine. The name meant clear. 'Not that I feel very clear about anything,' she added. But maybe she was transparent.

'I would like to visit Scotland one day,' said Paulette. 'The love of mountains is a family trait.'

Her mother had grown up in the mountains of Tuscany, she said, but her family moved to the Pyrenees before she was born.

'My family have lived in this area for many generations,' said Giorgio. His voice carried a sense of belonging, of continuity. Paulette's family shared a love of mountains. Katrine saw only arguments – her mum crying, her father's glowering face. They weighed each other down: Katrine didn't even understand why they'd got married.

'I've always lived by the sea,' she said, and started to pack up the picnic things.

The weather was changing. It was still, and she was melting like ice-cream, beads of sweat running down her as if she hadn't had a swim earlier. Heavy, humid air compressed the landscape, and her head throbbed. The heat was so sticky Katrine could hardly breathe. She brushed away tiny black flies that had started landing on the picnic cloth, now crawling over her arms and legs. She commented on the lack of wind.

'Maybe it has swung behind the land,' said Giorgio, looking up. Spectacular cumulus clouds towered overhead, fusing into a dark, obstinate mass on the eastern horizon. 'We'd better get back to the boat. I'm sorry. There is no time to explore the park now.'

'What are the risks in a thunderstorm?' Paulette said. 'Could lightning hit the boat?'

Yellow light glimmered across the water. The sun broke out under purple continuous cloud and the landscape looked surreal.

'There is some risk with the mast,' said Giorgio. 'And strong winds are more the problem – a sudden squall and we could capsize. We must be careful and stay close in to the shore.'

They arrived at the bay a few minutes later, and stood on the shoreline. Katrine looked out over choppy, uneven wavelets. Occasional gusts buffeted her back. The boat was further out than she remembered. It would be a hard swim. Maybe the anchor had dragged

– in which case, they'd better be quick. Giorgio seemed to have the same thoughts.

'I'm going after her,' he said. 'No point all of us going out so far. It could be dangerous.' Katrine took the bucket with the picnic remains, their clothes, and mobile phones in a dry-bag. Giorgio swam towards the boat with swift crawl stroke. He looked small in the giant landscape, willowy frame pitted against the elements, and the boat seemed even further off.

When Giorgio reached the boat, he clambered aboard. Katrine got ready to swim out, ignoring the ominous weather. This was not the North Sea, after all, just a lake. There were no fast running tides and steep waves. And it was summer, in Italy – even if there was a thunderstorm on the way. Paulette played with the strap of her swimsuit, agitated and fretful, rolling up and down on the balls of her feet.

'Come on,' said Katrine, 'let's go and stand in the shallows to be ready when he brings the boat round.'

Giorgio rowed slowly towards them with long oars, and they waded out as far as they could before starting to swim. The water was cold. Katrine pushed the bucket in front of her like a float. She glanced round, and Paulette was already lagging, starting to flounder. Katrine swam back.

'Just tread water,' she called. 'When Giorgio gets to you, hold onto the side of the boat.'

The boat passed Katrine in a small arc. He must have seen Paulette in difficulty. Katrine swam across and passed the bucket onto the boat. She was out of breath. It had been a strenuous swim.

'Hang on there,' Giorgio said to Katrine. He was trying to help Paulette get aboard the other side. 'Your weight will stabilize us.'

Paulette was too tired to get herself out of the water, and the boat kept tipping with their combined weight. Giorgio had to slide into the water to give her a push so she could scramble aboard. Katrine hung onto the gunwale and trod water until it was her turn, then she gave her best dolphin leap to do the same.

Giorgio found some spare clothing for Paulette, who was shivering. Then he gave her a waterproof jacket, and got some chocolate from a small box.

'Emergency rations,' he said with a wry grin, and passed it round.

'Lifesaver,' said Katrine, and sugar flowed through her. They drank water from their bottles, and Paulette offered round a few boiled sweets.

'We use these when we're walking in the mountains,' she said. 'I shouldn't have drunk the wine. But I thought we'd have a walk first, and it would wear off.'

Giorgio gave Paulette a hug, which seemed more than friendly. Sometimes, Katrine missed those small indications, the subtle interplay between people that said what was happening – except, perhaps, with Ana. Katrine usually saw through her.

The wind had given its last gasp as they swum out to the boat. A heavy, unnatural stillness clung to the air and made her brain ache. It must be air pressure, not wine, causing this feeling.

'We won't be sailing,' said Giorgio. 'Can you row?'

How like her father he looked in that moment, nothing external, just his expression. Something about his eyes was so familiar. Katrine imagined her father as a much younger man, before the years etched angry lines into his face – he might have looked like Giorgio.

'Yes,' she said, 'I can.'

Katrine sat in the front of the boat, facing astern, and Giorgio set up the second pair of wooden oars, which were long and heavy. The rowing position was awkward, much wider apart for her arms than on the little dinghies she was used to. The oars felt cumbersome, but she didn't say anything. It was a question of pride. Paulette sat in the stern of the boat, and Giorgio showed her how to operate the tiller. Then he took the middle position and told Katrine to follow his oar strokes, slowly at first, until they got into rhythm.

It was hard going. Katrine tried her best to keep in time with Giorgio, but he pulled with his whole back, and she struggled to keep up with him. Often she missed a stroke, and had to start again. Dense, solid heat rolled across the water, and her body ran with sweat. Leaden air stuck to her parched lungs. Slaves on Roman ships must have felt like this. Thunderclouds glowered behind their little boat. Beyond the eerie, molten steel of the lake, the horizon filled with unmistakable anvil forms. It would not be long before the thunderstorm arrived.

Katrine rowed until she no longer thought about rowing. Her body became absorbed in the monotonous rhythm, and her mind roamed back to the tree and the driftwood train. In a bizarre way, it seemed as if she'd actually seen Hunter. Was her mind playing tricks on her? Her unborn twin soul, her inner man: Hunter was part of her innate knowledge, yet she knew so little about him. Why had he died, while she had lived? Her mother had never explained what really happened. Although in fairness, she'd never asked.

The first heavy drops pummelled her head and arms, the rain in warm air scented like crushed raspberries. Forked lightning scattered across the sky with an almost simultaneous roar of thunder. The storm was close. Warm, fat droplets of rain soaked down Katrine's back, sticking her clothes to her skin. Her eyes stung, and she could taste the salt of her own sweat. The oars slipped and turned in her hands as she rowed, chafing her palms. Rain was beating her. How much longer could she keep going? The boat heaved about in blasts of turbulence. She watched Paulette astern, huddled in a waterproof, hanging onto the tiller with both hands.

'Not much further!' Paulette called, sopping hair falling in front of her glasses. They rowed on for what felt like an eternity, and just when Katrine's shoulders were falling out of their sockets, Giorgio guided them ashore in the deluge. They came up alongside a small jetty, where Giorgio worked fast to tie the ropes and stow the oars. Together, they wrestled a small tarpaulin over the whole boat to keep water out.

Turene Huiarau Jones

Ko Puketapu te maunga
Ko Te Ārai te awa
Ko Horouta me Takitimu nga waka
Ko Ngati Maru te hapu
Ko Rongowhakaata te iwi
Ko te Poho o Taharakau te wharenui
Ko te Mokai te whārekai
Ko te ara o Tuaraki ki Manutuke te wahi noho
Ko Turene Huiarau Jones toku ingoa

Turene Jones has spent most of her career writing for the screen and stage. Her award-winning play, *I Ain't Mad At Cha*, enjoyed two sold-out seasons, and tours around the country. The MCW was her first foray into writing in prose. She has a passion for telling stories about Māori for Māori, spends her spare time drawing, and has a BA in Psychology and a BA (Hons) in Theatre.

The Transfer is set in a near-future Auckland, where technological advances have led to the discovery and manipulation of the mauri, the lifeforce, of every living creature. A procedure, called the Transfer, is developed wherein a suicidal person can donate their mauri to restore the health of someone that is dying. This procedure brings together Tatiana Reynolds, a young woman dying from kidney failure, and Cohen Kowhai, whose brother, William, donates his mauri to Tatiana.

At the end of the tour, they were shown back to the reception area by a prostitute whose neck had been slit. She then gave Ella-May and Tatiana electronic notepads so they could rate their experience. Tatiana gave them five stars for everything and left the comment sections blank, but Ella-May tapped a flurry of words into her response. Tatiana watched the crowd that had amassed as Ella-May typed. Tired parents accompanied their loud, bright-eyed children,

looking as though they couldn't wait for the school holidays to be over. Tatiana thought they had to be desperate to provide entertainment if they were willing to take their kids to Spookers.

A boy, who couldn't have been older than ten, whose guardian was buying tickets for him and the five other children he was with, walked right up to Tatiana and said, 'Wow, you look sick!'

Tatiana smiled at his audacity. Kids often openly commented on how she looked but usually the ones who spoke up were younger.

'Yes, I am very sick,' she responded.

'What's wrong?'

'My kidneys don't work.'

He considered her comment. 'That sounds bad.'

'It is.'

His eyes widened. 'Will you die?'

'Maybe.'

Tatiana didn't want to upset him but death was a normal part of life. It wasn't going to hurt him to know.

'You should get a Transfer.'

There it was again. It was as though the procedure was following her – she couldn't escape it.

She pretended to take his suggestion seriously. 'I'll think about it.'

'It will help. Just do it.'

'Jonathan!' His guardian turned to them. 'Stop bothering that young lady and get back here now.'

'Well, I hope you get better.' He waved awkwardly then re-joined his group.

'What a rude boy,' Ella-May said. 'Sweet, but rude.'

After Spookers, they went on the search for a pharmacy that sold nutritional drinks since they had forgotten Tatiana's liquid feed.

'Gross.' Ella-May screwed her face up when they found the right aisle. 'They only have the brands that taste like metal.'

'It's fine.' Tatiana and her grumbling stomach didn't care. 'Just grab a couple of the RealMed Inc ones.'

Tatiana sat in the car with her dialysis machine in her lap, and drank her liquid nutrition slowly. She didn't want a repeat of what happened the other day at the café. Ella-May ran into a

supermarket to grab herself something to eat before they drove to Weymouth Beach.

When she arrived back in the car, Ella-May was grinning, holding a sandwich, a bottle-shaped paper bag, and two mugs. Tatiana knew exactly what Ella-May had bought without having to see it.

'I can't,' she said.

'Don't worry!' Ella-May sounded confident. 'I looked it up — one or two glasses won't kill you.'

She drove them to the beach and pulled up in the carpark. Rain thrashed the car's windscreen. Tatiana could barely see the ocean. The wind pushed and pulled at the car, and she could just imagine the mess the choppy current was creating on the seafloor. Tatiana hated northern weather — it was temperamental and could change from clear skies to a raging thunderstorm without any notice.

'A typhoon hasn't been forecast to pass over, right?' she asked Ella-May. They were coming to the end of typhoon season.

'Nope,' Ella-May replied, 'but my car is typhoon-proof anyway.'

Tatiana still felt uneasy — she was pretty sure typhoon-proofing was a scam. Even climate change wasn't immune to capitalism and consumerism.

Ella-May filled both of their mugs to the brim. Tatiana had never tasted red wine before, or 'merlot' as Ella-May called it, dragging out the last syllable. Her face screwed up involuntarily with each sip.

'Sorry,' Ella-May apologised. 'I bought the cheapest bottle.'

Tatiana took another drink, and warmth from the wine spread across her cheeks. She was getting used to its tangy bitterness. Her body relaxed and her head tingled with tipsy happiness even though she had only drunk half of her mug. Ella-May only had one — even though her car could drive itself, she still couldn't be caught under the influence.

Sheets of rain pounded the car as they drove south. The Waikato River had overflowed onto the motorway, so the journey took twice as long as it did in the morning and Tatiana fell asleep. It was five o'clock by the time they made it back and it was already growing dark. Tatiana felt the car slow and awoke to find that Ella-May had pulled off into the Hamilton Lake Domain Reserve, followed by a drove of other cars.

'The light show!' Tatiana exclaimed.

Drone-light displays were held for each major holiday or festival. Tatiana had attended almost every single one because it was close to the hospital and relatively safe. She had put the thought of going to the Easter show out of her mind since her condition had deteriorated.

'They've lifted the fireworks ban for this year's Easter show,' Ella-May explained. Tatiana had made no secret about her love for fireworks and her contempt for the Hamilton Area council's ruling on banning fireworks year-round except for New Year's Eve. 'So I thought it was meant to be.'

While they waited, Tatiana and Ella-May wandered about the food trucks and market stalls filled with Easter merchandise. Fairy lights sparkled above them. New-age gospel music struggled to be heard over the noise of the crowd. Ella-May bought them both churros, rabbit-shaped light sticks and the ugliest autumn-themed sweatshirts they could find. Tatiana watched children laugh and squeal, and pull their parents from one stall to the next. Groups of teenagers loitered, using the festivities as an excuse to socialise without supervision, and couples wandered about holding hands. Envy pricked at Tatiana each time she saw a couple show affection towards each other.

'Argh, everyone is so sugary sweet and in love.' Ella-May was obviously jealous too. 'At least you won't be leaving behind some poor forlorn lover if you die.'

'Nope,' Tatiana agreed. 'Just a forlorn family and best friend.'

She heard Ella-May sniffle and immediately regretted making the comment.

The crowd started to make their way to find a place by the lake to watch the display, so Tatiana and Ella-May moved with them. Since Tatiana was in a wheelchair, an usher led them to the best viewpoint along the lakefront. There were even seats so Ella-May didn't have to sit on the picnic blanket she'd brought.

'Perks of caring for an invalid,' Ella-May said. Tatiana was grateful they weren't the only ones in the disabled area. In fact, it filled up quickly – it seemed as though the entire district had come out to watch the display.

Ella-May jerked towards Tatiana in her seat. 'Have you been taking your meds today? I haven't once seen you reach for them.'

Tatiana had, but while Ella-May wasn't watching. 'I'm pretty doped up – can't feel a thing.'

Ella-May leaned back in relief. 'I am the worst caregiver. Remind me to not do this again.'

They looked away from each other. The implication remained unspoken, but they both knew that Ella-May wouldn't be caring for her again. Either Tatiana would have gone through with the Transfer, or she would be dead.

Night had fallen. They were lucky – the weather was calm and even though there was a chill in the air, it wasn't unbearably cold. Tatiana could smell a storm coming and hoped it would hold off until after the display.

At seven on the dot, a hologram was projected over the river to announce that the display was going to start in ten seconds. A countdown flashed before them. Tatiana felt anticipation rise. The crowd grew quiet as music from an organ started to play. Movement across the lake caught her eye – one thing her disease hadn't taken from her was her eyesight. Tatiana could make out small drones rising in perfect formation. There had to be thousands of them, more than she had ever seen before. Row by row, they lit up in various shades of red, orange, yellow and green. They danced like birds in murmuration, before they hit a point in the air where they could be seen by everyone along the water's edge.

The display started with a leaf breaking off from a large oak tree, then transitioned to a close-up of the leaf. Tatiana could see every vein on its surface. The detail made it hard to believe the drones were being controlled manually. The leaf danced in the wind and travelled through different scenes that other drones played out. It came across a small child and a large dog playing in puddles. Then the wind took the leaf to an estate's garden, where it fluttered amongst the trees, hedges and granite statues where rabbits were hiding Easter eggs. With each scene change, the leaf's colour darkened as it started to break down. Tatiana lost herself in each scene, forgot where she was and everything that was going on with her. There was no sickness, no

Transfer, no sadness and disappointment – just her and wild horses running through a grassy plain in a rain of lights.

Fireworks boomed in the sky as the display drew to a close. Tatiana jumped every time one exploded. It was such old technology and she wasn't sure why she loved them so much. Their sparks rained down so close to the audience, Tatiana was sure if she reached out, they would burn her.

Tatiana stayed lost in a dream of lights from when they left Hamilton Lake, even after Ella-May had dropped her off at the hospital.

Tsitsi Mapepa

Tsitsi Mapepa was born in Zimbabwe and moved to New Zealand in 2007. Tsitsi is inspired by her dreams to write poetry and short stories and is a firm believer in the magic that is in the endless puzzle of the letters of all language. She studied at Manukau Institute of Technology, where she won an award of excellence in 2016 and the Kairangatira award in the Bachelor of Creative Arts in 2018, before her MCW degree at the University of Auckland.

Tsitsi's work has been published on *Ribcaged* (MIT Spoken Word 2017) *Little Treasures* (2018), and *Black Creatives Aotearoa* site (2020), as well as in the *Ko Aotearoa Tātou* anthology (OUP 2020). Two of her stories been recorded for broadcast by Radio New Zealand.

The Deadly Bush is a novel in stories set in the Southern Africa, mainly in Zimbabwe. The novel traces the events that took place before and after the Independence of Zimbabwe. The Tahas move from Marondera to settle down in Harare with the hope of bringing fortune into the family. And here, at their new dwellings in Harare, culture, war, religion, love, politics, and death make them delve deeper into their relationships, their past, and their present lives.

Nyeredzi scratched a match on the brown side of the box. Flames were born, and she threw the stick on the stuffed grass inside the hole. The girls bent, hands on their knees, and waited, staring at the hole. It wasn't the second hand ticking on Zuva's wristwatch in her old basket which told them how long the girls waited but each bead of sweat flowing from their foreheads until it dropped on the soil. Perhaps it was the smell of blood from the baby snakes they had just killed or smoke that lured out what was inside the hole. The top burnt grass had turned into black ashes but still it produced waves of smokes that disappeared into the atmosphere. Nyeredzi could still hear the sparks popping underneath the quiet, dark hole.

Just when the girls were starting to lose their patience and their curiosity about what was going to happen, something knocked the burning grass into the air and landed a few feet from them. They leapt back in fear, unsure what had come out of the hole. Long and thick, its tummy, neck, and head were grey, the rest of the body was blackish with a shiny herringbone pattern of scales. It was a black mamba, only a few metres away from them. Its head was raised, mouth open, ready to attack. Nyeredzi had never seen a snake that big and angry and she could feel Abigail shiver next to her as fear took over. The adrenaline of bravery had worn off. Nyeredzi didn't move her eyes.

'What do we do?' Abigail asked. She sounded as though she wanted to run away.

'Nothing,' Nyeredzi said. 'Mama, Mama!'

Zuva turned around. 'Don't move,' she shouted. She grabbed some stalks of half-dead grass and walked fast towards Nyeredzi and Abigail. The box of matches that Nyeredzi had used before by the termite hill lay on the ground. Zuva used them to set the stalks alight. They created a dense, dark smoke. Then, cautious of the black mamba, she moved closer to the girls and placed the burning stalks around them. Nyeredzi and Abigail stood, crying and trembling, but their mother remained calm.

The black mamba's head was now swaying sideways, neck stretched in the air, trying to bite at the girls with its glistening fangs. They had been told by Zuva to stay away from this termite hill, but Nyeredzi was curious. She'd wanted to know what was in there. What Nyeredzi thought she could handle wasn't what she had imagined all along. She thought it would be small snakes coming out of the hole. The ones she was chopping off with a hoe or stomping with the heel of her shoe when they were half-dead.

When Nyeredzi discovered that there were many snakes in the bush, she wished that one day if she came across a snake, and if it looked into her eyes, maybe it would understand her. But now, standing there in front of a venomous snake with seconds to live if it attacked them, there was nothing to be understood. It was clear that both creatures were enemies. Prey versus predator. If it were to come closer like Nyeredzi had wished, she would only have the kiss of death.

Although the black mamba was furious, the stalks of grass that Zuva had placed around them released heavy smoke, which clouded the snake. This subdued its anger, making it drowsy. The black mamba uncoiled itself, its shiny herringbone pattern of scales gleaming under the sun. It slithered away slowly, defeated, towards the dense bush. That's when they realised it was between one and two metres long. They did not wait for it to return.

'All right, I think it's time we go home,' Zuva said, picking the basket and their hoes.

'I don't want to come back here anymore,' Abigail shouted, facing Zuva, her body still trembling.

'Go and tell those people we have a black mamba in the bush,' Zuva said, looking at Nyeredzi.

'I think we should set a trap for this snake, Mama, that was really long,' Nyeredzi said, and ran towards their neighbours who were digging in their field. Her fear had turned into excitement. Once again, Nyeredzi was curious to know what would happen if they captured the black mamba mother. They had already killed some of her children, and she wondered if this snake was going to take revenge at some point, and death would fall upon them.

Zuva called the Snake Park from the call box down the street and asked the authorities to come and capture the black mamba. Nyeredzi saw the men with their equipment, small cages, long sticks that had hooks at the end, and the large snake bags to tie the snakes inside. Although the men found some snakes in the bush, which they took to the Snake Park, Zuva's family weren't sure if the black mamba was captured too. The men told Zuva to put the bush on fire to chase the rest of the snakes away, but she was against it. It would have affected other animals and Nyeredzi wouldn't have heard the beautiful sound of the pigeons cooing in the wild berry trees or run of the rabbits again.

Nyeredzi lay in bed, the only one awake. Her sisters were fast sleepers, and if she woke up, she lay still, staring at the grey asbestos roof. Two days had passed since the incident with the black mamba. Her mother had decided to leave the termite hill field alone for a little while.

The nights were getting warmer, so Nyeredzi had pushed off the thin blanket she shared with her sister. Nyeredzi felt Abigail stir next

to her, then scratched Nyeredzi's hand.

'Nyeredzi,' Abigail whispered. 'Don't move. A snake has coiled around my leg.'

Nyeredzi wasn't sure if Abigail was dreaming, but she didn't dare move.

'How big?' she whispered back.

'Maybe the length of my forearm.'

'Then don't do anything stupid,' Nyeredzi said.

She looked into Abigail's eyes: all they were saying was, 'I'm dead, goodbye, my sister, I love you.' Nyeredzi turned her head to look at the top of their blanket, a big bump was there by Abigail's legs. Abigail stayed still. Nyeredzi didn't want to alert the snake, but its head was moving. Nyeredzi slowly moved out of the bed as silently as she could. She tip-toed to Zuva and Mwedzi's bedroom through the dark passage and knocked on the door.

'Mama, wake up, a snake has coiled Abigail's leg.'

'What?' asked Zuva, shuffling Mwedzi's shoulder.

'I said a snake has coiled Abigail's leg. Hurry! It's going to swallow her.'

'Oh, my Lord, save my daughter,' said Zuva.

No one knew how deadly the snake was. Mwedzi, in his shorts, ran outside in the dark to grab the *gabhu gabhu* sticks from the chicken coop, where Zuva kept them. The sticks released a thick, intense scented smoke that snakes didn't like, and Zuva had only kept them to chase snakes from her chicken coop. Within a few seconds, he was back in the girls' bedroom, holding the sticks next to Abigail's head. Mwedzi lit the gabhu gabhu sticks from the burning paraffin lamp, now adjusted to light up the room for them to see. Mwedzi held the sticks, pointing them underneath the blanket and the smoke circled the room.

Zuva had put a wet towel on Abigail's face for her to breathe easy. While Nyeredzi was on the other bed within the room, watching, her eldest sisters were waiting in the corridor. Zuva was holding a thick log by the door. Though Mwedzi told Nyeredzi to leave the room, she didn't move. Instead she held her hands together and prayed silently, asking for the snake to let go of her sister's leg, for it not to get angry

and attack Abigail, who was still lying on the bed, frozen. She had forgotten how much they fought.

Wide-eyed, they watched the snake uncoil itself from Abigail's leg slowly underneath the blanket. Nyeredzi, Zuva, and Mwedzi tried not to cough. The smoke was not only making the snake drowsy; it also turned their eyes red and teary. The brown snake poked its head from the edge of the bed. First, the head touched the floor, and once its whole body was on the floor, Zuva swung really hard aiming at its head with a log but missed the first time. The snake twisted its shape on the floor, trying to escape, heading to the wardrobe doors that were opened. Mwedzi was now holding a hoe he grabbed from underneath the bed, waiting to chop the snake in half, but Zuva hit the snake several times with the log.

When everyone in the room was sure that the snake was dead, Abigail was still in bed, still frozen. Nyeredzi brought the paraffin lamp closer to study the creature. It was long, slim and brown. Nyeredzi then remembered she had seen a brown snake a few days ago. She stared at it while it slithered in their neighbour's yard on the grass. When it disappeared into the dead leaves, she had called for her mother. Zuva decided not to look for it since it was dangerous for her too. While Mwedzi took the dead snake outside to burn it, Ruth and Hannah were busy checking if there were any snakes left inside, under the bed, the drawers and inside the blankets. It turned out Abigail was okay; except she had wet herself so Zuva kept rubbing Abigail's leg with a towel to clean her.

While everyone seemed unsettled, Nyeredzi knew it could have been her leg coiled with the snake if she had covered herself in the blanket too, but she got lucky. She wondered if the snake had come for her. Perhaps it was her wish. Perhaps the snake had seen Nyeredzi before while she watched it slithering on the grass. Maybe it was just revenge from the snake family. They had killed lots of snakes, after all.

Sarah Murray

Sarah Murray was raised in West Auckland, where she still lives with her husband and three young children. An award-winning feature writer, she has been a journalist for over 10 years on some of New Zealand's leading publications including *Sunday* magazine and *NEXT*, and has written for the *Sunday Star-Times*, Stuff, *Canvas* magazine, *Metro* magazine and many others. Sarah is now the managing editor of *Fashion Quarterly* magazine.

The Seanachai is a collection of personal essays about the author's experience of growing up in an Irish-Catholic family, one of which has been recorded for broadcast on Radio NZ. The title is an Irish word meaning 'storyteller'. Sarah had been told her grandfather in Ireland was a Seanachai, but the concept also relates to this narrative, which is, more than anything, a tribute to the man she revered: her father. His death three weeks after the birth of her first child unleashed a thousand emotions and questions, and through this collection of memories spanning 30 years—set in London, Ireland and New Zealand—she attempts to articulate and resolve some of them. Each essay looks at a pivotal episode in her life—from the unsettling (her first wake, aged six) and the farcical (flogging boxes of Ireland's most favoured chip, the Tayto, at the Avondale Market), to the devastating (losing her father). Most of all, The Seanachai is about family, love, culture, resilience—and finding your way home.

It's May. Winter has set in, and the trees are skeletons. We drive the two minutes from our house to the Buckleys' home on Tirimoana Road. The tape in the car plays a rousing Irish song, cut short when Dad turns off the ignition. Together, as a family of four, we walk through the front door. I know this house, this sitting room. I've been so many times before, whenever Mum pops in to see Lynn, a former nurse with a matronly appearance and manner. Mum sits at the kitchen table with a white mug of instant coffee, her red lipstick

stamped on its rim, and I hang around her legs, giving her no space until she gets fed-up and says, 'go play'.

Sean is seven years older than me, but as the youngest of his family he is always forced to entertain us with what few toys he has left. A few days earlier, before he died, Fi and I obediently followed him to his room and he took his WWF figurines from his cupboard. We aren't into wrestling and didn't like those masculine figures with their bulging muscles but we pretended to be interested in them, and he pretended to be interested in us. He sat on the floor with us, colliding the figurines together with unstoppable force. And then, bored, he got up and went outside to play on his skateboard. I stood up and watched him through his bedroom window.

'It's okay,' Dad says, as he shepherds Fi and I in and motions us forward. I hold his hand, roughened but now clean of the dirt he's been working in all day. Dad isn't in his usual uniform of work boots caked with mud, and well-worn clothes. He is freshly showered and dressed in jeans and a collared shirt. He smells like peppermint and aftershave.

It is hot inside the Buckleys' small house. Wood crackles in the fireplace, and flames lick playfully at the logs. All the furniture is out of place, pushed back, as if it is magnetised to the walls, making way for the coffin that now stands where the coffee table should be. The small lounge is straining with the unusual influx of people, and they drizzle out to the adjoining kitchen where the mums bustle about making cups of tea and handing out bottles of beer.

I nervously move towards the centre of the living room. This is my first wake and I don't know what to do. I haven't known anyone who has died before, except my grandma in Ireland, who died before I was born, and Jesus. Earlier I was excited to come, but now I realise too late I don't want to be here. No one does.

Dad walks over to Tom, Sean's dad, who is his business partner: together they are Murray and Buckley and specialise in water mains around West Auckland. Tom is the closest thing Dad has ever had to a best friend. Normally Tom jokes around and pulls coins out from behind our ears, but tonight he looks ashen, gripping a bottle of beer. Fi and I, nervous but curious, approach the coffin. Shiv is already here

with her older brother Ciaran, a freckly nine-year-old with auburn hair. The two of them are standing right next to the coffin, staring at Sean. We walk over to them. My cheeks burn. I take a deep breath, stand on my toes and peer inside.

It's the cotton wool that gives it away. A small fluffy piece meant to blend in with his blond curly hair, but it stands out. The white, too bright to look like human hair, the consistency too full to pass for individual strands, even if it is a close match. From far away you wouldn't notice, but I can still see that thick matted tuft, carefully placed in Sean's hair, covering up what is underneath.

'That's where they drilled it,' says Ciaran, when he sees me staring at it. Ciaran is the oldest of us 'littlies' as we are called, and therefore the authority on everything. He picks up one of Sean's hands and holds it in his.

'It doesn't hurt,' he says, reacting to what must be my worried face. 'You're dead!'

Sean doesn't look dead. He looks perfectly healthy, lying flat on his back in his coffin in the middle of his lounge. It is as if he has dozed off for a quick nap, like he's probably done so many times after school. My head just reaches above the rim of the coffin and when I look in, my face is close to his. Sean's milky skin is the same, but a bit glazed. He still has his murky brown freckles, a prominent cluster across the bridge of his nose. And although I can't see, I know if he opened his mouth there would be those two extra teeth, the ones that were growing overtop his eye teeth and would now never have the chance to be fixed. These extra teeth always reminded me of vampire fangs, but they were never menacing. You only saw them when he smiled.

Everyone says Sean looks like an angel tonight. With that blond curly hair, his child-like body, and those still-plump cheeks he appears to have descended from heaven, not as though he's heading up there. The only difference is he has no angel wings. Instead he is wearing the uniform of a 90s teen: grey track pants, and a matching hoodie that he picked out for his upcoming birthday. He has on thick white athletic socks, and no shoes, his family reasoning he doesn't need them where he's going.

'Look,' says Ciaran. 'His hand's warm now. You can touch it.'

He offers Sean's limp hand to me, then Fi, then Shiv. I shake my head, too scared to get closer. I gaze at Sean's body, searching for cuts and bruises to somehow explain it all. Even though I can't see any, I know they are there. I've been told what happened. I know the driver lost control of the car and crashed. I know it was Sean's side that hit the power pole. I know he died instantly. I stare for a long time, not quite sure what I am supposed to be doing.

Before Sean died, I planned to marry him. One night I put on my white nightie with the multi-coloured stars on the front, a hand-me-down from Fi. I walked out into the living room barefoot, plastic beads slung around my neck and cheap rings squashed onto my fingers. Dad was slumped in his armchair watching the news, weary from a day of digging drains, sometimes by hand. Mum was ironing.

'I'm going out,' I announced. I picked up a small pink plastic purse and put in some crayons, Barbie shoes and a few coins I'd found down the back of the couch.

'Where are you off to, darling?' asked Dad. He turned his head away from the TV and grabbed the glass of beer from the side table with his large, leathery hands. He took a long sip, the white froth attaching to his beard.

'To marry Sean,' I said. I felt excited. Determined. Grown-up. Dad smiled, the skin around his blue eyes crinkling.

'But it's bedtime, darling,' he said. 'Go and choose a book.'

At the wake people move around us, talk over us. They cry. I don't realise how loud it is in there until the hum of constant chatter peters out and the parish priest gathers mourners around the coffin. He is Irish and wears a deep chocolate brown robe and leather sandals. It is the same outfit worn by all the Capuchin monks from Holy Cross Church in Henderson because they have taken a vow of poverty. When the priest finally speaks it is as if the whole room, and everyone in it, is sucked back towards the centre, towards the coffin, as if Sean has taken one last ragged inhalation of breath. Then comes the rosary, a series of prayers led by the priest. I listen to the monotonous drone

that is familiar from Mass, but the meaning washes over me. People pray in hushed voices, repeating the same words. Some have their rosary beads wound around their fingers, and every so often the glint of metal catches my eye and I see a swaying Jesus nailed to the cross. We are supposed to be praying for Sean's soul. I move my mouth for the words I know, but I don't pray. Beside me, Ciaran hasn't moved. He stands sandwiching Sean's left hand between both of his, as if warming that hand will thaw him back to life. I think everyone in that room hopes to God it might.

Wendy Parkins

Wendy writes fiction and creative non-fiction and is a former professor of Victorian literature who has taught at universities in New Zealand, Australia and the UK. Her memoir, *Every Day, So Far, I'm Alive* was published by Otago University Press in 2019 and her essay 'Water Says Things So Clearly' appears in *Strong Words 2: The Best of the Landfall Essay Competition* (Otago University Press 2021). Wendy is represented by High Spot Literary Agency.

Undone is a novel that explores what happens when everything comes apart in the middle—life, career, marriage—and we are set adrift from our past. It begins when the protagonist, Liv Burns, learns that her husband Luke had an affair while he was on sabbatical in Italy and wants to end their marriage of more than twenty years. The manuscript for Undone was longlisted for the 2021 Michael Gifkins Prize.

In the mail room of the English department on a Wednesday morning, Liv Burns was fine. Last night her husband, recently returned from a sabbatical in Italy, had announced that he was leaving her.

'I've met someone,' Luke had said, on an otherwise ordinary evening. An evening where Liv had made soup that they had eaten in silence. An evening where Luke had washed up while Liv moved to the sitting room with her laptop to catch up on email, one of those comedy panel shows on TV in the background. An evening where Luke had then stood in front of her, rolling down his sleeves, and asked if they could talk. Liv had put aside her laptop and muted the television.

I've met someone.

Luke had paced up and down, gesticulating as he talked. He was unhappy, had been unhappy for years. It was clear they had grown apart and that Liv no longer loved him. He wanted to begin a new life with someone else.

Rage had bubbled up in Liv like bile then, spilling out in foul insults, when all she had really meant was, No. You did not do this. This has not happened to me.

Her hair scraped back in an unforgiving ponytail that exposed the threads of grey at her temples, Liv collected late essays from her pigeon-hole and returned to her office. She was absolutely fine.

She added the essays to the untouched pile of marking and dropped heavily into her chair, causing it to knock against the desk. The vase of irises wobbled but did not fall. She had bought them on her way to work on Monday, a gesture for spring and hope: summer would be here soon, the students would leave for the year, the campus would quieten, and she could finally turn her attention to her own projects.

Outside her window, weak sunshine spilled into the courtyard separating the English Department from the residential college behind it. Its drab brutalist architecture never failed to disappoint: no dreaming spires here, even if the university was only an hour by fast train from the British Library. A blue-tit hopped in the rangy hedge in the centre of the courtyard, twisting its tiny body to expose the vivid yellow of its chest before disappearing from sight again. Even in that moment of distraction, though, the pain of Luke's betrayal was like a raw socket after a tooth extraction that you can't stop probing with your tongue, the lingering taste of blood curdling your stomach. Someone. No.

Until first light, Liv had lain awake alone in bed, ice-cold hands pressed between her thighs to stop them shaking, and imagined the meeting of eyes at a research centre banquet, somewhere two people could sit close, listening attentively to each other under the cover of convivial chat around them. She had been to similar places, if not anywhere as palatial as a Florentine villa, where one could write without distraction among other academics similarly free and unburdened, far from home. It was not hard to picture all the clichéd backdrops for a sabbatical affair that Tuscany would provide, the cloistered museums and piazza cafés.

She remembered video chats with Luke from his study-bedroom at the villa, a high-ceilinged, light-flooded space on the upper floor.

Behind him, tall windows gave onto a view of cypresses and the blue-green outline of forested hills; beneath the windows, his bed. Liv's empty stomach lurched at the thought.

She had not heard any stirring from the guest room when she got up this morning. Would she return home this afternoon to find him packing? Or would he have already fled with a hastily packed suitcase and a box of books? And where would he go? For all the hours they had spent weeping and raging at each other last night, Liv had no clear idea about where the someone was now, whether she was still in residence at the villa or had returned to her own university, too. And where was that? It was more than Liv could bear to have this someone take shape with a name and a body and a life of her own.

Her vision clouded. No more tears. Not at the office. If she succumbed to weeping again she would be lost. She had a lecture to deliver, followed by a seminar, and a PhD supervision after that. And essay marking, of course. Best make a start on something, then. To clear some space on her desk, Liv picked up a splayed book and her eyes fell to a sentence on the page she had underlined only yesterday, in a stolen half-hour's reading: 'one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other... people we know, or barely know, or know not at all.'

How had Luke singled this woman out, this woman unknown to her? What had made her so special, kindled his attraction? That was the word Luke had kept using, attraction, until it had sounded strange in Liv's ears, syllables devoid of any meaning. 'And then I realised that the attraction was mutual,' he had said, primly formal even as his voice shook with emotion. After twenty six years of marriage Liv could barely remember that move from attraction to flirtation and beyond. A glance caught and held a beat too long, or a lingering smile.

Luke had aged well so far; it was something that she had often noted with a tinge of resentment, the way that time was more forgiving to men. The slight silvering at his temples had not detracted from the sheen of his still thick, fair hair and, if anything, had made his eyes seem bluer. He ran regularly and wore the same size in clothing as when they met, unlike Liv. Everything on her body was softening – her chin line, the skin on her upper arms, the pouch of flesh on her belly – and yet inside she felt brittle, all sharp edges that could easily

be chipped off like porous sandstone, seemingly inflexible but dry and crumbling, vulnerable to the elements, in need of protective scaffolding of some kind.

She didn't want Luke to leave.

Where had that thought come from?

Last night, there had been a new urgency in Luke, a desperation for his life to be different. She felt again the pang, like a thin blade twisting just below her ribs, when he had spoken of his desire for someone else, that unknown woman. And just like that, the unspoken truth about their marriage—that it was empty, unsound—had been laid bare.

He knew he had lost her love, Luke had said. Sometimes he had felt her contempt for him. Was that the case? Luke had given no hint before last night that he had minded, seeming too preoccupied, too complete in himself, to care. It was true that they had been living as if they were old friends sharing a house, sleeping in separate beds, working in their respective studies in the evenings. They never quarreled over the little things, like whose turn it was to go to the supermarket. Work was their shared priority. He never demanded more from her; she had nothing to give.

In the beginning, though, when they were students in Dunedin, Luke's attention had been all she wanted. She had neglected her own thesis to read philosophy, Luke's subject, so that she could share that with him, too. The memories of their early years had a clarity and intensity that nothing since did. Luke, tracing the outline of her curves and hollows with his fingers while he talked about the impossibility of knowing anything beyond one's own lived experience. How can I truly know you? How can I verify your world when I can only see my world, only inhabit my perception of the world? He liked to press his forehead against hers until his features merged into a single blue eye and she believed she could see his world too, so near was he to her, his fingers inside her. And she would dare to move her hand down through the already-sticky tangle of hair between his legs, marvelling at this new power she possessed, wanting him to know this was no mere perception, until he closed his eyes, on the brink of yielding to the place beyond words, beyond intellect.

It was almost funny now, how solemnly they had approached sex, as if no couple before had ever brought together body and mind, as if they alone were possessed of this transcendent, arcane knowledge, this questioning and response where it wasn't clear who had the upper hand, or the last word. And then, one day, it wasn't enough for her. She had stopped needing to inhabit Luke's world. All the parts of herself that she had wanted to lay open to him, with nothing to hide, had gradually closed up, sealing over seamlessly. It had become easy, such self-containment, uncomplicated by the vagaries of desire. During the months of Luke's absence, she had often got up before sunrise, turning on music and frothing milk for coffee in the empty house, no worry about waking anyone.

Was that really all she wanted from life? It had felt like freedom, no longer being that young woman at the mercy of her desire, needing Luke's touch like sustenance, but now it seemed small and pathetic.

She didn't want him to go.

She had to go home. She emailed the admin team to say she was unwell, left a note on her door for her PhD student, and fled.

John Prins

John Prins was born in Ahuriri. He has a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Otago and a diploma in teaching from the University of Auckland, as well as his MCW. John has taught English and Media Studies at secondary school for six years. He lives in Auckland with his partner and their child. *The Recording Device* is his first novel and was longlisted for the 2021 Michael Gifkins Prize.

The Recording Device is a novel about communication, heteronormative fatherhood, legacies, teaching and learning, and indecision. The story is episodic and told from multiple perspectives. Cormac is a teacher about to leave his job to be a full-time parent; Louise is trying to rewrite a play for television; Ennis must decide if he should go to university; and Bernard must answer questions about his new book of poetry.

When Cormac did arrive to his year twelve English lesson, the students had let themselves in. He started apologising loudly in the corridor, projecting his voice to be heard before he entered. He liked to breeze in as though he'd rushed across the quad and through the hallways after an important meeting. The reason he projected his voice down the corridor was to give the kids a warning. He didn't want to see anything he didn't want to see, something that would require discipline. As far as he was concerned, he was not their parent. He didn't become a teacher to teach students manners, or help them to organise themselves, or establish a work ethic, or to lecture them about social responsibility. This was not year twelve etiquette. It was year twelve English, and he wasn't a life coach, or a cheerleader, or a motivational speaker, or his favourite—he wasn't their friend. Literature was his passion, not teenagers. His job was to teach them how to read and write, that's all.

There were forty-three minutes left in the lesson when he entered the room. A tight group of boys emerged from a huddle around someone's phone. This was exactly the type of thing Cormac wanted nothing to do with. If he did see something, he'd have to tell the dean, who would go to senior management, and he'd be in a restorative justice meeting faster than he could say let me see that. He told them to put their phones away and asked Sophie Greg not to sit on her desk, reminding her how insensitive it was to sit on a table. She glared at him and inched down off her perch.

The classroom was fusty. Lethargic ceiling fans looped overhead. If he turned them up any higher, paper flew everywhere. As it was, students underneath the fan were having to weigh down loose paper. The boys' uniforms were sloppy. Cormac asked Liam Hughes to roll up his sleeves to hide a ruby-coloured stain. Frayed cotton dangled where breast pockets had been torn off. Socks were down, buttons unfastened. The students' faces shone and their fringes stuck to their foreheads. The smell was the same in every classroom—school shoes, body odour, and cheap spray-on deodorant. By period five the smell would be offensive.

Half the windows didn't open because they were painted shut during the Easter holidays. Wire was strung across the ceiling and Cormac had imagined hanging dust jackets of his favourite novels or pegging flags up to represent all the nationalities of his students. He meant to staple student work on the walls, too. This year had gotten away from him. The only decoration was a poster for his favourite film, Old New Zealand.

Desks were reshuffled into groups of four, five, or six to accommodate the social demands of being a teenager, which was fine. Students should collaborate at every opportunity. His year twelves were his noisiest class, easily distracted, unruly at times. The din could only be one of three things—gossip, complaining, or boasting. Cormac told the class to be quiet, then when they didn't calm down, he told them to shut up. That got their attention. The printed copies of the poem they would look at during the lesson were on his desk. One of his more obsequious students was handing them out.

—One per person, Cormac said.

Someone asked if the poem was up online. It wasn't. Cormac looked up to see who had asked and, of course, it was Stephanie Preston. She had some sort of vision impairment that made it difficult for her to read black text on white paper. It was a legitimate condition, but Cormac had heard every excuse for failure and lost patience with needy kids. Stephanie reminded Cormac that she had to write using her computer, which was another story about privilege being told as though it was about disadvantage.

—What did they say about reading? said Cormac.

—About what? said Stephanie.

—Are you allowed to read on paper?

—If it's orange paper, she said, or yellow.

Cormac lobbed a highlighter at Stephanie and told her she'd have to colour in the paper herself. He regretted it straight away. It wasn't witty, or funny. After all these years, Cormac was still surprised by a classroom's ability to sense when he'd crossed the line into callousness. Stephanie's dignity was defended by a chorus of 'oohs'. She would not talk to Cormac for the rest of the year, which was fine; senior students were going on study leave in a week. She could join the club.

Today's lesson was practice for the unfamiliar texts section in the upcoming external examinations. This involved writing an essay in response to a poem they were reading for the first time. During the exam the students were expected to read, understand, and respond to questions about a poem they were given. Cormac liked to teach this skill because it allowed him to expose the students to his favourite writers. He had even printed one of his own poems on the back of the worksheet. Whenever he did use his own poems, he used a pseudonym and claimed the poet was a troubled genius who died young. His poems were easily as engaging as the ones he taught from the canon, sometimes more so.

He held up his paperback edition of But Baby, I Love You, a collection of poems by a real-life troubled genius, Bernard Jane, and started to introduce the poem they'd be looking at when Harry Deeks burst through the door and asked if he needed a late note. Cormac told him to tuck his shirt in and sit down. There was no need to make a scene.

Near the front of the classroom, Troy was flashing his scrotum through the slip of his open zipper to another boy. Sophie, sitting nearby, saw and laughed. She whacked her friend on the shoulder and pointed. The friend peeked and winced, laughing too. It wasn't an honest laugh, it seemed performative, as though this is what she must do to protect herself. His whole testicle was hanging out now. It looked like the brain of a marsupial. Cormac didn't have time for meetings with deans, senior management, and parents. It was exactly the kind of incident that could escalate into a serious controversy. He tapped Troy on the shoulder and narrowed his eyes in a silent warning. Troy's eyes widened and he collected it up and tucked it back in through his zipper. Where there should have been remorse on Troy's face, there was only pride.

—Right, said Cormac, today we'll be looking at a poem by Bernard Jane. Anyone heard of him?

No one raised their hand. No one was even looking at him.

—Screens down please.

He waited while the students saved their games or sent an icon to their friend or whatever they needed to do. One or two were probably searching Bernard Jane's name but it was best they didn't, not yet.

—That's okay, all you need to know is that he's a New Zealand poet and you should think of him as one of our best, a master craftsman, a true original. You could use words like enigmatic, idiosyncratic, and iconic in your practice essay. Think of him as a pioneer, a mountaineer, even a buccaneer.

—What's a buccaneer? someone said.

—A pirate, said Cormac.

—Why don't you just say pirate? said another student without raising their hand.

—Hands up for questions please.

Harry Deeks held his hand high above his head and called out his question again.

—Oh, I don't know, said Cormac, the same reason you insist we call you by your middle name Harry, when your parents actually called you Kevin.

There was a rush of muttering around the room. Harry would not

be defended, he did not have enough social capital. Though Cormac regretted his meanness, there had to be casualties in every classroom. These teenagers had an insatiable appetite for public humiliation.

—Look, said Cormac, all you need to know at this stage is that Bernard Jane is someone worth knowing about.

The students continued talking to each other. Cormac repeated himself, but quietly. He knew they'd quieten down to hear him. The thing about young people is they are obligated to their curiosity. In almost a whisper, Cormac continued.

—Today's poem is the titular poem of the collection, But Baby, I Love You.

Still no one was listening. Cormac held the paperback above his head and shouted for everyone to settle down. He asked if anyone knew the name of the bird on the book's cover. No one bothered to guess.

—Okay, said Cormac, you're right, you shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

It was okay, they never laughed.

Deborah Robertson

Deborah Robertson grew up in rural Whangarei and has lived in both Auckland and Wellington, earning a Bachelor of Arts and Graduate Diploma in Secondary Teaching from the University of Auckland as well as her MCW. She has worked as an English and Media studies teacher, film-writer and editor, and has published several short works, including a short story scheduled to be broadcast on RNZ. She was selected for the 2020/21 Te Papa Tupu Writer's mentorship programme and her manuscript is currently under consideration with Huia Publishers. When not writing she can be found teaching English to high-schoolers, making pottery for galleries or running through a suitable patch of forest in Northland.

Before George is a middle-grade historical novel inspired by the events surrounding the 1953 Tangiwai disaster. It follows Marnya, a young South African immigrant whose mother cuts off her hair and changes her name to George just hours before perishing on the Christmas eve train. In this fatal moment, George loses not just her family and name, but also the answers as to why her mother deceived her father and fled their homeland. A story about life, death, and otherness in rural New Zealand.

My new name was George.

I traced the name across the cool surface of the window and said it aloud under my breath.

'J-orge.' The first consonant, a foreign sound to my Afrikaans tongue, cut the air around me. I looked across at my sister Karen, but I hadn't woken her. She was curled up like a kitten on the dull iron of the train seat, her red Christmas dress folded into a permanent rumple around her. Next to her sat my mother, hands folded across her lap, eyes closed. It angered me that she was able to sleep while I was left awake to wonder.

I wondered how easy it was going to be, having a new name. Did a new name make me a new person? For the past twelve years – all my life so far – I was Marnya.

I didn't know if she'd told Karen where we were really going. Had she carved the sharp edges off the words, softening them as she had not done for me?

I was angry with my mother for bringing us here. I'd taken off my shoes, now that she wasn't looking and my long thin legs dangled down over the edge of my seat. I had always thought of them as girls' legs and girls' feet. It was hard to think that they might also be boys' legs and boy's feet. What was it that made them one or the other?

I slid my finger down the window pane. So cold. Everything was cold here. The houses of Wellington, huddled into the sides of the hills as if hiding from the wind, the rough sea, the black rocks. It wasn't fair. My mother couldn't take my name away and make me someone else. She said it was only for a short while, but I didn't believe her. She'd told me that us coming here was only for a short while and now it was forever. I wished we had never got on that ship in Cape Town.

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'You can't be called Marnya in New Zealand.' My mother stood before me, her bottom lip thick from the pressure of her teeth on it. She always bit her bottom lip when she was worried.

I stood on the dock in front of her.

'They don't have names like that in New Zealand,' she was saying, and her eyes flit about, as if scared she might be overheard. 'We'll call you George instead.'

'George is a boy's name.' We weren't English but even I knew that. There was a boy called George at my school who spoke in a broken Afrikaans.

'I know that. You'll be a boy in New Zealand, just for a couple of weeks.'

A wave of confusion washed over me. In the world before this day,

it had never occurred to me that anyone could be anything except the sex that they already were.

At once my mother was a hundred times bigger, and me a hundred times smaller. I heard my own voice, small and far away, exclaim. 'What do you mean?'

My mother crouched down in front of me. 'I don't want anyone to recognise us,' she said. 'If you're dressed as a boy then it makes it harder for anyone to track us down. Especially with our names all changed.'

'But I'm not a boy!'

'Shh. Listen. It will only be for a little while. Just until we get to Uncle Ryl. Then we'll sort it all out.'

'But I thought we were only going for a month?' This made no sense. Who didn't she want to find us?

My mother said nothing. It was perhaps this more than anything that impressed upon me the seriousness of this conversation. My bottom lip quivered and I gulped down the lump in my throat. 'Mama?'

'We're never going back,' my mother whispered. 'Not ever.'

At once my world dissolved. The noise of the Cape Town seaport faded into a strange glugging. Voices, once near and imposing, now a thousand miles away. I understood that I had been told something important. Something which I knew, deep in the darkest pits of my heart, that even my father didn't know.

'We'll get you a haircut,' she said. 'And some new clothes. Brand new ones.'

'But what about my old ones?'

You've almost outgrown most of your dresses anyway. We'll get you new ones when we move in with Uncle Ryl.'

'I don't understand!' I exclaimed. Uncle Ryl had immigrated to New Zealand when I was seven and I hadn't seen him since. The only clear memories I had of him were from him teaching me to ride his little pony.

'You don't have to understand,' my mother's arms clamped around my shoulders. Firm. 'You just have to trust me.'

Her eyes were hard as baubles. I wanted to tell her no, that I didn't want to just trust her. I wanted her to explain.

But the moment had passed. My mother stood up and was talking to a man on the docks about our baggage.

Two hours later, they cut off all my long hair.

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It was seven hours since we'd left Wellington. Restless, I stared out the window again but it was impossible to see the name I'd drawn on the glass. Was George real or just a ghost?

I wasn't sure. I knew only that I didn't want him. Didn't want his legs, his short hair, his khaki shorts. I wanted me.

A flicker of light, almost like the lap of a flame, reflected across a corner of the window and then disappeared. I squinted at the space where it had been. Outside, the darkness was coal-black.

Light erupted into the space and for a moment I saw trees, rocks, depth. Then it was gone.

I glanced over my shoulder, unsure if this ghost light was real or not, but my mother and sister were both asleep. The light flickered on again and my eyes flew back. A tunnel through the darkness. In it a man running, his torch the beam of light. He was waving his arms, his ghoulish face panicked.

The train tore past the man, and the world once again descended into blackness. The train brakes screeched, long and slow; the sound burrowed into my ears. In the cabin, a couple of people lifted their heads.

And then a roar. Building so quickly it consumed every other sound.

'Mama?' I said, my voice shattering at the edges.

The train leaped, twisting like a snake in mid-air. I was flung from my seat. In a moment the floor was a wall, the window the ceiling. I smacked into the bulk of the man across the row from me. Heard him grunt when we collided. And then my feet were on the wall, my head on the floor. The hard wood of the seat slapped my elbows.

I yelled, but I had no voice. I could do nothing but move with the sound, my body tumbling over and over.

Water. Cold water everywhere. My hands wet. My hair wet. It swirled under me, splashed over me. My body jerked. I lifted my

head above the wave to find it almost filled the carriage. For a moment I could see the surface of it, brown and broiling, and then I was under again.

Darkness. My mother, her body long and bent, speaking to my father. Telling him we'd only be going to Cape Town for a week. My father, sandals on the dusty sunburned earth. The lines of his face angry, taut.

'You don't need to see your sister!'

I was up again, head above water. My mouth gulped in gasps of air. There was no light. Silt stung my eyes. I flailed my arms, the world revolving around me again as I disappeared.

My mother in the garden singing a song that doesn't quite make it to her eyes. She hangs out the clothes, checking for snakes in the long grass around the washing line.

I smacked into something hard. A tide was pulling at my body, sucking me into liquid jaws. I felt myself pull free into the current. It rippled over me, dragging me down.

The tide seemed to change, drawing me out from the bowels of the carriage, pulling me away. I could feel myself rising, pushing and scrabbling towards the surface. Only then did I feel the desperate burning for breath. I was suspended in the mass of the water with nothing but the lick against my skin to guide me.

The current pulled me to the surface and I felt the bite of air. I opened my mouth to gasp a breath but silt choked me. A sharp stick jabbed one hand. I wanted to scream for help but I couldn't. I was moving, rapidly, irreversibly, with the flow of water.

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