

2020/21

# Master of Creative Writing

## University of Auckland



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

ARTS





This cohort of the MCW had its challenges with COVID-related lockdowns and Zoom workshops, but persevered with good humour and hard work. In the course of the year a planned memoir turned into a novel, and a novel into a memoir. Our one poet stayed true to her kaupapa, and our historian ventured into creative nonfiction. Our story writer created a linked collection set largely in one cul-de-sac in Glenfield, encompassing different decades and points of view.

With the nonfiction writers we explored ancient Northland forests and sailed the vast blue Pacific. Historical novelists transported us to Aotea (Great Barrier) in the nineteenth century, and to a brutal family crime in Depression-era Wairarapa. We investigated the secrets of the young and old—in the hothouse atmosphere of a private Christchurch girls' school, the home of South African emigrés in West Auckland, and in memories of a lost life in Singapore. Characters were born in Bulgaria, or a New Zealand beach town, or Sri Lanka, or Minnesota. With them we glimpsed art galleries and physiotherapy clinics and schools, prisons and brothels, protests and deathbeds, farmland, suburbs, the circus ring. As ever with the MCW, our writers and their imaginations roam the world.

This is the first cohort eligible for the new Crystal Arts Trust Prize for best MCW portfolio—at \$10,000 the largest student writing prize in New Zealand. We thank the founders of the Crystal Arts Trust, MCW alum Rosetta Allan and her husband James, for their generosity and vision.

We also thank Robert Greenberg, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and Malcolm Campbell, Head of the School of Humanities, for their ongoing support of creative writing. Our year would have been less stimulating without the contribution of guest teachers and speakers, both in person and long-distance: Aminatta Forna, Stephanie Johnson, Melanie Laville-Moore, Selina Tusitala Marsh, Amy McDaid, Karlo Mila, Tom Moody and Ruby Porter.

This year another four MCW alums published books: Daren Kamali, Rosetta Allan, Angeliqe Kasmara and Sonya Wilson. I welcome the MCW writers of the 2020–21 to our growing whānau, and look forward to their own publications.

**Paula Morris** MNZM

*Director, Master of Creative Writing*



**ARTS**

# Master of Creative Writing

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# Maggie Barry

Maggie Barry ONZM had a 35-year career in the media, spanning radio, print and television news and current affairs and lifestyle programmes. Her awards include Senior Feature Magazine Writer of the year and the Helen Paske Award 2008 for 'Sir Ed Hillary: his final interview' published in the *NZ Listener*. In the 1990s she co-authored four books from the long-running *Maggie's Garden Show* and an illustrated book on gardening and cooking. A former Minister of Arts, Culture and Heritage, Conservation, Seniors and Associate Health, Maggie was the Member of Parliament for Auckland's North Shore from 2011–2020.

Her novel-in-progress is the story of multi-generational resilience after a family tragedy in an isolated farmhouse in rural New Zealand. Beginning in the years of the Great Depression, it explores the legacy of insanity and its violent outcome through the experiences of three sisters and their mentally ill brother.



EXTRACT

## **Dillon. Easter 1932**

Even though he's past it, the old man's still got that Irish native cunning. He knows I'm on to him, and somehow he's even managed to turn Mum against me. I've heard them both on the telephone with the nun, the saintly Baptista, who's always said asylums were terrible places of torture, but she's suddenly changed her tune. My own mother now cares so little about me that she wants to lock me away in a place for 'incurables' with people who would hurt me. I'd never get out alive.

I know they're trying to poison me and want me dead to silence me. I'm on my own. It's either them or me.

### *Agnes*

It was a foggy night, and we made slow progress, not getting home until nearly midnight. Lewis went to stable the horse and everyone else in the

house seemed to be asleep. I hugged Mum at her bedroom door, telling her how happy I was that Sister Baptista was going to help us with Dillon.

A couple of hours later, I was woken from a deep sleep by the sound of two loud bangs, and then footsteps running down the hallway.

'Agnes, Agnes, wake up, get up now,' Dillon shouted. 'There's been a tragedy. Somebody has shot our parents!'

Groggy, not understanding what I'd just heard, I stumbled out of bed and ran down the hallway to our parent's bedroom. Dillon, silhouetted in their doorway, was in his socks, wearing his working pants and a dark singlet. He silently handed me his candle, indicating with a sideways movement of his head, I should go inside. Their bed was in the far corner of the room, opposite the door, and on Dad's side it was pushed nearly against the back wall. I took a few steps inside and saw Mum who was lying half out of bed next to Dad, who was on his back. Even in the dim light from the candle, I could see they had both been shot.

I think I must've screamed, and terrified of Dillon, I ran back down the hall into the boys' bedroom. I shouted at Lewis to get up, and shook him hard.

'Mum and Dad have been shot, Lewis. I think they're dead.' I couldn't believe that he'd slept through the noise of the gunshots. Lewis rushed to the doorway of our parents room. When he saw them, he gabbled something about going for help, and barefoot, wearing only his nightshirt, he bolted out the front door.

Little Bernardine and Pat appeared next to me, Bern holding on tight to my nightie.

'I'm scared,' she said. 'Where's Mum?'

Dillon came out of his bedroom.

'Tell the kid to shut up!' he shouted. 'Where the hell's Lewis gone?'

'I want to see my mum now,' Bern wailed. We were all standing by the open doorway to our parents' room. Dillon blew out the candle. Our eyes hadn't had time to get used to the dark when he switched on the ceiling light. After Bern's first choked cry, the three of us were shocked silent. The horrifying sight was revealed in the glare, with blood splattered across the wallpaper from the bed to the fireplace. Mum was lying facing the door with her hand outstretched. Dad on his back, his right eye resting on his cheek, under a black hole.



Dillon motioned to us, and we followed him out of the room and went stumbling down the hallway. I watched him from the kitchen as he walked into the dining room and telephoned through to the police. 'It's Dillon Corrigan', he told them calmly. 'There's been a double fatality at the farmhouse. Both my parents are dead. You'll need to bring a doctor to certify the bodies.'

I was too scared of him to ask who'd shot Mum and Dad. I knew who'd shot them all right, but I said nothing about it to him. He was muttering to himself and all I could make out was that he was cursing Lewis. He relit the kitchen range, boiled the kettle and made himself a cup of tea, all the while carefully cleaning his shotgun. He found the cake I brought back for Dad and the kids and gobbled down all three pieces. It was the first time in more than a year I'd seen him eat with such enthusiasm.

'Nice cake, Agnes. Would you and the kids like a cuppa?'

'No. Thank you. What are we going to do now, Dillon?' I was standing in the hall, trying not to let him see me trembling, with an arm around Pat and holding Bern close to my side.

'Just keep yourself and the others quiet until the police come'. He didn't look up from cleaning his gun.

I hugged Pat and whispered for him to go into his bedroom and keep the door closed until help arrived. Bern was shaking, sticking close to me, and not wanting to be around Dillon, I led her back into our parents' bedroom where I was hoping we'd be safe.

I turned off the ceiling lamp, and in the light from the hallway, we walked across to the bed. I couldn't bear to look again at Dad with his staring eye, his left hand cupped under his head as a sleeping child might do.

The only thing I could think of to do was to pray for them, and for us. We knelt down by the side of their bed, and I wrapped a blanket around us both. Mum was lying across the mattress, as if she'd sat up and raised her arm, perhaps to try and protect Dad, then fallen onto her back. I wanted to cover her bare leg, but I didn't. I reached out, touching her hand, which was still warm and soft, and for a moment, I thought she made a sound.

Footsteps approached and I pulled Bern close.

'Was that a noise?' It was Dillon's voice. He was back in the bedroom. I squinted at him in the dim light. He'd changed into his black shirt and grey suit, wearing his best boots, still unlaced, and his fedora hat tilted down over

his face. Bern was trembling with fear, and it was clear that Dillon was agitated again, mumbling to himself but all I could make out was Lewis's name. He walked over to the sash window at the front of the house and rattled the window half open, then adjusted the blind level to the same height.

The warm night air rushed in and a familiar sweet citrus smell filled the room. Bern and I breathed in big gulps of the mouth-watering perfume of 'Queen of the Night' and felt a moment's comfort.

Dillon seemed oblivious to the scent of the flowers. He sat down on a low chair, with his back to us facing the window, as though he was watching and waiting for whoever was coming. Bern and I huddled together; she was whimpering softly. When I heard the click of the safety latch, I knew Dillon had reloaded his gun.

In a low voice, I began praying and Bern joined in; Dillon said nothing but he calmed down again. Not knowing what else to do, we kept reciting decades of the Rosary until it was getting light outside and we could hear a car arriving— the police, at last.

Hail Mary full of grace...  
... pray for us sinners now  
and at the hour of our death Amen.

### *Dillon*

I knew when the time was right. I'd heard them scheming with the nun to lock me away. Yesterday, when they were all at Mass, I oiled the hinges on their bedroom door.

When they got home late, I was listening to what Agnes said to Mum in the hallway. I knew I needed to move fast. I'd gone over every detail in my head a hundred times and knew how important it was to take them by surprise before they could fight back and overwhelm me. I'd waited a couple of hours for them all to be in a deep sleep, and then in my socks, I'd crept across the hallway.

I opened their bedroom door as slowly as I could, but Mum must've been awake. She sat up in bed and looking directly at me called out, 'God have mercy on our souls'. So I had to shoot her first. It wasn't supposed to have happened that way, in that order. I'd meant to kill the old man first.

The noise woke him so I had to be quick. I jumped up onto the bed and took careful aim at my chief persecutor. He lay there staring up at me, defeated at last; he didn't say a word, knowing it was over for him.

I'm relieved they're both gone. Maybe now, I'll be safe at last.

# Jacqueline Carter

Jacqueline Carter is Te Patuwai and Ngāi Te Hapū of Ngāti Awa and Waitaha, as well as Ngāi Tūkairangi of Ngāti Te Rangi. She's been composing waiata since she was a kid (she turned 47 in May 2021) and wrote her first poem in 1991. Her poems have been published in several anthologies, including the award-winning *Whetū Moana* (AUP 2002); its sequel *Mauri Ola* (AUP 2010); *Puna Wai Kōrero* (AUP 2014); and every edition of Anton Blank's literary journal *Ora Nui*. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Māori Studies, a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary), and is currently Teacher in Charge of Te Reo Māori at her old secondary school, Epsom Girls' Grammar School. Her poetry manuscript draws on the whakatauki: 'He tao huata e taea te karo, he tao kupu e kore e taea te karo.' (A wooden spear may be deflected, but a spear of words cannot be parried.)



## Reiputa

I have deep dark elemental  
rock pools in me  
most can't fathom  
'cause I'm too white to see

others dive in  
sometimes unwittingly  
finding the reiputa  
between my teeth

## **Dieback**

dis-ease is spreading  
through our rākau rangatira

like greed and hypocrisy  
throughout our leadership –

making its way through  
stolen whenua

āe,  
I believe

it is all  
related

## **Kapua pōuri**

I didn't want the weight  
kapua pōuri  
cloudbanks of mourning  
pressing down on me

pare kawakawa  
far too heavy for me  
dying flowers  
way too much for me

choosing instead to  
holiday with my family  
doing what I must  
remaining with the living this time

**He tao kupu**

Some of these poems have been  
given to me  
by God  
gods or tūpuna  
beyond the world we see

Others carefully  
crafted by me  
kupu curling  
takarangī

Some are spear  
some are arrow  
some are stone  
bone or wooden

But whether bone  
wood or stone  
each will eventually  
find its home

Inscribed in minds  
rangī and rhymes  
concentric spirals  
eternity

### **Waiata tautoko**

Sometimes we stand there  
shifting uneasily  
eyes facing floor  
far wall  
ceiling

someone leading  
most of us mumbling  
on the wrong note or  
taking it too slowly

Oh for the days when  
Mihikitekapua  
Mananui Te Heuheu and  
Te Rangitopeora  
waxed lyrical by themselves and  
made it up on the whenua

me he korokoro tūi  
e kō nei i te ata

### **Waitai**

If I am water  
I am salt

If I am taste  
I am kawa

If I am hard  
I am stone

If I am broken  
I must be bone

# Samantha Crews

Samantha Crews is a twenty-four-year-old writer from Christchurch. Two films she co-wrote (*One Hundred and Twenty Seconds* and *Her Beneath Her*) premiered at New Zealand's only Oscar-accredited film festival, Show Me Shorts, in 2019 and 2020.

*Mercy Girl* is a coming-of-age novel set in post-earthquake Christchurch. Protagonist Noah is Head Girl of Mercy Girls' College, a strict Catholic boarding school in the centre of town. When her secret girlfriend, Aroha, passes away suddenly at the beginning of year thirteen, Noah's perfect Christian-girl facade falls apart. Noah is forced to face her dark past for the first time, including the evil things she has done to uphold her reputation, and the repressed memories of the earthquake which split her family apart. When she finally understands the forces that drive her need to feel admired, the damage may be beyond repair.



EXTRACT

## '21st November 2015

I lay on my back in Dad's walk-in wardrobe. I stared up at his shirts, one eye closed, as though I was stargazing. They sagged off their wooden hangers. Lifeless. Dead. Not touched since the 26th December, 2011; a thin layer of dust clung to each shirt as proof. How lonely it must be, I thought, to be abandoned like that. I longed to shrink to the size of a dust mite and crawl into the pocket of his brick-red blazer, to burrow myself into the sleeve of his linen button-down, or to find a home in his navy surgical scrubs.

Instead, I reached my right hand up and pulled each shirt off their hanger, one by one, until I was covered in a blanket of my missing father.

Even after all that time, the smell of him was suffocating. Lemon-scented hospital-grade disinfectant. Wrigley's spearmint gum. Some earthy cologne I couldn't name but wished I knew. He smelt like home.

Silent tears rolled down my face. I winced. Something stung. I lifted my hand to my cheek. My fingers found an open cut and a trail of blood crusted down my neck. When I pulled my hand away, my fingertips were covered in



red glitter. That's when I remembered. The end-of-year prefect party, two hours earlier. My best friend Maddy's acrylic fingernails, scratching my face on the common house floor.

I ran my palms across the fabric on top of me, feeling for something, for anything else. But each shirt held its own unwanted and untouchable memory.

His short-sleeved button-down, made from white cotton and littered with cartoon pineapples. I have a replica, six sizes smaller, bought from the Honolulu International Airport gift shop on our one and only family holiday in 2005. I was seven. Dad was twenty-six. We looked like

twins the entire trip, with our untameable ginger hair and matching tooth gaps. The same shirt worn every single day, soaked in sweat and salt and happiness. Maeve urged us to wear something else; people were beginning to stare in restaurants. But we just laughed. Because we were just happy.

No. Not the memories. Not here, I thought. Not now. I had been through enough tonight.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

Stilettoes on tiles.

I forced my body still and counted to ten. By count nine the golden flare of the wardrobe lights lining the panelling flicked off. Darkness swallowed me whole. Maeve cannot find me here, I thought. Not like this. Not half-drunk, wearing nothing but beige Spanx that reached halfway up my ribs, and a matching beige push-up bra, both stained with red wine and wet mascara.

No. I was a Catholic girl. In a Catholic household. Hiding behind my Catholic smile the lies of my very un-Catholic life. My cut throbbed. I considered praying, but that didn't last long. I stuffed Dad's denim jacket sleeve into my mouth and screamed instead. Click. Clack. Click. Clack

Panic. Panic. Panic.

When did things get so out of control? The easy answer would've been Aroha's death. Before then, I was on a path. A good path. Kind of.

I was Head Girl of Mercy Girls' College, the most elite private school in Christchurch. I had made the shortlist for the Oxford University Scholarship. I was the leader of eight extra-curricular groups, including netball (A team) and debating (top team). I also had an internship at Mulligan Finance, doing photocopying every Saturday for my grandfather's business.

But then Aroha died.

I didn't want Aroha to die, despite everything I had done to her. But I will admit this. I had seen her as a potential roadblock, or a breathtaking distraction. A beautiful ocean view when you're driving around a hill bend. If you look for too long, you're going to fly off the edge.

But that didn't mean I wanted her to die. Did it?

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

It's easy to blame someone else's tragedy as the reason for your own. It's easy to say that Aroha's death derailed my life. But I would be lying. Because right there, on my back, breathing in the air of my childhood home, I finally admitted that things had been wrong for a long, long time.

14 Carrington Crescent wasn't my home anymore. Since Dad disappeared and I moved into the Mercy Girls' College boarding house, I'd only been back there a handful of times each year. Easter Sunday, Christmas Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Never, ever on my birthday. I didn't enjoy going back. The house made me feel as though I was walking through a hazy memory. I could never quite grasp what'd really happened and what I'd made up. The boarding house was my clean slate, my fresh start, my real home. But after the end-of-year prefect party that night, I was no longer safe there. 14 Carrington Crescent was the only place I had left to go.

So I walked three kilometres at two a.m. after that party, after Maddy smacked me and I smacked Maddy back, in my white Chuck Taylors (which were now brown), past the flax of the Avon River, through the sludgy grass in Hagley Park, around the dark Dean's

Bush alleyways, across the newly asphalted Fendalton streets, until I reached that pearly white, wrought-iron gate, completely solid and double my height. Home.

Or something like that.

On top of the gate, the iron curved into a line of gothic hearts and triangle daggers, pointing straight up to heaven. When I was a child, I had an almost uncontrollable urge to climb the cobblestone pillars either side of the gate and run my hand across the points. I wanted to see how sharp they actually were.

The house itself was shielded from prying eyes by a towering kōhūhū hedge, which snaked around all four corners of the property. All eleven

hundred square metres of it. Our family gardener and housekeeper, Rebecca, a middle-aged woman with green hair and no family, came every second day to prune the hedge. I had never seen a leaf out of place.

It looked magnificent. It looked excessive. It was designed so that you could not see in, and once you were in, you could not see out. Unless you were on the third-floor veranda, of course.

I punched 1980 into the tiny metal code-box lodged into the pillar. Maeve's year of birth; only seventeen years before my own. I half expected to hear the sad Christmas carol like song that rang from the speaker when someone got the code wrong. Instead, the lock clicked and the fence started to slide open with a shake and a rattle.

Welcome Home.

A long path of white porcelain tiles, sheltered underneath a garden arch dotted with white jasmine flowers, led to the towering beast. The white timber weatherboards. The white French doors. The white porch that wrapped around the whole middle floor. The white house belonging to my white family holding decades of white lies.

# Saraid de Silva

Saraid de Silva is a Sri Lankan Pākehā writer and creative based in Tāmaki. She co-hosts podcast and video series *Conversations With My Immigrant Parents* and acts for stage and television. An excerpt of her essay 'Mitzi' was published in *A Clear Dawn: New Asian Voices from Aotearoa New Zealand* (2021).

*Amma* is a novel about three generations of South Asian women and the journeys they take away from their homes and towards each other. Its setting include Singapore in the 50s, Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Invercargill in the 70s, Hamilton in the 90s and contemporary London.



EXTRACT

## **Annie, 1997, Hamilton**

Hamilton in the nineties is a lot like Hamilton in the eighties. And not too dissimilar from Hamilton in the seventies. The houses on the river all look as though they were built by people who just made money. Dentists, plastic surgeons, one or two software designers who don't know how much richer they are going to get; that they could have waited a couple more years and bought in Auckland. The town centre has the air of a party that just finished—one where everyone cleaned up badly. That's Hamilton as a whole, actually. It does feel like something happened here once, but nobody remembers what it was.

Annie Ano Fernando is sitting in the backseat of her grandmother's car, staring at the sun. It is whiter than a lemonade popsicle, pure enough to clean her. At first the sun's blazing arrogance burned her eyes, but now it feels normal. Her little head twists as they turn corners, trying not to break contact; she is counting seconds so she can tell her mum how long she looked. She'll tell her that all grown-ups know nothing because looking at the sun doesn't hurt: it just makes you realise how grey everything else is.

Gran is driving fifteen kilometres under the speed limit, listening to National Radio. Men in big cars overtake her, thinking their size will protect them, unaware that Gran's scowl is vicious enough to shatter glass. They are

driving beside the Waikato River, passing houses with straight roofs and too many windows.

Sometimes the Waikato is exciting to Annie. She likes to imagine what it must look like under the surface. Thin beams slicing through the thick brown top of the water, illuminating fields of moss and seaweed. Everything tinged with green, boulders the current passes over like a veil. Vast open spaces and broken statues of warriors like the water is hiding a temple. She imagines herself becoming part of it, diving in and never stopping, swimming straight to the bottom with her hair streaming behind; the only part of her reaching back to the surface.

Annie is seven years old. She has dirty knees sticking out of navy school culottes and a black eye. She has a mullet, with a fringe she cut herself, long enough to hide the fried egg ears people always tell her are big. Annie is not especially short, but she is thin in a way that is particular to children only, a way that is startling and temporary. Her stare unhinges children and grown-ups alike. It's one of a few social cues she has not picked up on—when to look away, when to look with less intensity. She only knows how to give all her attention at once.

Annie got her black eye a week ago, running away from the living room. She was too distracted to move her feet properly and she collided with the stair's sharp wooden edge. All of the feeling in her body seemed to travel to her cheek and vibrate there, ringing like an alarm. Her vision went blurry and she screamed.

It was Gran who came for her. Annie didn't even know Gran was in the house, but suddenly there she was, examining Annie. Gran was so warm. She smelt of peppermint and cloves. She held Annie's matchstick body, kissed the good side of her face, and told her she was going to be okay. Then she scooped her up and hummed a lullaby in her ear, drowning everything else out.

While the pain of that day has faded, Annie's black eye somehow looks worse. It is squatting on the side of her face. Annie studies it constantly, checking its progress. She is disgusted but also protective, like it's her pet. Or a work of art, puddling around her left eye, a brutal purple in the centre, spreading out into blue, red, and even yellow at the edges.

The yellow is the worst part: it looks as though her skin is rotting underneath. She has become quite used to grown-ups recoiling, trying to

sew their faces into a smile.

Annie is familiar with pain. Once she bit her wrist so hard she bruised skin. She refused to tell Gran what had happened, which sent Gran into a frenzy. She made Annie get rabies shots. Another time she pulled hundreds of hairs out of her head, leaving a lopsided patch of skin just above her ear. This was much more effective and easier to hide.

The pain always helps. It makes her feel like she is pulling all the corners of her mind together and tying them up in a knot.

The space inside Annie's head fills up too quickly. She is already more than half-full to begin with, but people keep topping her up. At school she empties her entire pencil case before using anything inside it, and lays her pens the exact same distance apart. She orders them by colour, size or usefulness. And only when they are perfect does she return to the room. This is how she makes the world around her simmer down.

When she picked her up from school today, Gran told Annie they were going to court. This is what the two of them call the legal firm where her mum works. Annie tried tossing her backpack to the ground in protest, knowing the detour would mean she would miss her daily half hour of television, but Gran just threw her handbag too, like a toddler, which made Annie laugh.

The news on the radio of someone called Versace dying is making Gran sigh and kiss her teeth. Annie asks why he was shot.

He was not shot, he was assassinated, Gran says.

Annie peels her eyes off the sun, black spots blooming behind her eyelids with every blink, and reaches into the driver's seat to touch her grandmother's hair. Her salt and pepper curls are soft in Annie's hand.

Gran wears thick-rimmed glasses and she always knows when Annie is lying. She senses Annie unwrapping the tin foil around a Ferrero Rocher hidden at the back of the cupboard, or winding up some forbidden lipstick, breathing mist gently onto her own reflection, inching the stick closer and closer. Her voice will float in a warning from another room and devastate Annie before she can be *sophisticated*.

Annie's mum is sophisticated. She is the most glamorous person Annie has ever seen; her skin is dark like gold under the sun. Her heavy black hair flows to her waist and tickles Annie's nose and eyes when they are close; she

wears skirt suits and thick hoops and draws brown lip liner on in the rear-view mirror, long fingers tapping the steering wheel.

Four days ago, her mum climbed into Annie's bath and cried. Annie knew she had been to the police station, but they didn't talk about why. Annie was experimenting with the hot tap. She let it run, got it as hot as possible, then twisted the handle. Hot water dribbled onto her vagina. It was the sorest place on her body, and it hurt so much she started sweating.

When her mum crashed in, Annie shot to the other side of the tub with embarrassment, desperate to keep her habit a secret. But Mum pulled her dress off in one go, left her underwear and socks on and lowered herself next to Annie.

Annie wrapped her arms round her as far as she could, rested a cheek on her spine, and asked what was wrong. Loose tendrils of her mum's hair spilled down. Like the arms of a jellyfish, it left little electric charges on Annie's skin. There were deep bruises all over her mum's stomach in the shape of flowers. A garden of purple and black worming across her torso. She looked broken. Annie had never seen anyone heave with tears like this. It made her feel embarrassed.

# Jeff Evans

Auckland based writer Jeff Evans has had 6 non-fiction books published: *Nga Waka o Nehera – the first voyaging canoes* (Reed Publishing 1997), *The Discovery of Aotearoa* (Reed Publishing 1998), *Waka Taua – Māori War Canoe* (Reed Publishing 2000), *Māori Weapons in Pre-European New Zealand* (Reed Publishing 2002), *Heke-nuku-mai-ngā-iwi Busby: Not Here By Chance* (Huia Publishers 2015), *Reawakened: Two navigators of Polynesia* (Massey University Press 2021). He has also written for numerous magazines and has been anthologised in Tessa Duder's *Salt Beneath the Skin* (1999.)

*Ngā Tokimatawhaorua: the biography of a waka taua* recounts the history of the northern war canoe *Ngā Tokimatawhaorua*. Built for the 1940 Centennial of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, the waka rests at the Treaty Grounds at Waitangi. Delving into historic film footage newspaper, radio and photographic records and iwi recollections, Evans has explored the fascinating history of this iconic waka that has been a mainstay in the restrengthening of waka culture in Aotearoa.



EXTRACT

The cloud cover I had worried about earlier in the day had disappeared by the time we made our way to the vehicles, pushed out over the Pacific by strong westerlies that unveiled a brilliant blue sky. Led by O'Halloran, our convoy of two 4 x 4s headed inland, past lifestyle blocks and orchards until we intersected State Highway 10 at Waipapa. From there, we travelled north for a few minutes before turning inland again, to where paddocks of green flanked us and an unsealed section of road began. A few minutes later O'Halloran brought our vehicle to a stop, allowing us to take in the view ahead. A hundred shades of green seemed to be floating before us like a cloud, hovering 10, 20 or 30 metres off the ground. It was as if all 25,000 hectares of the forest were filling our view. O'Halloran pointed out a sole kauri piercing the canopy like a sentry guard far to our right.



In truth, what we were looking at was only a thin snapshot of the forest's southern border, but I was already beginning to reassess the challenge that the canoe builders would have faced when they began their search for suitable kauri. By 21st century New Zealand standards, the forest was immense. What, I wondered as O'Halloran gently accelerated, were the chances of us finding the site where the two kauri had once stood?

A little further up the road O'Halloran stopped again, this time at a padlocked gate: public access to the forest had been restricted after the recent discovery of kauri dieback. A microscopic fungus-like organism that lives in the soil, kauri dieback infects the tree's roots, effectively damaging the tissues that feed the tree its nutrients and water. Infected kauri, often hundreds of years old, were starving to death. Munro jumped out of the cab and opened the gate, allowing our vehicles to pass through before securing it behind us. Beside the gate stood a recently introduced hygiene station, built to allow visitors to clean their footwear when entering and leaving the forest. DOC was doing everything that they could to restrict the transfer of the disease, save for closing the forest itself.

The station was a thing of utilitarian design, not totally dissimilar, I thought, to a cattle drenching race. A handheld spray gun allowed me to moisten my boots with water collected from downpours caught by the station's roof, before I ran each of them over a stiff upturned brush to dislodge any remaining dirt. After that I took a step forward onto a foot pump that lowered under my weight, and I watched as an industrial strength disinfectant was sprayed onto each sole. We each took a turn. It was a simple, three-step process that gave the kauri a fighting chance.

Back in the trucks, we set out again along the forestry road. Recent rains had washed away the shingle in several places exposing its clay base. The further along we travelled, the more it became obvious that this was no place for a city car. As we crested one of the rises, Munro pointed out Mt Hikurangi, a sacred maunga, far to the south. I had passed it earlier, but the significance of seeing it from here, on the cusp of entering Puketi Forest, only dawned on me later when I read a short piece that Judge Frank Acheson had written about *Ngā Tokimatawhaorua*. It included one of the few descriptions I could find about the area the trees had come from, and while it wasn't specific enough to help us with our search, it did give a wonderful insight into the consideration given by kaumātua when it came

time to choose the forest that the trees were to be taken from:

The said Kauri trees grew on Ngapuhi watershed midway between two coasts and their tops were in sight of all the mountains beloved by the Maoris of the North. Hence the choice of these trees for the canoe.

The judge was an interesting character. Born in Riverton, Southland, he arrived in the Tai Tokerau district in 1924 with five years' experience as a Native Land Court judge and continued in that role until 1943. He was a serious man with a long face, a closely cropped moustache, and he wore small, black-rimmed glasses. Over the course of his career, Acheson became friendly with many Māori leaders, including Te Puea Hērangi and Dame Whina Cooper, and where possible he lent an empathetic ear to their concerns.

Ten minutes after passing through the gate, we pulled over into a layby of sorts and climbed down from the vehicles. O'Halloran, who would be leading us along the overgrown track, strapped on his protective gaiters and then grabbed his backpack and a pair of forestry loppers. Once the rest of us were ready, he led us the 100 metres or so along the road to the entrance of the track. There Munro recited a karakia, seeking guidance and protection for the period we would be in the forest. When he was finished, we entered Puketi Forest.

We started our little expedition on the eastern side of what was a wide ridgeline, and it seemed as though O'Halloran knew it like the back of his hand. Leading us off at a cracking pace, he navigated the track with the same assurance and speed that the rest of us would a city footpath. Still slippery underfoot from the recent downpours that had drenched the country and with kanono and karamū plants, kiokio fern and tātarāmoa vines encroaching on the track, we kept up as best we could. Things only got more difficult for us when it came to climbing over, circumnavigating, or ducking under the numerous juvenile mānuka trees that crossed the track as we got deeper into the forest.

Thanks to our guide's sharp eyes and breadth of knowledge, there was plenty to take in. A bowl-sized hole in the earth was the result of a pig rooting for food, and a peculiar miniature-forest, spotted just off the track, turned out to be *Dawsonia superba*—the Giant Moss—the largest in the world,

growing to a height of 60 centimetres. From above, it looked remarkably like a plantation of tiny Christmas trees. A little further down the track, O'Halloran pointed out the broken and empty shell of the giant carnivorous kauri snail known to the Māori as pūpūrangi. The shell was six or seven centimetres across. The snail had probably been eaten by a wild pig.

Predictably, nature soon enveloped us. After 20 minutes or so of mostly downhill walking, I stepped off the track to let a couple of my companions pass by. I wanted to take a moment to absorb the forest's ambiance. It felt good to be in the forest, separated from civilisation. The air was fresh and clean and crisp after the rains, and the chilly westerlies we had experienced getting out of the trucks were absent, blocked out by the closeness of the surrounding bush. A miromiro sung nearby, hidden from view among the trees, but there was precious little else to hear.

When I caught up to the group again, O'Halloran was using his forestry loppers to clear away a couple of branches that were overhanging the path. After he had finished, I asked him to take a minute to describe what he could see around us. He began by pointing out the four- to five-metre-wide forestry road that our track was following. Now mostly overgrown, I had missed it altogether. O'Halloran thought that it probably marked the path that loggers had used to drag trees out of the forest, but exactly when it had been last used, he couldn't tell. Whether it was the bullock train pulling out the logs we were interested in, back in 1937, or a tractor in later years, it was now impossible to determine. But he thought it was more than likely the path that the logs for *Ngā Tokimatawhaorua* had come out on, if they had, in fact, been taken from near here. It made sense, he said, that later bushmen would have taken advantage of the 1937 road, even if they had access to tractors, rather than force a new route through the forest.

O'Halloran then pointed out a couple of kauri trees that were busy establishing themselves 20 or 30 metres off the track. They had probably been too small to harvest when the area was last picked over, and now had a chance to mature, at least if kauri dieback was held at bay. The forebears of these young kauri were well known to northern iwi, who eventually settled upon them as the tree of choice when it came to constructing their largest waka.

# Helen Jamieson

Helen Jamieson was born in England but has spent much of her adult life living and working internationally. After completing a degree in London, she met her husband and settled in Aotearoa New Zealand.

In *Home*, the novel's protagonist, Harriet, drops her life as a physiotherapist in London to visit her dying alcoholic mother in rural New Zealand. Through a prism of anxiety and self-obsession, Harriet looks back on her frightening childhood and recent marital breakdown, while maintaining her own denial about the truth behind her departure from London. In its painful disclosures, 'Home' explores generational trauma and the possibility of redemption.



EXTRACT

After we all tramped into Margaret's room, Richard waved me away to fetch a chair, and then again to bring coffee. The cups shivered against each other when I settled the tray on the dresser. Margaret sat erect against her pillows, wrapped in her dressing gown. She looked calm despite having refused any morphine that morning. 'Later, darling,' she had said, patting my hand. She needed her wits about her.

Richard stood at the end of the bed, supervising. He held his mug by the handle, his other hand curved around it, immune to its searing heat. Margaret looked from me to him.

'I need some time alone with Tony and Betsy please, Harriet, Richard.' I nodded, grateful she'd handled that, and rushed away into the lounge.

But Richard stayed. From where I stood by the woodburner, I could hear him in the bedroom still trying to take part in the conversation with Tony and Betsy. My hiking socks peeped out from under my trousers. I wasn't wearing as much as an Arctic explorer—Richard didn't know what he was talking about—any normal person would have this amount of clothes on in this weather. I hugged myself and looked out at the field behind the house. Two days ago, as if by magic, sheep had appeared in the wild undergrowth

beyond the lawn. I watched as they busied themselves, tunnelling through the thick grasses, snatching mouthfuls from the plants. It gave them some protection from the weather. Along the edge of the garden, young trees dotted the fence line, drooping under the downpour. It would be years before they offered any decent shelter from rain like this.

Richard was asking Tony how he'd been and whether he was following the rugby. There was a lull and then Richard asked Betsy how long she had been working for Tony. She muttered a polite reply.

'Well, it's good to see you, Richard. Margaret's energy is limited at the moment.' Tony's voice, even from all the way down the corridor, reassured me. 'It would be best if we could have some time alone with her now.'

'Oh right, right,' Richard said. 'I'll leave you to it then. I'll just be down the hall if you need anything, right?'

He stumped along the corridor and must have come into the lounge behind me. I stared at the sheep blundering about. My arms wrapped all the way across my chest, each hand clasping an elbow. His eyes were burning into the back of my head, I was certain. Look natural, I thought, and turned around.

He wasn't looking at me at all. On the edge of the armchair's seat by the fire, he held his head in his hands. Did he not know I was in here? I turned back to the window and counted to ten, three times. How could I let him know I was standing here? I took a deep breath through my nose and he sprang off the chair.

'This was your idea, wasn't it?' He was puce.

'What was my idea?'

He balled his fists level with his chest but kept the back of his forearms to me. Not so much a boxing stance as a gesture Ruthie might make in fury about an injustice. He looked into each of my eyes back and forth as if he hoped, by doing it fast enough, he might catch the truth there.

What an appalling person Margaret had shackled herself to all this time. The man had no restraint. She must have been telling the truth about his rages. I turned away shaking my head. It would be better to say nothing and just go to my room until Margaret needed me again, later.

He grabbed my upper arm and spun me to face him. His face seemed to float at a distance but I could feel the heat of his skin on my throat, the appalling moisture in his breath. He spoke through gritted teeth. 'If you think you can—'

Without waiting for another word, I planted my open palm on his face and pushed hard. Before he regained his balance I charged across the lounge and ran to my bedroom. I leaned back against the door. If he tried to come in here, I would scream.

The room regarded me, everything in it motionless and frilly. The back of my head bumped onto the door and I screwed my eyes shut. I was pressed up against the door, so it wasn't possible, but I was falling backwards. My eyes snapped open and the sensation stopped. With an effort I tried to slow my breathing. A desperate urgency drove up from my stomach into my upper thorax and my arms shook as if they wanted to whirl backwards. With swooping certainty, I understood: a panic attack.

In a slow, deliberate movement, I slid down the door until I was on the floor, knees tucked under my chin. I pushed my head between them, reaching around my shins to clutch my forearms. Breathe. Breathe. Count and breathe. The urgency in my chest galloped on—my heart tearing at my ribcage with its fingernails, convinced death had arrived. Breathe in, two, three, four; hold, two, three, four; and out, two, three, four.

*Forget about Richard. There are other people in the house. He can't open the door.* I forced myself to repeat the box breathing. I brought the force of my whole concentration to my senses—the sensation of the air in my throat, the way it felt cooler as it went in before it warmed and came out again. The feeling of my ears clamped between my legs, the material of my trousers against my cheeks. I breathed in the clean, reassuring smell of my own washing powder. It brought back my safe, sunny flat. All of it mine again. Breathe in, two, three, four; hold; and out. A fine layer of moisture appeared all over my body. The desperation diminished like a parachute settling onto the ground.

I stayed in that position until I heard the door to Margaret's bedroom open. My legs protested when I forced myself to my feet. I tried to grip the door handle two or three times before I managed to open it. Tony and Betsy were taking their own coats off the coat stand. Richard wasn't with them.

Tony was dismayed when he saw me. 'Are you all right? You look terrible.' 'You're very pale.' Betsy reached for my elbow. 'Are you feeling okay?'

I hadn't said anything yet and it was important that I did. It would all get much worse if I didn't say anything. It would look very bad.

When I smiled, my face was like putty, as if I was only pulling back my lips to show my teeth.

'I'm so tired. Perhaps it's still jet lag?' I offered. Nothing to worry about here, just silly, tired Harriet.

Tony slid his arms into his long woollen overcoat, already placated. But Betsy's eyes said she didn't believe me. She was far more self-assured than I realised when they'd arrived. How long ago exactly did they arrive? She was still looking at me. My mind tried to skim the possible responses, but I felt like a magician in the spotlight whose hand has come out of the hat, empty.

She reached into her pocket and held out her business card. 'You can call me at the office if there's anything at all you want to discuss.'

Tony picked up his briefcase. 'Everything's in order as your mother requested. Has she spoken to you about her particular wishes in terms of her ashes?'

I shook my head.

'I see. Well, when you need us...' He must have had hundreds of these interactions and yet he didn't know how to say it. He tried again. 'Please call us when you're ready.'

I pulled open the door for them and the cold clattered against my face. The rain had stopped, and smears of blue streaked a grey sky. The turning circle and the fields beyond rose in a hush of surprised relief after the rain. Tony and Betsy moved past me and I leaned against the door. Its edge dug into my shoulder, my cheek.

They stomped down the steps, surely relieved to be walking away from this awkward space, away from Margaret's deathbed. They were free to return to the world of the living, to embrace the earnest clutter of daily life. They weren't tethered by medication and pain management and fatigue. Richard wasn't going with them. Drops of water fell like a slow metronome from the verandah's fretwork and their car came to life. It carried them away with a protest from the gravel and a flash of Betsy's white hand for me at its window.

# Rotislava Pankova-Karadjova

Rostislava (Ronnie) Pankova-Karadjova, is born and raised in Bulgaria. A musicologist and choir conductor by training, she has worked in Swaziland, Southern Africa, and since 2004 lives in NZ. Most of her published poems and short stories are written in her native tongue; four were shortlisted in the *UK Writing Magazine*. 'Matilda Rose and the Beekeeper' was published in *MiNDFOOD*, April 2019.

In Focus explores the incidental, visible and invisible connections three people have with each other and with their past. Anna, an arts graduate, yearns to fit back into her hometown; Marcel, a French/Bulgarian photographer, is obsessed with his forthcoming exhibitions, while his wife Bella balances the fragile equilibrium of their marriage posting in her advice blog. When secrets triggered by a photograph are revealed, their paths intertwine. Obscured by unresolved hurt, it seems the way forward is embedded in the meaning of a Māori word, once seen in a dream.



EXTRACT

*Haere mai, Welcome to Whātea.* Powdered white with clay dust, hills and flax obscure the sea until the last turn of the road. Streets shrouded in heat, parched grass wilted to yellow-white, birds with open beaks crowning lamp posts. Two-hundred kilometres as though travelled in a time machine to a December never torn off the calendar since she was born.

People stare from doorways, wave. 'Look at that, Anna's back,' they say, 'No place like home, eh?' they call out, probably meaning polished floors and sheer curtains, roast in the oven and the entire family happily fussing over their prodigal daughter, while she's thinking, 'Why did I leave?'

How about a different scenario? Cracked paint peels its colourless layers off the fence. Warped, the grapefruit leaves have turned sepia. Salt has long eaten into hinges and bolts with bluish-green hunger and has moved onto



the nails of the porch. The front door squeaks louder than the shrieks of the seagulls arguing over a morsel of fish.

Inside, the trapped heat has unleashed the smells of the house and they hang in a bundle — years of cooking stuck to the wallpaper, bitter coal smoke woven into the curtains, dust blanketing every surface and pasted thick in the corners. The clock's pendulum is motionless. Time is marked by random clicks of the hot tin roof, ticking off the months since Anna's grandmother's funeral. Two clicks close to each other, one a little after that, two sharp ones again, like a garbled S-O-S of memories sentenced to oblivion.

Home sweet home.

If home wasn't a family or a house but a single person, the keeper of shared stories encrypted into the need to be known, intimately known by someone else, then Anna was homeless. If home was where confessions were forgiven in the chapel of a single embrace, where words aired stagnant thoughts until feeling normal was possible again, then she was homeless.

Anna Waerea Marsden, twenty-two, motherless and possibly fatherless, now felt orphaned and in need of rescue.

Anna left her suitcase next to the half-moon table, avoiding her reflection in the mirror above. The doorless kitchen, part of the living room, was clean, too clean: odourless. Nana's reading glasses lay next to her photograph above the piano. Anna pushed the lid open and dragged her fingertips over the smooth whiteness interrupted by the slim mounds of the black keys. She pressed C-E-G. The chord cut through the silence — a content sound, bright and out of place. Outside, a cicada scraped at the afternoon over the distant whoosh of the ocean.

Why had she come back? To feel even lonelier?

The house was hers now. Her inheritance. Such a hissing, cone-shaped word that had nothing to do with her or Nana, yet it had rolled out of Uncle Dan's mouth.

'It's all yours, Anna. Rent it, sell it — it's your responsibility.' His voice had quivered, laden with the dregs of the funeral.

Responsibility, ownership — more loaded, adult words. She wouldn't sell her home, but what exactly had she inherited? A middle name heard in a dream and three roomfuls of loneliness.

Anna stepped over her suitcase and entered the dimly lit corridor. The first door on the left was Nana's. Candlewick bedspread, the mirror above the dresser framed by a jagged zig-zag of photographs. Her grandmother's scent, a mixture of lavender and roses, was everywhere, stronger in the wardrobe. Anna pulled out a long, daisy print dress with a row of buttons down the front. Would she sense Nana's hug if she put it on? With a faint shiver, she dismissed the thought and hooked the dress back.

White beams crisscrossed her father's room and landed on the boxes stacked in the corner. Indelible tobacco smell suggested he'd walked outside just now, not eight years ago. The bed was eerie: a relic from another reality, where Anna's mother had given birth and had died, leaving no traces, not a single picture. If Anna could renounce her inheritance of this room, she would. But she couldn't disown being motherless; couldn't close the door on that emptiness.

Her room was at the end of the corridor. A bleached *Twilight* poster surrounded by a cluster of photographs. Stuffed with notebooks, scrapbooks, school readings and plastic trophies, her bookcase leaned onto her slim wardrobe. The limp blouses were no longer hers; they belonged to who she was three short years ago. Three long years ago.

Time, she had discovered, spanned differently. The same stretch of hours could feel like a rush of a tidal wave, or a trickle of sand windblown from a dune. It could also stop as it had in the last six months.

At first, time had been measured by eagerness. Auckland, AUT, Visual Arts undergraduate — lots of As in Anna's new life. She was in a hurry, trying to outrun the blurred occurrence of events, stopping only to focus her lens on them and seal their transience in a frame, tame their mood in a print. Her life was a shiny, ticking mechanism, oiled with words like *self-motivation* and *self-discovery*. The city was heady, vibrant with people and smells and sounds, and Anna dived into it. She rummaged through the K Road op shops, dip-dyed her hair-ends blonde, then blue, then purple, and went to every party she was invited to. Shop windows reflected her image, her friends — the new self she was still getting used to. The first-year studio papers turned into a second-year of exploration. Her camera became an extension of her arm; the red light and the smells of the darkroom her preferred pastime.

By the time Anna reached the third-year, time had slowed down,

captured in her photographs and making her wonder what was real — the images in her prints or the never-stopping swirl of life she'd stolen them from. The colourful tips of her hair had grown out to its natural mahogany; tied in a ponytail, it swayed over whatever was clean to wear. Her life-map had shrunk to the St. Paul Street studios, Grant K Gallery on Kitchener, Jamie's bedroom and her counsellor Lesley's office. Anna was in constant conversation with herself. Sometimes she thought she was going mad from the questions grating at her like a rusty machine: would she ever feel whole without knowing her mother; what did others, what did Jamie see in her? Did she fit in?

'You've got a whole life to figure these out,' Lesley had said. 'Posing the questions is easy, finding the answers — not so. Put it in your work; it's the best way.'

The title of Anna's Graduate Exhibition was *Dis-Connected*. She was writing the brief essay when Aunt Zora called. It was four-thirty on a rainy Saturday afternoon at the end of June. Time stopped.

Anna didn't know what happened first: her grandmother's death, Jamie's cooling off, or her inability to take a single new photograph. Maybe it all happened at the same time. After the funeral, she wanted to run away — from the house with rain-splattered windows, from the mournful faces whispering condolence and assuring her that time would heal everything. She was wounded and giddy with pain, as if some major organ inside had been torn off and it hung there, raw and bleeding into her gut. In Auckland, with Jamie and her work she'd be fine, she thought, and hurried back. But the time that was supposed to heal everything hadn't come. It dragged until it stopped once more, locking her in a dome of memory-laden days and dream-infused nights.

Footpaths and park benches tripped her steps; shop windows hurled her reflection back at her — slump-shouldered and empty-eyed. She plodded through this vast memory vault — from the steps at Khartoum place, where Jamie had first kissed her under the stern gaze of the suffragettes, to the Grant K Gallery, where she worked two days a week; from Silo Park, where Jamie skateboarded while she took pictures, to the Mt. Eden takeaways, where he dumped her, leaving her to wait for their fish and chips order, number eighty-three.

Anna felt disconnected from everything, from herself. Not a single new photograph for her graduate exhibition. She wrote and rewrote the brief. She arranged and rearranged the prints, straining to remember what she had meant, any meaning. Self-reproach shadowed her, whispering sad mantras about Anna Marsden, the out-of-ideas arts graduate; Anna, the Grant K intern, displaying other people's art and wishing she was one of them.

In her dreams she was happy, welcomed by her grandmother's open arms; throughout her days she felt caught in a sticky web, the aimlessness of her life sucking her dry. Anna wanted to tear away and run, run all the way to Whātea. Nostalgia swelled and towered itself into a beacon of certainty that all would come right if she went home. It was unreal, like in movies — a calling as strong as a command, as unfathomable as a dream.

And she had followed it.

Anna picked up her grandmother's portrait from the piano. She'd made it for her first-year studio paper. Silvery-white hair framing the oval face, the smile not on Nana's lips, but in her eyes, beautifully calm. There was a question there, an expectation.

I'm here, Nana.

Welcome, *milo déte*. But why have you come?

You called me, didn't you?

It might've been me, it might've been the land. Rest now. Then you'll find out.

Find out what, Nana?

Why you came back.

# Cait Kneller

An intricately woven portfolio of minor cruelties, thwarted hopes and human dysfunction, Cait Kneller's *Miss Pauanui* is a novel-in-stories, unfolding through the voices of seven women and girls from a single cul-de-sac. Each character describes her world with unflinching intimacy—this late-nineties Glenfield is a near-glittering landscape, overstuffed with material longings and distractions, and contrasted against an absence of adult support.

The titular story, *Miss Pauanui*, was chosen by Ali Smith as a prizewinner in *The Moth Magazine Short Story Competition 2021*. Her essay 'Glenfield' appeared in *Strong Words: The Best of the Landfall Essay Competition* (Otago University Press, 2019) and was a precursor to this project. You can read more of her work in *The Three Lamps Journal*.



EXTRACT

The dressing room at the Winter Feis was choked with *Hélena Professional*. At Hollywood-mirrored stations, each dancer was fitting their wig over tiers of balled-up socks. Their mothers stood behind them, cooing and fussing. Spritzing. I didn't wear a wig. My hair was naturally curly; we just enhanced it. While the curling iron heated up, I teased it into a three inch quiff until I looked like a baby brunette Dolly Parton. The bigger the hair, the closer to Nationals.

Connie was blocking the doorway, talking to Chanel's mother about all my wrongdoings since birth. She watched me struggle with my bun rat for a good five minutes before she took a hairpin out of my hand and fixed it herself—drawing the pin backwards, flipping it and raking it along my scalp.

'Thanks, Mum.'

I squinted but I didn't flinch. I could see it in her eyes. She was trying me, waiting for a chance to say *Buck up your ideas*. Anyway, it felt kind of good when she touched my head like that. She hadn't talked to me since I woke up.

I padded my face with the wet-tongue sponge of my compact until I was a uniform *Café Au Lait*. The faint fragrance of foundation clagged in my throat and calmed my nerves. I loved my face in competition makeup. In false lashes, I looked like an adult. I wished a cute boy from school could see me

like this, even though they would probably call me a poodle-headed prostitute. I daubed pink apples on my cheeks until it looked like I was smiling when I wasn't. One of my eyes was always on Connie. I needed her to curl the back, but I had to pick the right moment to interrupt her.

She sprayed one piece of hair at a time. When it was crisp with lacquer, she pinched it in the tongs and wound it up so it sizzled. Then she dragged a brush through each strand slowly, bristles sticking in the gunk so my hair made a drawn-out rasp. Connie loved to tell me *Beauty is pain*. She said it with gravity, but to me it was pretty fucking obvious. I sat with my chin raised and did not make a sound.

Kahlia sat next to me eating jelly snakes. She had lipstick smudged in the crook of her eye tooth, and she kept gasping *Fuck, Mum* as her mother tamed her flyaways. The mother ran a fine-toothed comb over Kahlia's smooth head. Her hair was styled in a smug little Marie Antoinette pile up.

Connie jerked my head straight. When it drifted back to Kahlia, Connie pursed her lips and flicked her wrist so the hot iron knocked against the skin above my collarbone. Our eyes met in the mirror, mine full of bright pain. My mouth dropped into a lipsticked *oh*.

Connie picked apart the clotted ringlets, eyeballing the spot where she'd burned me. She glared at my neck as if she were mad at it for burning. She looked as though she wanted to say, *Who the hell do you think you're talking to?* It was stinging. I don't know if the other parents saw. Connie walked away from me across the dressing room and rubbed cream on her hands.

My reflection wore a long oval burn like a hickey. It was Rich Girl Red and weeping. I hid it in my hair.

My solo dress weighed four kgs all on its own. Violet rhinestones winked at me from the dense embroidery when I lifted it down from its hanger. It fitted like a sarcophagus, snug at the waist with a pleated skirt that just covered my knickers. Connie came back to zip me. I held my breath and pushed in my stomach so she wouldn't pinch my skin in the teeth of the zipper. The dress enclosed me in purple velvet to the nape of my scrawny neck. My competition number was clipped to my skirt with a diamanté shamrock fastener, and it swung like the tag in a cow's ear. I was the only thirteen-year-old competing in Senior Girls today.

At the side of the stage, I crunched lumps of rosin under the toes of my jig shoes. Joel was competing in the pair before me. Men's 19 to 21. He was a strong dancer but he twisted his mouth on stage like he had no teeth. I'm not sure he was aware of it.

Joel bowed deeply and left the stage past me on the stairs. He didn't say hi. As he passed, he looked down at the mark hidden under my ringlets.

'Who's been sucking on your neck?' he said.

Connie drew a bobby pin from its yellow cardboard fan and secured my headband in place with a shunt.

I hit my tricks and scored high in all three rounds. Connie sat in the audience, her lip twitching dryly as she tallied my score. I stood feet in fifth at the top of the podium, five two including four inches of ringlets. They gave me a trophy and sash, and a cheque for \$3000 from one of the North Shore's leading real estate agents. It wasn't one of those novelty ones, just a regular-sized cheque from a chequebook. I couldn't see past the camera flashes that popped in my eyes. I got my dimples out.

In the foyer, Connie was talking syrupy to someone's father. He was a chinless man whose neck was pitted with mousey stubble. He held a bouquet of red flowers wrapped in polka-dotted cellophane, and Connie toyed with one tilting head.

I wheeled over to them with my costume case. Next to Connie, I felt like a lump of marzipan in my tracksuit. Her camisole hung low across her bust, lace obscuring where her cleavage had started to wrinkle. I passed her the cheque and she tucked it into her handbag without looking at me. The chinless dad studied his own reflection in the trophy on my hip.

'Need a hand with that thing?' He hiccuped at his own joke and Connie laughed, pressing her palm against his chest. The man gave me a wet smile and adjusted himself through the front of his trousers. Connie licked her thumb to spit-scrub something off my cheek, and I could smell tonsil stones in the dampness she left behind. When the man walked away to congratulate his own daughter, she lifted my chin in the bowl of her hand and squeezed it until my lips hooked like Elvis. 'You're looking bloated,' she said. 'You might need a colonic.'

We walked in silence from the yellow parking machine to the car. Connie didn't drive me to class anymore, just competitions. It felt so luxurious to be

inside, out of the wind, cradled by the foam headrest. The inside of the car smelled like crumbs and this choking jasmine perfume that she kept in the glove box. When I was tired like this, I squinted my eyes at the traffic lights, making them erupt into blurry cartoon stars. Out Connie's window, in the Burger King drive-thru, Chanel and Kahlia were cackling in the back seat of Chanel's mum's car. They would go to Oireachtas, soon in Australia, if they did well at Nationals. I probably wouldn't go. Even if I qualified, my teacher Rosetta didn't think we'd raise the money on time.

As soon as I got home, I locked myself in the bathroom so I could throw up. Three pumps worked a charm every time. Just like a fairy tale.

My stepdad used to make me toasties after feiseanna. When I was six, after I placed at my first feile, he made me a mousetrap cut into a shamrock. I had to nibble at it with the cusps of my new front teeth.

I reached for my toothbrush but the glass was tipped over, a foamy line of scum running down the side of the vanity. Connie's brush was lying face-up in the sink, but mine was missing. I found Masterpiece under the frill of Connie's bedspread, gnawing on it like she was trying to whittle a weapon. I wrestled it out of her fangs. The soft plastic handle was serrated in Bichon tooth marks.

I stood in the doorway to the lounge and watched Connie on the couch. She was lit from above by the floor lamp, and her hair fanned out like threads of spun sugar.

'Mum,' I pleaded.

She side-eyed me from the couch. I held the brush upside down so she could see the damage. My teeth tasted like fur. Connie shook the handset at me and mouthed, 'I'm on the *phone*,' then returned to sawing at her nails with a pointed file.

My mother was a pageant queen. She was Miss Essex County 1985, Miss Evening Chronicle 1986. She moved here when she was 23 and her daddy imported a dove-grey Jaguar. She won all the Coromandel pageants in one clean sweep. On the wall in our lounge, she had hung an airbrushed portrait of herself in a Baywatch one piece and a red Miss Pauanui sash.

The pageant circuit just wasn't what it used to be in Constance's day. She wouldn't stoop to enter me in these crummy New Zealand cattle-shows, on account of they only gave scholarships. Irish Dancing gave real cash prizes.



Anytime someone asked her about the sacrifice, the late nights and early mornings, the long rides to competitions in rec centres out of town, she just tilted her head and said, 'What's a talent wasted?'

# Liz Manley

Liz Manley was born in Zambia and lived in central and southern Africa. She moved to New Zealand in her twenties with her husband and young family. Her background is largely in science and education, where she has published several articles. She now lives in Titirangi, West Auckland, which is the setting for her first novel, *Unravelling*.

*Unravelling* explores themes of aging and death, racism, and how immigrants, bound to the past that formed them, maintain a sense of identity and belonging in a new country. Vi Botha is a wife, mother, scientist and occasional friend. She is definitely not a live-in carer for the elderly. Vi is as surprised as anybody when she says yes to Dorothy, her ailing mother-in-law, moving into her home. Vi and her family are unprepared for the grim reality of life with a racist octogenarian. When Dorothy shares an explosive secret she has guarded for years, it threatens to tear the family apart. Will Vi overcome the smouldering resentment that threatens her relationships? Can she reconnect the threads of their lives, or will her family implode?



EXTRACT

Syd walked through to the lounge, all legs in shorts that made Keith's look knee-length in comparison. The pale, early evening sun shone through the bifold doors and onto the tiles, illuminating dog pawprints like heat over secret onion juice messages. She scraped her fingers through her hair, pulled it through a hair tie which she wound off her wrist and curled it up into a scraggly bun. It was a combination of Keith's red hair and the blond that my own had once been. She turned her back on her grandmother who was already clutching an amber-filled glass.

'She told me I had to get her one,' she said under her breath, 'I had to pour until she said stop.'

Keith opened his thumb and forefinger and looked at Syd. She leaned in and widened his fingers. My stomach felt as though someone had gripped it and squeezed.

Dorothy's daily whisky freed her locked mind more effectively than an interrogator's truth serum. It was a quick-acting drug in a forty-three kilogram frame with as much meat on it as a sucked-on chicken bone. Just enough whisky and she relaxed and became almost chatty; too much, and she became a belligerent drunk. Like an animal waiting for its daily meal, she sensed when the hands of the clock clicked towards five.

'Can you imagine those poor children?' Dorothy spluttered into life like a poorly laid fire. 'A South African prison is no place for a child to be born, hey?'

In a wooden box on the top shelf of our cupboard was a forty-year-old page from an *Eastern Province Herald*, with a picture of Dorothy above an article about her fight to improve conditions for black women prisoners. Her social worker's cloak gave her the context to care, and then it was hung up at the end of the day and she drove home in her Mercedes, to her house in leafy Upper Walmer, run by a platoon of servants who lived away from their families to tend to hers. She showed more compassion for 'beautiful black babies' in her day job than she ever did for my babies.

'It's still better than being taken from your mother,' said Syd from behind the fridge door in the kitchen.

'Oh, my dear, they were such lo-ver-ly people.'

In Dorothy's world there were lovely people and bad people. Lemons and lemon squeezers. Us and them.

Syd mouthed 'Lo-ver-ly people' in synch with Dorothy into the fridge, her head wobbling. I couldn't recall if we had ever shown her the newspaper article.

Dorothy let out a shrill 'Woof!' She held out her empty glass and did it again. 'Woof!'

I refused to respond. Keith took the glass and poured another whisky. I joined him at the kitchen counter, my back to the lounge.

'What the hell?' mumbled Syd. 'What's with the woof?'

'I don't think she wants to ask me directly for another whisky,' said Keith in a monotone, moving back out to deliver the drink. Dorothy would have been more comfortable ringing the little silver bell she used for years to summon a servant for another drink.

'Why doesn't dad just say no?' Syd asked, with all the black and white clarity of an eighteen year old. She might not grow out of it. She was her

father's daughter and Dorothy's granddaughter. Their worlds were binary.

'She and Grandpa had a few whiskies every single night for fifty odd years,' I said. 'That's a hard habit to break.'

It was the one thing that still gave her any pleasure, until the Johnny Walker slump took over.

'Well, I'm not changing that nappy,' Syd said and pushed past me on her way back to her room.

'No fear of that,' I said under my breath.

The nappy-before-bed wasn't as bad as the particular smell of the morning-after nappy and the sodden bedclothes, and neither were as challenging as undressing a paralytic eighty-nine year old. Still, I couldn't bring myself to tell Dorothy that she had had enough to drink.

Keith took Dorothy's dinner on a tray to where she sat on the couch. He laid it in her lap, then erected a barricade of side tables and chairs around the end of the couch to prevent her from offering all her food to the dogs. She picked up the plastic salt-and-pepper shakers and inspected them as though they would contaminate her hands.

'You'll have to bring the Spode set from the house,' she instructed Keith without looking up, and covered the couch with a pepper-speckled film.

I'd seen the same expression on her face when she inspected dinner preparations in the kitchen back in South Africa, always with her crystal glass of whisky in her hand. She'd stir the gravy with the other hand and say, 'Lovely, Janey,' to the elderly black cook. And every meal Marius would peer over his glasses from the opposite end of the dinner table and say, 'Delicious meal, my dear. You've outdone yourself.'

Once she was finished, I climbed over a side table and took the tray from where it balanced on knees that were like arthritic knuckles on legs. There were several pieces of chewed grey steak carefully arranged on the faded gold edging around her plate. We would be eating more stews.

I listened to Dorothy as I cleared up the meal. We were a few mouthfuls of whisky from antagonistic. I avoided scraping the meat into the compost in deference to the worms and let the foot pedal of the bin go so that the bin lid clanged shut.

'Sydney's blood is French, hey!' she stated to Keith, her upper body nodding towards him. We were off down a well-trodden path. 'My family were French Huguenots. Terblanches. Terre blanche: white earth. We were

the real farmers, never mind the Boers.' Her lip curled. Despite marrying one, Dorothy nursed a hatred of the Afrikaaners who controlled the country and set apartheid in law.

'Well, my family were Vikings,' I said and dropping my voice, I added, 'and we ransacked Paris.'

'Yup,' Keith said, 'Vi stands for Viking.'

She knew that my ancestors were Vikings and that they had conquered the north of England, which was rich in coal. A friend of hers asked me once which town my 'family coal mine' was in 'back home'.

'My grandparents were wonderful farmers,' said Dorothy. 'When I was a child, I spent hours by the channels that took all the wees to the plants.'

'The wees?' I asked.

'Yes. The wees. They dug trenches from the latrines. Grew the most amazing vegetables and fruit. The Boers called themselves farmers, but they couldn't grow like we could.'

'Nitrogenous wastes in the urine,' Keith said, 'Plants love them.'

The only things I could grow at this time of the year were cavolo nero and spring onions, and Dorothy didn't like them.

'My sister and I called the African women who dug the trenches Le Wees! Hey!' She cackled, her lips drawn back, showing yellow teeth with a glint of gold fillings here and there. Her bottom teeth were straight and whiter than the others.

Dorothy fell silent and her mouth slackened. She tried to bend forward. Her hands dropped to the seat. By sheer good fortune, the crystal whisky glass balanced on its edge. Her chest heaved.

'Keith! She can't breathe!' I yelled and sprinted towards her. My hip crashed into the kitchen bench. Keith was up and thumping his mother hard on the back. The whisky, sucked in too hard, had constricted her throat. Saliva mixed with whisky drooled out of her open mouth.

'Be careful you don't break her,' I shouted above the dull slaps of his open palms. I grabbed a tissue from her box on the side table and scooped up a viscous pool of glop from the leather. I yanked her upright by her upper arm — my thumb nearly touched my fingers. At last, air rasped into her lungs. She swallowed, rasped again, swallowed again.

'It's liquid, you're okay,' I said, holding her upright by her shoulder now. 'You won't choke.'

She swallowed, her head bobbing. Keith hit her on the back again. My hands shook. I knelt beside Dorothy. The cold tiles between the couch and the rug hurt my kneecaps. They might be bruised tomorrow, but Keith's thumps would leave worse bruises on Dorothy's back. He dropped onto the couch, his arms by his side, his face chalky.

I hauled myself into the seat beside him, my body leaden, as though I had just finished a hard run. I imagined trying to resuscitate a nearly-ninety year old. She'd snap like a twig. The thought of having to put my mouth over Dorothy's wrinkled my nose and curled my upper lip.

We put Dorothy to bed, and I collapsed back onto the couch. My computer was in the middle of the dining table, open at my work account, but I couldn't concentrate after that episode. My review of literature was already late. Keith turned the TV on and rolled the volume back from forty to ten.

'My god that gave me a fright,' he said, 'my heart's still going like the clappers.'

'What if she dies here? Would we call an ambulance?'

I had always hoped that I would die in my sleep at home, but I'd never thought about what that would mean for my family.

Keith rubbed his eyes. He had seen his fair share of sudden deaths in the police service.

'We'd call a funeral home, although I'd probably need to call work first. Oh man, I don't want to think about it.'

We lay draped over the couches, like damp paper dolls, saying nothing. The green light of the TV played over Keith's face as the scenes on the screen changed, but all I could see was Dorothy choking.

## A.J. Rush

Motueka writer A.J. Rush started writing with diaries as a young girl before majoring in English Lit for her BA at the University of Auckland & completing a Post Grad Diploma in Journalism at AUT. Since then, her career has spanned broadcast journalism, natural history television research/producing, non-fiction book writing, Communications & PR. Her feature articles have appeared in numerous publications including in *Canvas*, the *NZ Listener* and the *Sunday Star Times*. Most recently she's been a Senior Writer for creative arts publication *The Big Idea*.

*Going Under* is a coming-of-age memoir focused on a sailing adventure 21-year-old AJ took with her then-boyfriend Jon and four other Kiwis from New Zealand to Indonesia during the Pacific sailing season of 1992. The yacht, a 52-foot ketch called *Manureva*, was a salvaged wreck. Sailors' superstition warns never salvage a wreck and this belief perhaps transformed an anticipated sea adventure into an ill-fated voyage. Three disturbing incidents followed, including a ferocious shark attack. This is AJ's version of the voyage and the events which unfolded, including her rescue by the Royal New Zealand Air Force.



EXTRACT

It took the best part of the morning to sail from Port Vila to *Imere* or 'Hideaway' Island'. The warm sea breeze was medicine to my mind, calming me, cooling me. It felt exhilarating to be back on board *Manurevai*—with her sails up, billowing in the breeze, she was in her full glory—appearing like scene from a children's picture book, leaning over to one side, cutting a foamy track forward through the swell.

I spent the voyage sitting up on the bow, looking out at the vivid turquoise water through my dark sunglasses; transfixed by the colour. It was such a different blue to that of the ocean back home in Aotearoa New Zealand. A brighter, more azure blue with a clarity and visibility from the surface that we didn't get in the deeper green ocean coastal waters back home. A few years later when I was working in natural history documentary

filmmaking, I learnt how the different shades of ocean could spell better visibility for underwater shots. The director I worked with, would wait for this warmer blue water to 'come in' late in the summer when the ocean temperature in peaked. This was the best time for filming as it would give us the best shots with the visibility always superior to that of the darker green of the cooler waters.

We came upon Hideaway from the western side. Oval in shape and only about a kilometre in length, it looked like a postcard, the picture-perfect image of a tropical island. Lime green foliage rose as high as the tallest coconut trees in its centre. Its lush jungle-like vegetation was fringed by ivory sand, like an egg-white spreading out into the iridescent turquoise waters of the coral reef, before merging into the darker blue depths of the Pacific beyond.

We sailed around to the eastern side where a lemon-coloured sandy beach stretched the length of the island. Al positioned the yacht about fifty metres offshore, tying up to a buoy attached to the reef. Over the side, I could see a myriad of marine life teeming in the crystal-clear water below us. The beach was an easy swim or row in the dinghy. *Magnifique!* I later wrote in my diary, calling on my fifth-form French.

It was scorching hot, and I couldn't wait to get in. I felt excited. I had loved snorkelling ever since our annual swim team camping trips to Goat Island Marine Reserve. But I'd never snorkelled in the tropics before. I changed down below in our cabin into my one-piece black Speedo swimsuit and dug out my snorkeling gear from under the seating in the cockpit.

I spat in my mask, smeared the spittle around the glass, and leaned over the side to wash it out in the seawater before adjusting it onto my face. With my fins on I jumped scissor-legged into the water, making a big splash and submerging to near the bottom, before kicking up to the surface. I rolled on to my back to clear my mask and then turned face down, kicking to propel myself forward over the reef.

Underwater was another world. Sun shards splintered through the surface and created golden sparkles out across the pastel blue, pink, and mauve coral. Swimming amongst its craggy outcrops, colourful fish of all shapes and sizes completed the rainbow. They had darted away in fright when I'd cleared my snorkel, but once I was kicking along gently and breathing normally, they went back to their daily business—some swimming in earnest, others nibbling at the coral or the sandy bottom in between



shoals. Others, in schools, floated in between softer corals that swayed gently in the moving tide.

Through my peripheral vision I could see Jon with Hamish and Gin. The water was warm, and my togs were all I needed. The sun warmed my back. This was what I'd dreamed of, exploring tropical underwater worlds through my snorkel. I felt so happy.

I made my way further out towards the drop-off, where the azure shallow water ended and there was a navy blue rim to the reef. WHEN I peered down over the edge of the steep underwater cliff, it looked dark and felt a bit scary. The reef seemed safe by comparison to the deep expanse of shadowy water which disappeared into the fathoms. I explored along the cliff edge and saw larger fish and even spotted a little brown speckled turtle. The aquatic locomotion of its flippers reminded me of a motorised bath toy as it cruised in the aqua blue above me, sun rays lighting up its rounded shell.

Then my eye caught something far below me, just visible in the inky depths. It was a steely grey baby shark about a foot long. It twisted as it swam, its small fin and square jaw a classic shark shape from above. I felt a jolt of fright and wondered if its mother was nearby. It was time to move back towards the safety of the reef.

Back on the boat and drying off, I sat with Gin, Hamish, and Jon in our sarongs and towels and shared stories of what we'd seen. Pete returned dripping up the ladder in his wetsuit, spear gun and fish in hand. He proudly proffered his catch before whacking it on the head and gutting it to be begin preparation for the fish smoker screwed onto the yacht railing.

Al and Di returned as the sun was setting and told us they had caught the little ferry over to explore Mele village across from the island on the mainland. They said the island had been hit badly by a cyclone and the coral reef had been smashed up so it was not as good as it was before the storm. On the ferry, they'd also been told of a small boy who'd been electrocuted and killed earlier in the year by the power generator on the island.

At sunset, Jon and I rowed the dinghy over to the wharf on the island. We tied the boat up and made our way towards a wooden carved sign that read 'Welcome to Hideaway Island'. We discovered the sand wasn't soft; instead, it was coarse, made up of broken coral—the reef that had been smashed on the beach by the cyclone. Beyond the sign, we could see the abandoned resort, and further, along the beach, I could make out what looked to be the wrecked

restaurant and bar. Usually, we would have been able to buy food and drinks at the hotel bar and restaurant, but it was clearly closed up, seaweed and debris lying among ruined sun loungers and broken windows. There were parts of small catamarans and windsurfers piled up behind the washed-out restaurant and bar. It was quite eerie.

The island had seemed so idyllic. I felt saddened to think that a cyclone had destroyed the resort here. It would have been a truly stunning place to stay, with the white sand, the gentle water, the lapping current. So peaceful. It seemed hard to imagine such a huge storm whipping up here, but I supposed things weren't always what they seemed. Even in paradise, bad things could happen.

The next morning we awoke to another scorching day, heat hitting the boat the minute the sun rose. Before long we were all up, in togs and over the side for a swim. Then fixing ourselves breakfast before another session exploring the reef. At morning tea time, I got one of the pineapples from the netting basket in the galley and found a large knife before taking it upstairs and proceeding to try and chop it up for everyone.

'Don't fucking do that, you idiot!' Al yelled, and he kicked my butt from behind. I jumped, a red flush rising up into my cheeks, shocked and humiliated. 'Use a bloody breadboard! It took me days to sand and paint that and you'll wreck it by cutting on it with a knife.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't realise,' I stammered. I felt mortified. Tears threatened to spill from my eyes. I abandoned the pineapple and headed below to our cabin. I lay on the bunk, my face wet, shaking with emotion. I'd been trying to be helpful, trying to be useful, and prepare food as Di and Gin did for the crew. I felt useless: everything I tried to do was wrong. I didn't know how to help sail the boat. I'd been stupid to use the knife on the wooden cabin top: why hadn't I realised you couldn't cut directly on the wood? I should've known, I thought.

But Al shouldn't have kicked me: it was disrespectful and nasty. It made me feel again that he didn't want me on board. That I was unwelcome, unwanted. As soon as we got back to Port Vila, I vowed to myself that I would go to the travel agency and buy myself a ticket out of this place and off this boat.

# Alexandra Stinson

Alexandra Stinson is the author of 'Land of the Rising Sun,' 'Ericaceae,' and 'Electric Pirate Acid Test', all published in *The Three Lamps*.

Her novel *Glass Spoon* follows the journey of a botanist named Remi who quits her first job out of graduate school to be an equine performer with Cirque de Soleil. The novel juxtaposes Remi's world of vespertine entertainers with the intoxicating world of botany. When her straitlaced brother Paul comes to visit, we learn of a secret shared between the two that bonded them as young children and drove each of them down extremely different paths. Blurring, anecdotal, and tactile, *Glass Spoon* explores Remi's interactions with hearsay and the uncanny multiplicity of reality.



EXTRACT

In a cloud of pink petroleum, saccharine like calamus-scented pink starburst, Misty zipped me into my costume and told me she was my well-wisher. Leave a tip. She put me into one of my four wigs, and my first of three masks. They'll tell you at Burning Man that the best mantras are the ones that you do automatically. Mine was 'move, move, move.' I alighted on the Anglo-Arabian named Fortune, Omen, and Boon. His hair was braided, and I wanted to stick my tongue into his velvet nose. Sometimes he would let me. I asked the horses to teach me to see backwards and forwards the way they could, to travel time the way they could. I aligned myself into shapes above and below as they galloped and I held to their manes. I dropped neck-first off the side of 16-hands tall Velvet Hammer, his legs all bone and galvanized—strong and thick like a medieval table for treaty signing or putting swords to rest. I leaned when he leaned, my hands quiet and giving. Remote.

Eight hooves dug clods of dirt; the surroundings whirred hypnotic until the excess faded into centricity. I stepped onto the stirrup with my palms. We jumped over every obstacle. During dressage, I did pop-ups and back handsprings onto warm fur necks and withers that quaked like aspen as I pressed. I wondered if they drank the surroundings like I did—if they

watched the crowd like I did. A web of thick ropes hung above me for later acts—everything else gossamer, sheer, like the silks the priests used to put out in the church for the changing of the liturgical seasons. I hung from hooks, hooked in. Belted in. Scored like a seed. Flashing lights, lights flashing for me and only me. Plumes, Lunarlon, Lycra. Rhinestones. Lyra. We were vine-ripened ecstasy out here for all to see. We were *Theobroma bicolor*, *Uncaria tormentosa*, bone-white pearl lupin, goldenrod, night-blooming cereus. Seeds planted in the dark, by the brightest minds. Mist machines, smoke machines, coumadin and rose coumarin glitter, green chalk and visual incense. Lucid dream. We rose and fell and bobbed and breathed and flew and undulated like grass. A segment in the show was entirely Luna months and dragonflies and another with just ladybugs. It was all just us in disguise. Kinetic, frenetic and husked in patent-leather green: we were precision in spades. Diaphanous curtains above us; windmills in our diaphragms. Our god was G-force. We were not false idols. We made everyone believers. I've flown over the real pyramids of Giza: my ears never stopped popping. Sometimes they popped during my act, and I just had to ride it out. And at the end of each show, someone different got to say, 'another step for humanity' into a mic. It was always someone picked at random from the audience forty-five minutes to the end of the show. They were given a little business card with the words on it. Nobody ever messed it up.

Sometimes after the shows the audience treated me like a prophet, asking me to sign their program. Asking to pet my horses. The signatures I smashed out were empty lines scribed inside this concave palace. I usually wrote 'Beware of False Gurus' instead of my name just to get a rise. Eventually, I got a rubber stamp made. I'd push my double-helix curls away from my eyes, and press the stamp as many times as I felt like. Sometimes, we made people in the audience cry. A perpetual weeping in the crowd was the only water in sight in this desert. And sometimes I mistook the spotlight in whites of eyes for even more crying eyes. This single aeolian life became a directed power plant in the circus, hip to hip with the other acrobats. Salvation in bread and circuses—the drunken history majors from college had been right. Joker, Fool, Thief, Queen of Hearts, Queen of Spades: I could be them all out in Vegas. We were a hive of alkaloids, chemical x's in our own rights. Sometimes, one performer got stormed and taken off stage the way a hive of bees crowds a no-longer-productive queen. I was never led out that way. I surfed the

horses formula one speed. All surefooted and unspookable, my feet pressing on Fortune, Omen, and Boon. My feet had eyes. My hands had eyes.

I used to sleep with one eye open until I began to tape it shut. In one of the acts, I taped both of my eyes shut—theatrically. Sweeping my arms, I looked right into the audience. I liked seeing them, and then not. I liked imagining what their faces did and never knowing, ever. I walked from FOB to Velvet Hammer, bare feet on hide balancing in the lemon light. And when it went orange, my part was over and we trotted off the stage to go eat tiny heirloom apples together. My nostrils filled with stable muck and detritus, diatomaceous earth and dark intestinal soil. And as quickly as they took my offering, I abandoned the mouthy horses and slung myself into Dorant's vandalic truck. I drove into the cold desert of lymphatic Vantablack noiselessness as if I were still flying on horseback. I inhaled sagebrushed air, the ankle ruche of my loud Betsy Johnson sweats clung to my dry calves. I held tightly to my gifted freesias and gladiolus, the ones they often gave me after shows. The ones whose presence, like mine, made no sense in this desert. My hands were in a perpetual high voltage grip, gripping the wheel, my freesias, my own hands to replace the ropes, and the manes, the reins. Next show in 24 hours.



My adopted brother Paul was in town for the next two days sleeping on a pillow bed on my floor in Luxor and attending an aggregates and materials convention. We trudged into the Tropicana the next day for Robert Irvine and 'stories' of the Rat Pack. Our dad always said any story believed is a true story.

'Remi... do you know the real reason Monte Carlo got changed to The Park?' he asked me after he'd ordered his sliders. I bit my lip and panned the crowds for Earl of Sandwich, the acrobat.

'I still call it The Casino Formerly Known As Monte Carlo. How can the Monte Carlo just get renamed?' I asked him, barely paying attention.

'It's cause they don't want the public thinking about Monte Carlo. They don't want money diverted out of Vegas.' I sipped my lemon water through pursed lips, letting it dribble down my chin right over the faceted cup and down into my shirt. Paul let his legs man spread all the way to my chair as

he pulled out a collection of lavender tokens from of his easily pick-pocketed pants. He laid them on the table like he was setting down a wad of tissues, as if they were meant to repel not attract. To me, they were amaranthine candy: a surge paused in time by damming the hourglass. They were in bloom regardless of how long you averted your gaze. They were permanent, unless of course you gambled them.

'People forget they can go to another M like Monaco, or Macau, or heck, Malibu, Maui, Miami,' he said as he pushed the shiny talismans towards me. Paul would try to pretend he didn't fear or loathe this built environment. I smirked at him through the ice in my mouth. His buzzkill pupils fixated on the singular goal of coming to ask if I'm ever coming back again—and when. I'd have to take him gambling with The Bone Doctor and Stealth. I'd ask Marionette to give him a shout out mid-show. He had to like it here. People usually loved to learn I worked in Vegas. They rolled in like tumbleweeds from out of town to cause mischief and expect me to have dinner with them. College friends from all over—they came for the boozy mischief. 'I love you so much; see you next time' they'd murmur in the midday sun as we parted ways.

And then I'd get called in with the other showgirls and showboys, and it was time to go again. We'd spend nights balancing on sides of pools at various hotels. There were no teams out here; we were all one apparatus. We were all the glitter in one glorious bazooka; we cracked our bodies like glow sticks. Sometimes it was embarrassing to get recognised out on the strip. In a group, I didn't have to carry it alone. I grew up with hopscotch and jump rope and balancing on Minneapolis park benches and front stoops. I never got this much attention before. This nocturnal world—even during the day—provided me with a sea of eyes. Our rib cages ever expanding, drinking air, we were limitless stars underneath the stares. We were linked, locked in some kind of parabiosis.

# Kate Waterhouse

An Auckland-based writer, environmentalist and consultant, Kate co-edited *Motherlode, Australian Women's Poetry 1986-2008* (Puncher & Wattman 2009) and won the RNZ Flash Poetry competition in 2020. Her work has appeared widely in journals including *Meanjin* in Australia and *Broadsheet* in New Zealand. She is fifth-generation Pākehā, married to an Australian, with three teenaged daughters, and a deep connection to Aotea, Great Barrier Island.

*The Flower Hunter* is a novel about the life of Fanny Osborne (1852–1934), noted flower painter, who lived at idyllic but remote Tryphena harbour on Aotea. Her childhood is one of survival and immersion in a beautiful but disputed landscape. Her relationship with a man, for whom she bears thirteen children, estranges her from her parents forever. Finally freed of family obligations, she develops as an artist with brilliant technical control, surviving tragedy and loss to sell and exhibit her work to wide acclaim.



EXTRACT

**1873**

My monthly bleeds stopped in the spring, but the first I knew of my child was a violent retching that came out of sleep. I had to clamp my hand over my mouth until I could get out of the house. No-one was awake and I got as far away as I could before being ill in the long grass behind the dairy. The smell of it made me retch again and again. When there was nothing more in me I lay down and closed my eyes, clammy and panting. I was never sick, and it could only mean one thing.

The bellbirds were at their morning's song and waves tumbled into the bay, everything carrying on as usual. I sat up, wanting water now to get rid of the awful taste of bile, but the smallest movement made my stomach turn. If there was to be a baby now, I knew how sick I would be—Mama had shown me that. I would need to manage better than she had. No-one must know.

The sun hadn't yet come up over the ridge. I would fetch the water and see how I fared. Giving the dairy a wide berth, I found two buckets near the

water barrel, and made my way gingerly up the creek. I quelled a deep desire to run far into the bush, willing one foot, then another along the smooth clay track. My head filled with panic. Keeping this secret as well as our meetings was unthinkable.

What would Joe do and how could I tell him? Friday was three days away. I couldn't be more than two months along. He would be pleased; I was certain of that. Surely now we would have to find a way to elope.

At the pool, the eels stayed hidden. I rinsed my mouth clean with the sweet water and let it run through my fingers. Filling the pails, I thought of the first time I had come here, how small and stubborn I had been. What would this child that was growing in me be like?

A whiff of something dead came down the valley on the breeze, just a faint smell but I gagged. I would have to arrange things— to stay away from the dairy and the kitchen, any sour milk smell from Mama or the baby. At the idea of that I retched into the stream.

By the time I had lugged the water back I was sweating and faint. But it was bearable compared to the thought of being trapped indoors. My sisters were old enough to be apprenticed and help Mama manage the dairy—the milking, the cream, making cheese. I could take over the washing from Mama, and I would help Papa with the kumara and potatoes and the rest of the spring garden work. Anything to be outside, and anything to avoid my mother noticing my missing monthly cloths. I just needed Addy to go along with it.

In the kitchen I set the fire and put on the kettle. Addy came out. She took down an apron and tied it tightly round her narrow waist.

'Where did you go?'

'I woke early and heard the bellbirds, so I went out to listen. There are fewer and fewer of them, have you noticed?' I poked at the fire. 'I got the water; it really was very peaceful.'

Addy gave the slightest lift of an eyebrow. Casually I said:

'I was thinking, I should take over the washing from Mama. It's too much for her now, have you seen how she winces when she squats down? And we should be doing two washes a week.'

Addy reached for the porridge pot and began scooping handfuls of oats into it. I knew I was infringing on her self-appointed role as task mistress, but I kept going.



'And anyway, it's time Clara pulled her weight and took on the dairy. Connie's old enough to help now. Remember you weren't even ten when Mama had us skimming the cream?'

Addy smiled as she poured water on the oats. She had done it so many times she never measured anything.

'You can help me with school today if you're looking for work,' she said.

'Well, yes of course,' I began, 'but don't you think I should help Papa? There's such a lot to do. George is a loose cannon with the sowing and planting—he's only interested in fishing.'

Addy laughed. 'Always trying to get away from those children, aren't you? They dote on you, and you hardly seem to have a second thought for them.' With both hands, she lifted the heavy pot onto the hook above the fire. It was best to say nothing.

'Well, you'd better go and get dressed then,' she said, 'before he catches you in your night shirt.'

I could smell the porridge now and felt another gag rise.

'Let's talk about it over breakfast?' I said, making for the door. I wanted to kiss her on the cheek, but I didn't trust myself. In the end I contrived to miss the crush of bodies in the kitchen by going out to sketch a boat in the bay. I managed a piece of dry bread and jam and a mug of sweet tea when everyone had finished.

Papa was pleased to have me with him in the garden. As well as checking the hives, I helped him repair the hen house. Mama happily gave me the washing and immediately agreed to conscript Clara and Elinor to the dairy. Soon the new arrangements were the only arrangements.

Each morning I woke and lay quietly, preparing myself to get to the bush before I was sick. I tried to hold the bile back and go to a different patch of grass or trees each morning so the smell wouldn't be obvious. The dogs were the worst, following me as soon as I left the house. I was desperate to see Joe.

Every day that week I kept an eye out for him, but there was only the light from his window at night stretching like a yellow arm across the water. On Friday, I spent some time drawing with the little ones outside, snatching glances down the beach towards his house. As soon as I could, I packed my materials and left. The track up the valley was dry, but I couldn't make my body move the way it usually moved. I stopped to rest, lying with closed eyes to let the quiet stream and lush smell of toropapa settle my breathing. I was

quite lightheaded by the time I reached the saddle.

'You're late,' Joe said, stepping out from behind a tree.

'Oh!' I cried, 'don't do that to me!' and I burst into tears. Then his arms were around me, warm and smelling of beeswax. His hands stroked my hair, and he kissed the top of my head. I wanted to stop time, to stay like that, curled against him, out of the world.

'What's happened? Is someone hurt?' he asked.

I stepped back and took his hands, meeting his eye at last. I knew everything would change once I told him. The future would reveal itself like a long stretch of sand. A band of little riflemen flitted behind him, the green of their wings flashing in a patch of sun. His face was all I had been able to see in my mind for days, was now full of concern.

'There is a child,' I said softly. 'I'm certain.'

He tensed and his concern deepened. 'You're sure, Fanny?'

The way he said this, I felt suddenly faint. Would he abandon me now, after all we had done?

He fell to his knees, put his head against my belly and pulled me to him. My doubts evaporated and I knelt and kissed him. He rose and took my hand to lead me away to the honey shed.

'No, not there,' I said, 'here, now.' And I drew him to me.

The pleasure he gave me there under the trees, in the dry leaves and half sunlight, with the wind sighing and the riflemen's sweet chatter high in the canopy, I could not have imagined. There was an opening up, a flush of ecstasy that had not been there before. Afterwards, I lay against him, my head in the curve of his shoulder. There was a button missing at the top of his shirt. I slid my hand under it and felt his heart beating under the palm of my hand.





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