

2022/23

Master of Creative Writing

University of Auckland



UNIVERSITY OF
AUCKLAND
Waipapa Taumata Rau
NEW ZEALAND

ARTS

MCW 2022–23
University of Auckland



ARTS



ALTHOUGH WE WERE BACK in person for the entirety of this MCW year, I was overseas on research and study leave for our first semester. During my absence, workshops were run and students supervised by Selina Tusitala Marsh, Rosetta Allan, Rachel O'Connor and Ruby Porter. Many thanks to them for their insightful hard work with the MCW writers.

Thanks also to the visitors who gave seminars in both semesters: Gina Cole, Jack Remiel Cottrell, Melanie Lavelle-Moore, Amy McDaid, Joanna Preston and Sonya Wilson. We were delighted to host Colson Whitehead on campus for a brilliant masterclass. Thanks to the Auckland Writers Festival for their ongoing commitment to our programme.

The extracts in this sampler represent the work of one essayist, one poet and ten novelists. Some settings in the books they're writing will be familiar to local audiences—Western Springs, Auckland Museum, High Street, Kingsland. But some transport us to less familiar places, including into dystopian futures and violent pasts, to cities on the brink of revolution, sodden with alcohol or dark with crime and corruption. The people of these books seek futures beyond grief and personal loss, dysfunctional families, gang violence, sexual assault or psychological manipulation. In the work of this year's MCW writers we travel from Te Moana Nui a Kiwa to Cuba, from ancient Egypt and Rome to contemporary London and Sydney.

Many thanks to our Dean of Arts, Robert Greenberg, and Kim Phillips, Head of the School of Humanities, for their support of our creative writing programme, and to the colleagues and writers who served as our examiners. We're also grateful for the scholarship offered to MCW students each year by Copyright Licensing NZ.

This year we launched a new award, the Phoenix Prize for the year's best manuscript. This is named for the influential literary journal published at the University of Auckland in the early 1930s. Many of its founders and contributors went on to become major names in New Zealand literature, and this new prize recognises them, as well as the new waves of emerging writers we teach in our programme. The Phoenix Prize is entirely funded by generous MCW alums. And thanks to our MCW Alum Fund, this year we have been able to launch the new MCW Writer-in-Residence Award. Our first writer-in-residence was Sonya Wilson, working on the sequel to the award-winning *Spark Hunter*.

Six recent alums published books in 2023 and we look forward to more books next year. Our community grows and its commitment deepens.

Paula Morris MNZM
Director, Master of Creative Writing



Master of Creative Writing

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Craig Clark

Craig Clark was born in New Zealand and has lived in Czechoslovakia, Germany, Israel, and Argentina. Here and There is a collection of short fiction inspired by the places where he has lived and his interest in history.

The Swagger is set in Taranaki during the Depression in the 1930s and World War Two. A young girl observes the impact of these events on her farming family and how they are viewed by their neighbours. The Singer is set in Cuba between the late 1930s and the early days of the Revolution in 1959. A wealthy woman's privileged life is upturned and she tries to escape, seeking help from her estranged family. The Officer is set in Argentina during the Dirty War in the 1970s. The officer is forced to confront the moral consequences of running a paramilitary cell and address the ghosts of his own past.



EXTRACT from 'The Singer'

EVA GÓMEZ WAS SELDOM in the kitchen organising her domestic staff, but tonight was an important occasion. Ten people were coming to dinner, including the U.S. ambassador and his wife. Every year on the last Saturday in March, Eva hosted the ambassador – a tradition going back thirteen years to 1925. Eva's husband, Sergio, a lieutenant colonel in the Cuban army, had also invited some of his colleagues.

Eva contacted the reporter for the social pages of the *Diario de la Marina*. For the past ten years, Betiana had been reporting on Eva's dinners and parties. At 7 p.m., Betiana would arrive with a photographer. Punctuality might not matter to some, but Eva insisted on it. Her time was far too valuable to waste time waiting.

Since 7 a.m. that morning, Eva's house staff of four had been preparing the dinner. Tonight, they'd begin with fish soup – snapper – followed by shredded beef, served with rice, beans, and fried plantains. Dessert would be guavas and oranges from her orchard, supplemented

by pineapples. She knew that *los norteamericanos* liked traditional Cuban cuisine, but nothing could be too spicy.

She strolled into the orchard and lit a cigarette. It was a disgusting habit, but she needed something to get through the stress of organising the dinner. The heat was already getting to her, and it was only spring. The gardener's shirt was wet with perspiration and clinging to his thin body. How awful it must be doing physical work in this unseasonable heat. Some strands of hair were matted to his forehead, as though they were glued together. Eva ran her right hand through her hair. She knew it must be a mess, but she wasn't worried. At 5 p.m., one of Havana's leading hairdressers would be coming to do her hair.

She took a couple of puffs of the cigarette. It tasted like roasted nuts with a hint of smoke. When she smoked, she felt sharper. She looked at her watch, knowing she had to go back inside. She wasn't looking forward to returning to the suffocating heat of the kitchen. She scrunched the cigarette into the gravel path with her high heel.

Eva scanned the kitchen. Liliana, the housekeeper, was carrying a silver tray. On a family trip to Paris in 1912, just months before he died, her father had bought her that tray. She kept it on the dresser in her bedroom, and Liliana polished it once a week. It was used only on Christmas Day, Good Friday, and at the annual dinner for *los norteamericanos*.

Liliana was about to place the tray too close to the stove.

'No, no, no, no!' Eva shouted. 'Keep the silver tray away from the stove. Place it further along the bench next to the fruit,' she added, waving her hands. Sometimes, the staff were absolutely useless.

Tonight, Eva would show the ambassador and his wife that some Cubans appreciated the finer things. And Eva could also show them what a Francophile she was by displaying her fluent French. She knew the ambassador's wife was one too, and had arranged to sit next to her.

Eva inhaled the familiar smell of the fish soup.

'Would you like a taste, madam?' the cook asked.

Eva nodded and the cook provided a large spoon. The fish essence in the broth was subtle, and cumin and oregano infiltrated her taste buds.

'It's missing something,' she said, without being able to put her finger on it.

'Shall I put some more salt in, madam?'

'Yes, try that. You already have enough spices.' She didn't want to offend her foreign guests with a dish too spicy for their taste. The food served at U.S. embassy dinners was so bland. How could anyone possibly enjoy food like that?

Eva's twenty-year-old daughter, Isabella, appeared in the kitchen doorway, trying to get her attention. She was wearing a cross and a white dress. The top two buttons were undone, far too seductive for Eva's taste.

'Not now,' Eva said. 'Can't you see I'm rushed off my feet? Can you help Liliana prepare the dessert?'

Eva noticed Isabella hesitating before slinking away, her shoulders hunched. The last thing Eva needed was her surly daughter distracting her from her exacting schedule.

When Eva walked into the dining room, she inhaled the tropical fruity scent of the red anthuriums. Earlier that morning, she had cut the flowers from the pot in her bedroom. They were in a blue vase next to white drapes, adding colour to the room. She planned to tell her guests how she chose the arrangement to represent the flags of their two countries. Eva beamed with pride at her attention to small details, knowing other hostesses weren't as fastidious. She strolled around the mahogany dining table and its twelve chairs, surveying the position of the napkins and cutlery. She moved one spoon closer to a fork. Overall, it was a job well done. She had trained her staff well, but she wouldn't be giving any praise. They were just doing their assigned jobs after all. Eva imagined Isabella hosting a party like this in the future, but she had so much to learn.

Eva's hairdresser would be arriving soon, so she rushed upstairs to have a bath. When she was climbing the stairs, a maid was vacuuming the entrance for the second time that day. Some leaves had blown in, making Eva order her to do it again. She didn't want any of her guests thinking she ran a sloppy household. In her hot bath, with the water lapping almost to the top, she felt relieved. The preparations were almost complete. Her meticulous planning had paid off again. Sergio also prided himself on his organisational skills. His repetitive boasting bored Eva to sleep. They just fought on different battlefields after all.

Eva leaned back in the cane chair on the balcony, fanning herself with a fan. She looked out over the orchard of guava, mango, orange, and apple trees, where she'd played hide-and-seek with her younger brother, Ernesto.

She used to cheat, by peering through her fingers, because losing to him at anything wasn't an option.

The sound of a tram's wheels rattled along the rails. Even though Eva was born and raised in Havana, she'd never caught a bus or tram. She'd always had a chauffeur. She imagined the tram heaving with people, crammed together. On a hot day, it'd be hideous. The body odour would be enough to make her throw up.

She took a sip of her fresh orange juice, thick and refreshing, and spied Isabella walking into the orchard. Isabella squatted near a tree, vomited, and wiped her mouth. How unbecoming and vulgar. She hadn't brought Isabella up to behave like that. Eva's eyes darted around the orchard, hoping no one else had witnessed it. Her heart sank. She fought the urge to jump to conclusions, but she felt her stomach pulling in different directions. The prospect of speaking to Isabella scared her – what might she discover? Eva didn't want the dinner to be spoiled in any way, but Isabella's desecration of the orchard couldn't be ignored. She marched down the stairs, blood surging, her jaw tight.

Outside, even among the trees, the heat was steamy. Eva pulled at the front of her dress to stop it sticking to her skin. Isabella was still there, sitting on a bench in the shade of a mango tree. Eva's initials were scratched into its bark somewhere. When Ernesto was climbing the same tree, he'd fallen and broken his arm. She'd nursed him until they reached the hospital. Every tree had a memory for her.





Te Aniwaniwa Codyre

Te Aniwaniwa Codyre (Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Awa) is a young writer from Auckland. Her essay 'The Māori Mascot' appeared in e-Tangata in 2021. Two of her poems were displayed in the Studio Vignettes exhibition for the 2019 Young Writers' Festival in Dunedin. In 2016 her poetry was published by the Michael King Writers Centre in the journal Signals.

After the Fact is a campus novel set in Dunedin. The novel chronicles a young woman's mental breakdown and eventual recovery in the wake of an assault.



EXTRACT from 'After the Fact'

IT WAS A DRUGGY, DISSOLUTE Dunedin summer. The last summer before people started dropping dead in the street and wearing hazmat suits in the supermarket. Not that people were dropping dead so much here, in New Zealand – only very old people. Overseas everyone was getting it. I read about it in the news as though it was a bad dream that was happening to someone else. Most people I knew said Covid was the worst year of their life. Even my mother, the biggest misanthropist I've ever known, started missing everyone all of a sudden.

If you've ever lived in Dunedin, you'll know the place is crawling with degenerates. And everyone's heard about the couch burning; Otago's been trying to put an end to that for years. Hall orientation, my first year, we were given a lecture decrying the practice. It wouldn't be tolerated, those bad old days were over, there was even a brochure. That very night I went to a party, and they burnt a couch in the front yard. People were standing around the blazing heap of corduroy and steel springs, laughing, and lighting their cigarettes with the flames. I still remember the acrid smell of smoke as the couch went up, the way bits of burnt upholstery fluttered into the dusk like blackened kites.

Dunedin's always in the news. The headlines focus on drug busts and property damage, as if that's the real danger. Every year the cops get called to some party because someone's done something stupid. Whether that's throwing bottles or public urination. Recently, a girl was trampled to death. She fell down the stairs at a big View Street party and not one of the six-hundred breathers noticed her passed out.

I heard about the View Street death at my parent's place in Point Chevalier, watching the news on their big flatscreen TV. I wish I was surprised, but I wasn't. Thankfully, I'd hightailed it out of there, by then. I did think that was a terrible way to die, though. Imagine looking down from heaven and knowing a bunch of drunk first years did you in. It would make you feel like your life wasn't worth much more than a few vodka cruisers and a root that night. Everything bad they say about the place is true, only its worse.

That summer, I was about to start my third year studying English. I was only nineteen, because I got put up a year in school. Supposedly, it was due to my advanced reading abilities. That's what they told my parents, and of course, they ate that up. They put a lot of people forward that year, but they put most of them back in the end. They were struggling too much.

Before it all went to hell, I ran with the same group for three years — Blair, Oliver Aroha, and Austin. Aroha was my only female friend. If you've been to an all-girls school, you'll understand. All-girls high schools are hell on earth, I'm telling you. You can't say that around woke people, because of feminism, or whatever. Don't get me wrong, I'm still a feminist and everything, but it's true. Girls can be very nasty.

Anyway, my mother would be horrified if she knew what I got up to. She was very anxious about me. Her main gripe was that I wasn't 'ladylike.' She had a running list in her head of unladylike behaviours — messy eating, wearing revealing clothes, sleeping around, drinking too much, even being friends with boys was a bit suspect. That's why she sent me to the girls-school, in the first place. It was to keep me safe where the evil boys couldn't get at me.

Of course, at university, it was impossible to observe her muddled strictures. Nearly every recreational activity at Otago was a possible threat to a lady's reputation. She never specified what happened if you broke these rules. Bad things, I suppose.

When something bad happens in Dunedin, it becomes part of the mythology of the place.

People start talking around it. They don't know what happened to the girl at circulation. Or at least they won't say it aloud. But what they do know is that the next day, in the cold blue summer light, people found lines in the sand towards the forest, as though someone was dragged there by the fingernails.

Where I want to start is the day I returned to Dunedin. Despite everything bad I just told you, I was itching to get back to the place. I'd been staying with my parents over summer break. They have quite a nice place, near the beach and everything. The same house I grew up in. But I was getting bored and lonely as hell.

That was how it always went. I'd consider dropping out in an idle sort of way, after the end of year exams burnout. I worried about the wisdom of an English degree, and my accumulating student loan. Then, every time, without fail — I'd go home, get sick of my family, and want to come back.

Don't get me wrong, it was always nice at *first*. Staying with them, I mean. But it got tedious after not very long. Mum just can't help herself. Always following me around, telling me I eat too much sugar and too many carbohydrates. She *says* she just wants me to be healthy, but I don't believe her. She's very delusional.

Anyway, the thing was, my mother always booked my flights *for* me. And she paid for them, too. I always ended up staying with them a little longer than I would've, otherwise. If I'd booked them myself, for instance. It's not that I wouldn't go home at *all*, over the break. But I wouldn't have booked for all summer. I never wanted to tell mum that, though. She gets quite hysterical.

I didn't keep in touch with many people from school. And most of the ones I did stay in touch with bored the living daylights out of me. My old friend Xian was like that. When I saw her that summer, all she talked about was her boyfriend's rich family. Their clothes, their beach house, their stupid high-paying jobs. I can't even remember what they did. That stuff bores me to pieces. She even showed me this Pinterest she'd made of wedding dresses. It was hard to relate to, the lives my school- friends led. All still living at home, or having babies, or marrying someone.

The day I got back was the Monday of O-week. Otago's Orientation week was in late February, the week before class started. There was the mass arrival of students, all moving into their halls. The place always felt like a jungle that time of year. All the glass and broken bottles everywhere, and the breathers out in full force. Throwing eggs at freshmen and drinking and singing those moronic drinking songs.

People come in from all over, all the surrounding towns, just to go to the Castle Street parties. The OUSA ticketed events were going on, concerts and the toga party and the Hyde Street party. OUSA was the Otago university student's association. It was also a haven for sexual predators, if their 2019 recreaion manager, Josh Smith, is anything to go by. The flowmies messiah. That's the perfect position for a creep, the goddamn recreation manager.





Michelle Mearns

Michelle Mearns has worked with people in career transition for over thirty years and has always used writing as a way to understand herself and the world around her. Body Blood is a collection of personal essays exploring belonging—in a body, a city, a country. Her writing pays special attention to transitional periods: from childhood into adulthood, from difficulty conceiving into motherhood, from life into death.

Mummified remains are seen on display in Tāmaki Makaurau; eels are fed in the back of a garden in Mission Bay; a Catholic woman marries an Orangeman; a fourth-generation Pākehā tries to get to grips with introductory te reo. There's dancing, violence, invasions, blood, bones and bulimia. Body Blood unearths the way the past persists in the present—carried down family lines, behind glass in museums, through soil, through stories, through silences.



EXTRACT from 'Wairua'

IF IT WASN'T FOR THE MOA, Ta-Sedgemet wouldn't be lying here in *Ancient Worlds*, on the first level of Tāmaki Paenga Hira, our Auckland Museum—more than 16,000 kilometres away from her home in Akh mim. If it weren't for one Julius von Haast, she wouldn't be here either. Prussian born Haast emigrated to New Zealand in 1858. He set about cultivating a reputation and before too long became recognised as a leading geologist and explorer. Haast's eagle, Haast township, Haast River and Haast Pass are all named after him. Of course, the eagle never belonged to Haast, it's only the flick of an apostrophe that makes it appear so; but because he was the first colonist to describe the bird, he got to name it. Pouākai was a great eagle that disappeared after the mega extinction of the moa. Its wings spanned three metres. It feasted on flightless birds and, it is believed, humans. And about Haast Pass—on the back of a tip-off from an earlier explorer, Haast led an expedition through the pass in 1863. But

the first people known to have traversed this mountain pass were Ngāi Tahu. The Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998 saw the pass officially renamed as Haast Pass / Tioripatea.

In 1870 Haast became the Founder and Curator of The Canterbury Museum, the landmark gothic style museum that stands on land coiled by Ōtākaro, the Avon River. Intent on having a natural history collection to rival those of his British and European counterparts, Haast made his way into a colonial network that included curators, museum directors, scientists, archaeologists and traders. Players around the world bartered what they had for what they wanted. Out here in the colony Haast was able to punch above his weight. He had something no one else had—moa bones. These bones, along with other treasures— pounamu, native birds, adzes, human remains, hair, bone and skulls—were all shipped away to be displayed in Great Britain and Europe. In exchange, The Canterbury Museum got to showcase exoticisms including an armadillo, a mole, crocodile, antelope, grizzly bear, ibis, and an ant eater.

The cache of Otago moa bones might have given Haast status and leverage in his trading network but even their weight couldn't bring home the ultimate curiosity—a good quality Ancient Egyptian mummy. Although his museum had managed to procure an unwrapped female mummy, it was visibly disintegrating—hardly good enough. Haast beseeched his network for years but in the end, there was no collegial exchange on this. The only way that he could acquire the exoticism he sought was to find the money and purchase it like any trader.

A local settler, John Tinline, made a donation of fifty pounds to the museum and was later recorded as being the benefactor of two mummies. Haast was off to The London Exhibition and intended to do some shopping while he was there. He budgeted for one mummy that was elaborate and one that was 'plain'. The first mummy he secured still lies in the Canterbury Museum. These human remains belong to Tash Pen Khonsu. Her coffin is more decorated than Ta-Sedgemet's and a spread of hieroglyphics and paintings are sheathed over her bound body. Her coffin also remains open, the locks disabled, the lid frozen at a distance well above the body it was intended to shield.

Haast purchased Tash Pen Khonsu from Hilton Price, a London banker. The price was twenty-four pounds, almost half the going rate of an entire moa skeleton. After adding some clay tablets and cylinder seals

into the cache, Haast had a few of Tinline's pounds left in his purse. He hunted for the good plain mummy. One of Haast's trading pals, the director of Florentine Natural History museum, introduced him to Ernesto Schiaparelli, director of the city's Egyptian Museum. Later Schiaparelli would shoot to fame by discovering Nefertiti's tomb in the Valley of the Queens. In 1887 he sold Haast a mummy from his museum's cache: Ta-Sedgemet, her remains priced at just five pounds.

Both Ta-Sedgemet and Tash Pen Khonsu are said to have been disinterred from Akhmim. It was probably around 1884, when the French Egyptologist, Gaston Maspero, discovered the necropolis. Thousands of bodies were excavated then. Most of them of them didn't land in museums. Some ended up as fuel for the Egyptian railways; some ground into mortar for paint called 'mummy brown'; some were hawked in markets all over Europe; some were ground down and served as tonics; some landed in living rooms. This was not to be the fate for these two women; their remains were packed into the bowels of a vessel that set sail from London to Aotearoa in 1887.

I imagine Haast now back home, anticipating their arrival, waiting for news that his ship had at last come in. Perhaps he dreamed of a grand unveiling, hordes of visitors traipsing through his museum—gasping, gaping, gawping. He really had created a museum to rival those of his European counterparts. But by the time Tash Pen Khonsu and

Ta-Sedgemet arrived in June 1888, Haast was dead.

Ancient Egyptians wanted their deceased to be protected. They wanted them remembered too. It was said that recalling their names would help the dead live on in their afterlife. Some Western academics and curators say that the displaying of human remains enables more remembering. Might we then be doing the deceased some service in exchange for our voyeurism? A kind of trade-off where we get to look, and the person gets to be remembered by name. After x-ray images of Ta-Sedgemet were published in 2005, *The New Zealand Herald* quoted a retired University of Auckland lecturer, Shirley Temm: 'The work the museum has done to preserve her is wonderful. She's now something like 2,500 years old and here we are still talking about her.' The article was headlined 'CT scan un.masks mummy'. Ta-Sedgemet had been taken on another journey, this

time just 2.5 kilometres, across asphalt (in a hearse? an ambulance? a van with blacked-out windows?) to Mercy Radiology in Epsom where she was slow-boated through a CT scan.

Underneath the newspaper headline there's an x-ray image revealing Ta-Sedgemet's skeleton. I glance, almost sideways, at the spread of her bones. Her arms seem long and her hands are positioned, perfectly so, palms down, one each side of her pubic bones, fingers dipping into a black triangle. Her legs lie knock-kneed, then there's a thin black line that runs to her feet. I feel like I'm watching a stranger sleep. I remember reading some disturbing accounts about mummy un-wrappings in the western world, stories of Victorian gentlemen gathered around the exotica, feasting on a slow reveal.

In 2016 I saw the Degas: *A New Vision in Melbourne*. I bought a postcard of *Woman seated on the edge of a bath sponging her neck* because I liked the colours, movement, light, the delicate shadowing of form. Back in Auckland I propped up the postcard in the glass-doored bookcase next to my desk.

In the painting the woman is facing away from the artist, leaning over a mottled eggshell-green bath. She seems to belong utterly to herself. But a couple of years later I read that Degas didn't engage with some of his subjects and liked the thrill of being unobserved. When I started thinking about him studying this woman through a keyhole, I had to tuck the postcard away in a book.





Katie Newton

Katie Newton (Ngāti Porou) has worked as a journalist and editor for many of New Zealand's most widely read media outlets such as Stuff, Sunday Magazine, Your Home and Garden and The Christchurch Press. Her short story, A Bigger Fish to Fry, was a runner-up in the 2020 Sunday Star Times Short Story Competition and she was awarded the Copyright Licensing NZ scholarship for the Masters of Creative Writing in 2022.

Her novel, People Will Get Hurt By This, is a darkly funny, feistily feminist story about a young woman who walks out on her life one day, leaving her partner and baby son behind. When she returns home a decade later, the mystery of why she left and why she stayed away for so long is unravelled through her long suppressed memories. The novel questions if we can ever really atone for our past mistakes, how much of their true selves women should sacrifice when they become mothers, and whether it is worse to have a terrible mother, or have no mother at all.



EXTRACT from 'People Will Get Hurt By This'

SOMEHOW, SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY, I had forgotten about this wind. How it slaps at your cheeks and grabs the whites of your eyes, pushing up high into your nostrils, making it hard to exhale. How it sucks and puffs inside your jacket and bites the patch of skin where your leggings end and your socks begin. How you're sure that it's blowing from one direction; then would swear it's actually the opposite. It's destabilising. Exhilarating. And unlike any other wind I've ever felt.

A gust comes at me sideways and wraps my long hair around my neck, as if it means to finish me off for good. Cause of death: Asphyxiation, due to lack of a hair tie. I twist the opposite way so my hair uncoils, and have to grab onto the handrail like one of the tourists I used to streak past as a child. I must have walked this track a hundred times, in nappies,

in gumboots, in togs and bare feet. Once I even did it in a ball gown, stopping for swigs of premixed bourbon and a furtive, teeth-bashing pash. I lick my lips and taste the salt. Since me and Ryan-what's-his-name snuck off from that party, almost twenty years have passed.

Grace, all straight back and long legs, is striding on ahead. She's used to it; she lives here, and stayed living here after I moved away. She turns to say something, but the wind snatches her words up, folds them into its flanks and tosses them off the cliffs either side. I catch *Mum* and *hospice*, and something that sounds like *pain and suffering*. But it might have been *made the stuffing*; it is Christmas Eve after all.

I turn my palms upwards as if to say—*what?*—and she grins, a lock of straw-coloured hair snapping across her face giving her a split-second moustache. God, I have missed her; my youngest, and let's-be-honest, favourite, sister. She cups her hands into curved shell-shapes on either side of her mouth and yells back.

'I said, Honour has made the stuffing! We're on salads!'

I nod and give a double thumbs up, which feels as awkward as it sounds. But I can't smile any wider; my jaw is in rictus as it is, and I have to show that I am willing to go along with whatever Honour has decided. Since I've been away, our middle sister has appointed herself the boss, in charge of the kitchen and everything else. Grace is our Switzerland, the peacekeeper, the closest thing we have to neutral territory. I am the eldest and today, my first day seeing them in almost a decade, my exact role remains TBC.

We continue up the boardwalk to the lighthouse until it soars bright and white in front of us. It's the tallest in the North Island, its rocky headland home to seals, gulls, and the rumour of a lighthouse keeper's ghost. I looked it up on Wikipedia before I arrived, as if reading about it would help to prepare me somehow, or make the visit easier. But the memories are all still here, the good and the bad, waiting, like little landmines embedded in the cliffs.

We stop at the top to take in the view, one hundred and eighty degrees of restless Pacific. The wind shimmers the puddles at our feet, recreating the ocean swells in muddy miniature. If only we could mould people as easily as the wind bends water. But people are more like jellies, wobbling around all over the place. Poke them and you never know which way they'll lurch.

I suggest we take the long way back, that loops around the headland. No one else is venturing off the boardwalk today, but Grace agrees, eyes flicking to the rust-pocked sign that reads *Dangerous During High Winds*. Since I was here last, the steps cut into the rock have had their sharp edges smoothed away and someone, probably DOC, has bolted metal handrails into the cliff face. The path is safer now, clearer, but we're still forced to inch along, two Lycra-clad crabs, trying to avoid being blown into the sea. Black rocks bare their razor spines and retreat under the churn.

Back on the sheltered side of the bay, we sit on a warm, flat ledge and pass a water bottle between us. Grace stretches her liquorice-stick legs out in the sun.

'That was nice,' she says, 'but we should head back.'

I want to stay here, in this spot, forever.

'Can't we stay a bit longer?'

'And leave Honour with all the cooking? She'll be furious.'

I chuck a stone at a puddle and miss. Honour's the one insisting on all this food.

'I'd be happy with a toasted sandwich and a glass of wine.'

'You can't have a toasted sandwich on Christmas Day, Faith.'

'Faith?'

'Sorry!' she says, alarmed. 'I meant Arna. Slip of the tongue.'

'That's okay.'

'I just need some time to get used to it, calling you that.'

'It's okay.'

I smile as if to say don't worry and allow the name—Faith—to dissolve into the air between us. I changed it by deed poll six years ago and that name—Faith—is not a part of my life anymore. It's as if it belongs to some old colleague who I used to see every day, but lost touch with when I left the job. A LinkedIn connection, one of 500+. No profile picture attached.

We crunch back along the sand, a crust of cinnamon sugar covering the damp grey beneath. Waves lick at the cove edging the farmland; sheep trails grooved into the slopes. The sun's warmth spreads across my forehead and down my cheeks.

'The doctors can't believe Mum has made it this far,' Grace says. 'It's like she's hanging on by sheer will.'

'Typical.'

‘She hates the hospice, but you’ll see when you visit, the medical staff and family support team are really great.’

‘How does she treat them?’

‘She’d only been there for 24 hours before she accused one of them of trying to kill her by injecting an air bubble in her vein. I think she saw it in a movie once.’

‘Poor things.’

‘I know. They’re very professional though.’ She looks over her shoulder and lowers her voice, even though no one is around. ‘I feel bad about talking like this, but sometimes when you get into the room with her it still feels like she’s going to leap out of the bed and come at you at any moment.’

My arms feel thin and shivery, despite the sun.

‘She’s also become weirdly particular about her hair,’ she continues. ‘She gets me to backcomb it constantly, like it’s the sixties or something. Some days the bloody beehive is bigger than she is.’

I smile and push down the swell of guilt that has been pressing up into my throat. I haven’t been here, backcombing and hair spraying, but I am here now and that’s got to count for something. The past few years have been a loop of Hustle—Recovery—Hustle. Don’t stop, don’t dwell, don’t ask, don’t tell. Our mother has cast such a dense shadow over most of my life, I can’t let her in again. Unless—

‘Has she asked for me?’ I say.

Grace shakes her head. No.





Hannah Norton

Northland writer Hannah Norton is a former journalist, editor (Fairfax, NZME, NZ Lawyer, Qantas Media Awards Junior Reporter Finalist) and PR executive. Prior to the MCW, Hannah completed an LLB, receiving Dean's Honours in climate change law and constitutional law, which both influenced her manuscript. Addiction is also a major theme in her work. Flagged early as a 'gifted child', Hannah went from High School Dux at 16 to addicted to drugs in her late teens. She was able to quickly rebuild her life. Now a 35-year-old mother-of-two, she works part-time as a freelance writer and a legal intern for a charity.

The Divide is a dystopian political thriller set in Auckland and Northland, exploring the intersecting lives of a genetically altered addict daughter of a wealthy family, a well-known businesswoman secretly saving climate refugees, and an increasingly autocratic Prime Minister with a penchant for eugenics. The Divide explores a future Aotearoa New Zealand ravaged by climate change, a staggering wealth gap, extensive social surveillance, and an increasingly fragile democracy, predominantly through the eyes of a bright but flawed young woman unable to escape the clutches of a heroin addiction.



EXTRACT from 'The Divide'

HERE'S THE THING ABOUT government-issue drugs: they never really get you high enough. It's like you're starving, sitting at a fine dining establishment in the Central Precinct—you know, the ones with 'elevated cuisine' and 'sensory experiences' for people that only eat supplement pills—and a waiter presents you with a puny-ass hors d'oeuvre. You eat it, and you're left with a full-body yearning, insatiable wanting, and you just need to have more. I got that feeling after Ryan broke up with me, after I'd sobbed until my tear ducts ran dry.

Ryan had come by my micro-apartment to do it, to tell me in person, sitting half a metre away from me on the pleather couch. He rubbed the fine blond fuzz on his scalp with his palms, one leg jittering, chewing gum like his tongue was too big for his mouth. Mastication that sounded like masturbation, rhythmic and slippery.

‘What the fuck?’ I said, when he told me he didn’t want to see me anymore, that he had Tiffany now. I could feel the heat of my irises flaming, the flaw in my alteration. They would be the colour of amber by now. ‘Who the hell is Tiffany?’

Ryan chewed twice, pushed the gum around his mouth with his tongue. ‘Er... my new girlfriend. She’s hot and she’s not even altered.’

Ah, yes. Not altered, like I was. There it was again, that gulf between us—my privilege, my body designed in a lab, genetically and technologically enhanced. But I never expected for him to see it as a bad thing. For him to use it against me. I wanted to speak, to ask him questions—how did he meet her? Why did he do it?—but it felt like there was a solid mass between my tits. My windpipe was concrete, and I couldn’t swallow. ‘How,’ I said after a few seconds, my voice strangled. ‘How long have you been cheating on me?’

‘Oh, come on, Sam,’ Ryan said, hazel eyes fixing on mine, goading. ‘We weren’t really together, were we?’

Just with each other every day for the past year, Ryan. I glared at him, noticing for the first time the downy hair on his cheeks, his large ears, the flare in his nostrils. It’s funny that delicate line between love and hate—flimsy and fickle. My newfound loathing for him must’ve spread all over my face. It wasn’t just my irises giving me away.

Ryan sighed. His eyes dropped to his tapping foot, the worn tongue of his sneakers flapping. ‘Six months,’ he said, rubbing his neck, red from shaving or picking; probably both. ‘Look, Moana said I had to tell you, in person, or she’d tell Tiff about you,’ he said, as if that explained everything, as if everything were that simple. I felt a momentary tenderness at the mention of Mo’s name, thankful to my friend for having my back. But then I was crushed by the realisation that losing Ryan meant my source of supply would also be cut.

‘But’ I said, blinking away tears. ‘If I don’t have you, I’ll get *sick*.’

Maybe that’s what Moana wanted. For me to get away from him. For me to stop again.

‘Not my problem,’ Ryan said, shrugging. ‘Go stay with your parents or something, I dunno.’

He lingered on the word ‘parents’ long enough for me to know it was another dig. His face looked tired: like this was a chore—a doctor’s appointment, grocery shopping—and he had better places to be. Last week, we’d shot up and nuzzled into each other in my loft bed, caressing and snuggling, and he’d said he loved me.

I could feel myself squinting at him, trying to control my rage, trying to control the flame. I lifted one finger to the air, willing myself to find the right words to say next, my mouth forming a tight circle. I wanted to be reasonable, to be rational. But I couldn’t. Instead, I exploded. ‘You know I can’t cross the fucking Divide!’ I yelled. ‘And *you...you—*’ I said, standing, pointing my finger at him, ‘*you* are the reason I’m on it again and now you’re just going to cook another girl, a *Normie—*.’

Ryan rose to his feet, his head just missing the base of my loft bed, a metre above us. ‘See that’s the problem, Sam,’ he said, his tone taunting and vicious. ‘You Centralites think you’re better than the rest of us.’ He smirked at me, arrogant and smug, like I was the one in the wrong. ‘Well, you’re fucken not,’ he said, before turning to step out the front door. There was a gentle click of the soft-close door shutting behind him.

I felt devoid, crushed, lifeless. Everyone had left me—I wasn’t worth sticking around for. That I knew. ‘*We are,*’ I said, without conviction, through tears and snot, to the closed door. ‘*We are* better than you.’ Even though I didn’t believe it.

There was nothing but silence.

I sat back down on the couch, sniffing, wiping my cheeks with my hands. It wasn’t just me that was destroyed. The coriander in my micro-living wall was dead, the duct tape pinning the curtains to the window frame frayed, the cotton buds on the boxy coffee table blackened. My rubbish bin brimmed with used needles in opened bioplastic sleeves, and a charred, broken glass pipe.

The sound of cicadas in the fleeting sunshine outside drowned out the news on my projector, which was a hologram of a greying man’s face, smiling. I tapped my wrist device, turning the volume up. Perhaps I could distract myself with the banality of current affairs.

‘The popularity of Prime Minister Douglas Reyes continues to soar,’ the voice-over said, ‘with a preferred prime minister ranking of seventy-

one per cent—the highest in the poll’s history—’

‘Who cares?’ I said to no one and turned it off.

And then it came, the yearning. Sudden like a defibrillator, like *blitzkrieg*. The desire to get really fucking high. There was a small bottle of Flavincir in my coffee table drawer, which I shook before opening: two little, blue oval-shaped pills left, the last of my weekly rations. Not enough. I knocked them back dry.

My device gave a shrill beep to indicate my social score was dropping from 39 to 31. One more point until the government deemed me *untrustworthy*. I ignored it, stripping off my loungewear, pulling on the canary-yellow playsuit that was draped over the loft ladder. A quick look in the mirror confirmed the flame was gone—eyes were back to highlighter green, and sunglasses were required. My hair was so greasy it looked more brown than bright auburn. That wasn’t a bad thing—better to blend in with the Normies on this side of the Divide—even so, I pulled it off my face and into a bun. Didn’t need a reason for pimples, for picking. I slid into my hot pink smart-orthotic jandals and scuffed my way out.

The jaded hallways and lobby of my tenement building were empty bar a handful of Normie workers in plain polo tops, each with the thin white scar on their left arm where their microchips were inserted. I was thankful to have a device instead of a chip. None of them met my gaze—it wasn’t the done thing here, talking to neighbours, unless you knew their score. Someone with an *untrustworthy* status could affect yours, even just by smiling at them.

A Samoan family with young children that lived on my floor played on patched-metal seesaws on the forecourt outside the tenement building. They were sheltered by a holey canvas that whipped and bobbed in the wind. The shrubs between the forecourt and the road were browning, spindly branches exposed, and I wondered if there was another water shortage. Even if there seemed to be plenty coming from the sky in violent bursts. Although no one really looked after the plants around here.

The road itself was out of use, potholes brimming with muddy water. Sometimes, when a summer deluge came, those cratered streets would be so hot that rain would sizzle off them like oil in a cast-iron pan. I turned right, towards the old brick commercial buildings from last century, the street-front shops coated thick in paint—bright yellows and blues and purples—which failed to conceal the gaping fractures in the walls. It was

like everything in this Precinct, cracking beneath the surface. The green and white stripes of the Dispensary stood out ahead, with its bollards and shuttered windows. A motley line of people formed out the front. My eyes dropped to the footpath when I walked by with tentative steps, to avoid the dips and the gum and the rubbish. I hated seeing people like me—addicts. I despised what we'd all become.





Rachel Paris

Rachel Paris practised law in Auckland and London for 20 years. She holds degrees from the University of Auckland and Harvard Law School and has been published in a range of international academic journals. Her feature film screenplay, Middlemarch, was the first original screenplay to be optioned by South Pacific Pictures in 2008.

Rachel's debut novel, The Unravelling, is a thriller set in contemporary Sydney. When the ultra-wealthy Turner family gathers for Easter, a child is fatally poisoned. Two unreliable narrators recount the quest to find the killer: Skye, the victim's mother, and Mei, a detective assigned to the case. Skye battles a disintegrating sense of reality, while Mei's career and personal life are in freefall. The women unearth sinister secrets, sparking the downfall of a powerful dynasty. The Unravelling explores grief, guilt, toxic masculinity, and the redemptive power of forgiveness.



EXTRACT from 'The Unravelling'

ON OUR RETURN HOME, we were engulfed by the business of death. A sharp pain lodged like a splinter behind my eyes. The priest from Duncan's family parish talked us through the options for Tilly's service. It was wise to start planning, he said, even though the coroner hadn't yet released her body. He offered gentle prayers and crisp leaflets about grief counselling. I wanted to cry, but the hurt was too heavy and too deep.

The priest was followed by the principal of Tilly's school. She arrived with a condolence book and plans for a memorial garden. Last Thursday, we'd chatted in the school carpark about the roster for the upcoming bake sale. Now she was describing a path of stepping stones to a butterfly garden where Tilly's classmates could reflect on her life. The whole exchange was surreal, as though we were acting in a macabre play.

With the media trucks and security cordon gone, a tide of neighbours, friends, and acquaintances swept in with offerings of Ottolenghi chicken

marbellas, vegetarian lasagnes, and unsolicited advice. The gate buzzer constantly twitched with flower deliveries that swamped all the bare surfaces downstairs. Their sickly sweet perfume drenched the house and made me retch. All I could think about was that the flowers would die soon, and all at once.

Duncan's assistant set herself up at the kitchen table and logged a record of each card and gift we received into a spreadsheet. She said it was important to send timely acknowledgements, as if we had to adhere to a corporate timetable.

At some point, Jamie and the children visited briefly. His face was carved with exhaustion, his chin grizzled with stubble. It was unbearable to make eye contact, to acknowledge the truth of it. Finn and Olly hung back behind their father, shifting their weight from side to side, their eyes fixed on the floor. Arabella was clutching Jamie's hand so tightly that the ridges of her knuckles glowed white. Her hair—usually braided by Nina with meticulous precision—was limp and tangled. Hugo arrived with them, smelling of whiskey, and fled to the library. I don't remember what we said to each other. All of my interactions had a peculiar, muffled quality.

Some of our visitors stayed on to help. A few neighbours took charge of the hundreds of teddies that had been left at our gate by boxing them up for charity. Hana and Larissa were burning white sage and palo santo in every room of the house. Bridget, Vicky, and Monique were in full mum mode, cataloguing the food deliveries for the fridge and freezer. Every time I entered the kitchen on my desperate orbits of the house, their gale of chatter would cease, and they would rush towards me as one many-headed monster to rub my back.

In the lounge, under Fran's artistic direction, Harriet, Claudine, and Emma were assembling the dunes of flowers into vases in their chic mourning dresses. They were scandalised when my old housemates from Newtown arrived in two battered wagons and presented me with a bunch of home-grown dahlias and stewed rhubarb.

I was touched by everyone's love and support, but I also felt irrationally anxious watching my past and present lives collide, as though it might trigger some further catastrophic rupture.

The next morning was Thursday. I woke late, groggy and nauseous from the pills Duncan had given me to sleep. There was a calendar reminder

on my phone screen for Book Character Day. Tilly's Pippi Longstocking costume was hanging ready in her wardrobe. We'd spent weeks planning her outfit: a dandelion yellow tunic with patched pockets that Tilly had helped me stitch on, her toy monkey which we'd fastened to the shoulder of the tunic with safety pins, and socks in lollipop stripes we'd chanced upon at Vinnies. I could see her in front of me—twirling in her costume, excited to join the parade that Outlook confirmed would be starting at 8.30 am—and I was overcome with the most intense physical yearning to hold her. It was a violent ache, deep in my bones.

'Are you sure you'll be okay?' Duncan asked. 'I really don't want to leave you but there are some urgent issues I have to deal with.' He was heading into the office. I figured someone else could take care of the work and that he was just desperate for a distraction; for the charade of routine and normality. 'Why don't you invite some friends over?'

I nodded. 'Bridge and Vicky are coming,' I lied. My friends had all offered to visit, but I'd brushed them off with excuses about the police investigation. I would stay in Tilly's bed with Bo and watch videos of her on my phone.

About twenty minutes after he left, I checked the GPS app on my phone and felt a stab of relief when the green circle labeled with his initials pulsed at Chifley Tower in the city. Bo was whimpering in the hallway, lying in wait outside Tilly's closed bedroom door. He'd been pining for her all week and had no way of knowing that her absence was permanent. He began swiping at the door with his paw, trying to force it open. A lump swelled in my throat.

'Come on, boy. Let's go for a run.' At the word 'run', Bo's eyes flicked up and his tail started wagging. We'd both been cooped up inside for days and God knows we needed to get out of the house.

I didn't dare head for one of the parks on the northern slopes where I could encounter a bootcamp of school mums. Instead, I yanked my cap low over my eyes and took the alternate route south-east along Victoria Road. The rain had eased, and tentative white sunlight quivered in the puddles. I concentrated on the rhythmic slap of my feet on the footpath. Everything hurt. My abdomen was tight, my legs were stiff and my lungs lead-heavy, as though I were breathing through gauze. Bo strained on his lead, sensing that we were headed for Cooper Park. Usually, Tilly would be riding her bike alongside us, and I'd be watching ahead for cars

in driveways, one arm poised to snatch her back from danger. That's the thing about being a mum—you're always on edge, alert to risk, primed to protect, and I'd failed her.

When Tilly was an infant, and I'd finally been allowed home, I'd bring her into our bed when she howled in the night and prop myself up on pillows while she suckled at my tender breasts. Even when I was bone-weary, I never let myself fall asleep until she was back in her bassinet. I was terrified of SIDS. But, for the rest of the night, I'd jerk awake to search for her in the bedclothes, petrified that her tiny body was suffocating beneath our sheets and blankets. It was, until now, the most frightful nightmare.





Andrea Pollard

Andrea Pollard is an Auckland-based writer. Her essay ‘Seeking the Sibyls in Italy’ was published in a 2019 collection, Journeys with the Divine Feminine, edited by Sue Fitzmaurice. In 2020, ‘Blood and Bone’ was highly commended in the Graeme Lay Short Story Competition. Andrea was also awarded the NZSA Auckland Regional Award in the 2021 National Flash Fiction Competition for ‘In the Boonies.’ An excerpt of Andrea’s first novel, Genziana, was published in the UOA Hellenic, Egyptian and Roman Antiquities Association (HERA) journal, Words of Reed Pens, in October 2023. Most recently, Andrea is one of the winners of the 2023 RNZ Nine to Noon Short Story Competition.

Genziana is a historical coming-of-age story set in Ancient Rome. In 45 BC, a young woman receives a vision of the impending assassination of Julius Caesar and feels compelled to travel to Rome to warn him. But she is cursed with the falling sickness, promised to the neighbour’s son, and not Roman, but one of the last Samnites and must escape her parochial rural community, and her brutal father first.



EXTRACT from ‘Genziana’

RUFUS EXTRACTED HIS CONTORTING SNAKE from its basket and lowered it into a crate. He tossed in a dead rodent before dropping the lid with a thud. Zia wrapped her arms around herself and tried to quell her growing biliousness. She’d eaten too quickly, drunk too much.

‘Grant me your watchful eye,’ Zia muttered to the gods, ‘shield me from harm. Protect me from misfortune.’

‘Go ahead,’ he said, gesturing to the bed.

The smoke-blackened ceiling sagged in one corner. Chipped food bowls were discarded around the room. A tiny cold brazier sat on a brick hearth, and a mattress lay on the floor, nothing more than a sack of straw. She removed her amulet and fur and tucked both into the side of her bag.

She laid down while Rufus blew out a lamp, leaving only one dim flame. She intended to wait for him, to anticipate his advance, but her eyelids grew heavy. The motion of the wagon and the gentle spin born of heavy wine lulled her down. She heard him move about, the floorboards creak beneath his feet, rustling cloth, a squeak of the crate lid.

Three grotesque faces loomed in Zia's mind. Old women that whispered and gossiped like Rhea, except these were otherworldly, frightening creatures.

'He's no friend of hers,' said one, spinning thread.

'No, no friend,' said another. 'Quite the opposite.'

'He's taken it all,' said the third, and she cut the thread with heavy shears.

Zia fought her way out of sleep, opening her eyes to the naked form of Rufus. Those witches were wrong. Rufus liked her and she liked him. He was Sol, throbbing with fire and heat, a crucible of molten ore.

'Pick up your things,' he said, wiping himself with a rag. 'It's time for you to go.'

'What?' Surely, this was a game. She was naked, still wet with his sex and his sweat. 'You're not serious?'

'I've finished with you,' he said. 'I want you out.'

Zia sat up and pulled her tunic across her breasts. He wouldn't catch her eye.

'I thought we were friends,' she said.

'I've no need of your friendship,' he replied. He picked up her bags and walked towards the door.

'Wait,' Zia said. 'It's night-time, I've got nowhere to go.' She jumped up and lunged for her bags but the blood rushed from her head and her stomach heaved. Her vision dissolved into masses of tiny sparkles. She fell against him and everything went black.

When she woke, Zia was shivering and naked. A biting draught raised the hairs of her skin but she was not under open sky. The reek of urine hung in the air. Shrieks and clashes came from far off and she had a dull recollection that she was in Rome. Her bones ached and her head pounded as though pierced by an iron spear. A familiar metallic pain of the kind that followed a seizure. She tried to get up but the agony threatened to upend her stomach. She sat back and felt around with shaky

hands. A bulky linen bag lay to her side. Her possessions were there, a small consolation. She secured her amulet around her neck and her fur over that.

Zia groped for her second bag and her hand hit against something hard, the smooth grain of a wooden shelf. Another just the same was set back, a short height above. She was at the base of a flight of stairs. The tall boarding house. Rufus. It all came back. He'd thrown her out. Even worse, thrown her down the stairs. The realisation came in a plummeting, sickening rush. What kind of man was he? Worse than her father, worse than her mindless husband. He was a man that lacked a heart, the worst possible omen from any animal sacrifice. A signal-fire from the gods. A warning that she should go home and tell everyone that they were right. She never should have left.

Zia lurched to her feet and leaned against a wall to steady herself. When the floor was solid beneath her, she made slow careful sweeps to locate her tunic, draped halfway down the stairs and her cloak and second bag in the corner of the stairwell. She covered her frozen, battered body. In near total darkness, she edged down flights of stairs, eventually emerging in an alley where she cowered against the building, beseeching her shaking thighs to find substance.

She was the one called Genziana, she reminded the gods, the one they'd entrusted with a special vision. She'd answered their call, done as they bid. Where were they at her time of need?

First light had not yet penetrated, but the amber glow of the city and a fat crescent moon burnished the streets. A veteran was navigating the terrain on crutches, clack, clack, clack, until he drew even with her.

'How much?' he asked, and even under his feeble gaze she shrank.

Grant me strength, keep me safe.

Zia faltered through the unfamiliar city streets—this paradox of marble and rot, baubles and beggars, statesmen and slaves—until she reached the river. She limped along the bullock track until she recognised the signage of the Medeor Market ahead. The sun had just pierced the horizon and the earliest stallholders were tightening ropes and setting out their wares. An early riser, or perhaps someone who hadn't made it to bed, moved between the stalls as wan and bloodless as a restless spirit. My fellow traveller, Zia thought.

The stands were like those in any other market, but the wares included all manner of magic and divination. These people offered healings and

fortune telling, curse tablets and rituals. They threw dice, studied cards, and read the arrangement of limp herbs at the bottom of a cup. Men pored over chickens, and a woman relayed messages wrested from a bowl of murky water. They wore exotic head bindings, or hoods with tassels.

Zia crept past the various stands, wincing with each step. The cold nipped her fingers, numbed her feet, and stole into her back but two thoughts eclipsed her discomfort. The first was that she'd found her people. The second, that she wasn't so special after all.





Sarah Shortt

Sarah Shortt has a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Language from the University of Leeds. Originally from Birmingham, Sarah spent the formative years of her career working in the script and production teams for television dramas including Coronation Street for ITV Studios and Doctors for the BBC. After discovering her passion for fitness, she migrated to New Zealand in 2012 to work for Les Mills International. Sarah works as a writer for the Les Mills marketing team and is also a personal trainer and group fitness instructor.

Sweat is a dark comedy about narcissistic abuse, set in Birmingham. Waitress Dylan Summers wakes up on her 28th birthday and decides she needs to find a 'real career'. When her dream of working in documentaries is thwarted by lack of experience, she's forced to take a job on a reality tv show about fitness. Dylan finds herself completely out of her depth in a world where aesthetic is everything. When her boss takes a shine to her, Dylan thinks she's found an ally. However, his kindness masks a darker intention, and Dylan is soon caught in a web of manipulation and gaslighting.



EXTRACT from 'Sweat'

'YOU'RE SQUEEZING MY HEAD.' He pushes my legs aside. 'Could you open your legs a little wider? Try to relax.'

I feel the cold air against my insides. 'Sorry.' I feel told off. Chided. I'm doing something wrong again. His tongue laps at me and I think about him talking to the intern. Wonder what they were discussing.

Afterwards, we lie next to one another, staring at the ceiling.

'I'm actually missing out on a wedding this weekend,' Crispin says. 'Whose?'

'Donna's. She and I had a, well I suppose you'd call it a fling, a few years ago. Her fiancé doesn't like me. He thinks she's only marrying him because I wouldn't marry her.'

‘That’s very sad.’

‘Do you know that in the office, you sometimes open your legs when you’re talking to me? I think you’re doing it deliberately, to tease me.’ He props himself up on one elbow and strokes my breast. ‘How many people in the office do you think want to fuck you?’

Is this how he sees the world? In terms of who wants to have sex with you?

‘Do you think about me when you masturbate?’ he continues.

‘I don’t really.’

‘Think about me?’

‘Masturbate.’

‘You’re so weird, Dylan.’

I close my eyes. ‘I don’t think I can do this anymore. It’s messing with my head.’

‘Don’t be immature,’ he says. ‘We’re fine.’

‘How can you handle this? Being one way in the office and another way with me now?’

‘You just need to compartmentalise. Be non-emotional. You can do it.’

‘Right.’

‘By the way, Jess might come and stay for a few nights while she’s between flats.’ So that’s what they were talking about. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

‘Of course not.’ I roll over and stare at the wall. Doesn’t she have any friends her own age she can stay with?

When I leave, he says: ‘Don’t be weird at work.’

There’s a fur baby of mould blooming in the top right-hand corner of my bedroom.

It’s creeping across the ceiling. I know I should find a step ladder from somewhere and try to wipe it off, but in a crazy way I’m also curious to see how far it will go. If I leave it, will it spread across the ceiling and down the walls and over my bed and then will I become mouldy, too? I’ll wake up to find a carpet of soft green down across my belly and my cheeks, and I’ll be the first Mould Man who ever lived.

These are the things I think about while lying in bed. As well as the fact that Jess is staying with Crispin this weekend.

But I’m trying not to think about that.

Mostly, I’m just focusing on mould.

The alien bleeps of the Skype ringtone shatter the silence of my bedroom. It's 9pm on Monday evening, and Crispin's ringing me for a mutual masturbation session.

I don't want to do it.

He's been asking me if we can Skype for the past three weeks. When he first brought it up, I assumed he was joking, and responded in kind. When he persisted, I became evasive, inventing excuses as to why I couldn't. Then last weekend he went home to Glasgow, sent me wheedling text messages every day. When I pointed out that, when he returned to Birmingham, he could actually be in the room *with* me, he said: 'Don't make this into a thing, Dylan.'

In the end, I ran out of explanations as to why I couldn't and that's why I'm now sitting on top of my electric blanket wearing my best Ann Summers pink lacy underwear on a freezing cold night in November. The very idea of it frightens me, but I'm worried if I don't do this, he's going to break things off. I remind myself that Crispin is much older and more experienced than me. This is what people do when they're in adult relationships with others. I need to, in the words of Crispin, 'not make this into a thing'.

Still, he's back from Glasgow, and a mere ten-minute ride away from my flat. We could easily be meeting up in person.

I press the green telephone button to accept his call.

He's lying on his bed, wearing his boxers. It's strange to see his bedroom on my laptop. It gives it a sense of unreality, as though I'm watching a made-for-television movie about my life. His blinds are down and his lamp is on. His slippers peep into the corner of the screen.

'Hi there,' he says.

I should have had a whisky.

'Recording has started,' says a female voice from my screen.

I feel a tightening in my gut. 'You're recording this?'

'Yes.' He smiles. 'Is that a problem?'

Yes, it's a problem. But I'm worried if I say so he's going to be irritated.

'No.'

We chat about the idiotic audience member I'd had to deal with on set that day, and Crispin makes me laugh. The conversation tails off, and he angles his screen so I can watch him slide his boxer shorts off. I unclasp my bra and pull my knickers off, trying not to shiver in the frigid chill of

my room. Though the radiator's been on for hours, the heat it emits is so feeble it may as well be there for decoration.

On screen, a small Crispin strokes between his legs and moans. I reach down to touch myself but my fingers feel like ice, and I let out an involuntary gasp. Crispin misinterprets this as pleasure and smiles into the camera. 'That's it, you like that.'

His room is probably toasty as. I decide the only way through is to 'fake it till you make it'. I summon my best acting skills and, for the next fifteen minutes, attempt to appear as though I'm in the throes of ecstasy.

'Good girl,' Crispin says, when we're finished. 'I'm proud of you.'

After I turn off the camera, I slither downstairs to pour myself a double shot of Dewars. The whisky burns my stomach and makes everything feel soft and manageable again.

At work the next day, Crispin ignores me.

It's subtle, but I notice it. He doesn't look me at me when he walks past my desk. At 11.45am, he gets up and changes into grey shorts, a blue tee shirt with SWEAT stencilled in the top left corner, and Nikes. He sits back down at his desk, places a towel and water bottle next to his laptop. At 11.56am, Catherine enters the office and walks over to his desk. He looks up and grins when he sees her. She's wearing white booty shorts that show off her tanned legs and a neon pink top with criss-cross strings across her wads of back muscle.

When they walk out of the office, their heads are close together. They look like a couple.

'Are you still coming to Revolve today, Dylan?' Mia is already in her Lululemon gear, cycle shoes wedged under an arm. 'You better get changed if you are.'

'No,' my smile feels thin. 'I'm going to give it a miss. Have fun.'





Eamonn Tee

Eamonn Tee (Pākehā, Vaka Puaikura) has published poetry with the Spinoff, Phantom Billstickers, and Minarets, and creative non-fiction with Bad Apple and Shindig. Eamonn appeared as part of the 2023 New Zealand Young Writers Festival, running a sold-out workshop titled 'The Ethics of Worldbuilding'.

The novel Quiet God is a mythic historical fantasy, based on the Cook Island story of the brothers Tangiia and Tutapu. The novel follows the rivalry between Tekii, a demigod with an innate aversion to violence, and his adopted brother Uru, a vicious and celebrated warrior. As the brothers grow, so does the rift between them, until eventually it threatens to change the course of history.



EXTRACT from 'Quiet God'

URU WOKE ME IN THE NIGHT and brought me to the edge of the boat.

'Why did you come here?' he asked.

'I wanted to save you.' I thought it was obvious.

'But what are you wanting to get out of this? I know you and your weavers, with all your favours and secrets. There's something you want out of this.' How quickly he had changed. Almost two years in the world of Rangatira and their politics, and now Uru's mind was filled with sharp edges.

'A thank you would be nice.' I said. He didn't laugh.

'I see what this is about.' His voice was venomous. 'You save my life and now I have to bow and scrape before you. Thank you great Tekii, I am so humbled by you.'

The conversation had steered in a direction I didn't understand. Like I had handed him the tools to carve, but he only saw the sharp edges. 'Why are we like this?' I begged him. I hoped he knew. 'I look at you and I hear

about you, and I just feel so angry.’ My voice was shaky. When did I start crying? Why couldn’t I stop? ‘I don’t know when I started hating you but please, I want to stop.’

Uru pinned me with empty eyes. ‘Am I supposed to care if you hate me?’ He didn’t need a javelin to impale me, his words were sharper. ‘A lot of people hate me. Do you think you’re special?’ I did. I was his brother. I cared about him. I cared what he thought about me. I came all this way to care about what he thought of me, and he didn’t.

A taut cord snapped inside my chest. The knot between us unravelled; I unravelled. I wanted to scream. He was so calm. That was what stopped me: the stillness in him. I felt like a child, which only made me angrier.

‘You look down on everyone,’ Uru continued, ‘you think everyone else is unclean. Little tapu Tekii, who won’t even ‘ongi someone if they’ve pissed on an ant.’

Before I could reply, he lifted his hand to my cheek. The hand that had thrown the javelin, the hand that had held the turtle. I flinched.

‘I can’t help it. It’s not my fault. I can’t stop it,’ I stuttered.

Uru smiled. ‘You’re such a hypocrite. You think it’s different for me? I didn’t choose to be an akāta’ae. But I have to be one. I don’t get to be kind, and soft, and so self-centred. I’m not lucky enough to be a coward like you.’

In the distance, there was a splash. A shark devouring a turtle. It had circled first, then rushed to crush the shell, pinning the turtle with its body-

‘Don’t look away from me!’ Uru grabbed my jaw and pulled me to meet his gaze. His eyes were bloodshot. His nails dug into my cheeks. ‘Look at my face and listen to what I am trying to tell you. You think I want to be this? What do you think will happen if another Rangatira comes to our village with some warriors? What will stop them? Will you make them a nice mat and then ask them to leave? Will you ask them to feel guilty after they’ve picked clean the bones of those who fought back? They won’t care what you think of them.’

Uru slowed his breathing and let go of my jaw. He was waiting for me to speak.

He was right, we couldn’t change what we were. I let myself be disgusted by him.

‘So instead, you go over there and do your killings? To make sure they’re so scared they don’t come here?’ If he didn’t care what I thought of him, it didn’t matter what I said. ‘And in the summer when we can’t sail, you’ll go down the road and find whoever you can kill. Doesn’t matter if they’re wanting to fight. You’ll slit sleeping throats. You let yourself do it. You’ll let yourself do it until you can walk all the way to Tāiva on the floating corpses.’

I hadn’t come undone. Neither had Uru. That’s why he woke me. He needed me to say this to him. No one else could. I could see it in his eyes. He came to hear the worst: I hated him, and his life would go on.

Uru smiled, ‘I’m akāta’ae. I can let myself do every awful thing. And if I think about it enough, I don’t even have to feel guilty.’

I felt like a child because I was acting like one. The past year I had been drifting, hesitating from doing something. Because, if I chose to do nothing, I felt like I had a choice in the first place. I didn’t. Nothing I could do or say would ever stop Uru. It didn’t matter if I hated him, all we had was each other.

I hadn’t let myself be angry in a long time. I was worried that being angry would make me like him. But we were brothers, I was already like him.

I wanted to break things, break him. I wanted to grab his throat and dig in my nails until they met in the bloody middle. I only stopped because I knew just how pathetic it would be if I failed. There is nothing more frustrating than being weak and angry.

When a ta’unga needs to widen the hull of a boat, they fill it with water, and drop in blazing hot coals. The water boils and crackles until the wood bends to accommodate the new shape. My hate for Uru was the same. It bubbled away in the pit of my stomach, demanding me to bend or break.

I screamed. Not the whimpering of a child, but the bellowing howl of a dog. I tried to grind every sound out of my throat. I didn’t care if I woke the rest of the men. I wanted to bleed all my anger out. I could do nothing to stop Uru, and he was my brother.





Yvette Thomas

Auckland writer Yvette Thomas won the Caselberg Trust International Poetry Prize 2022 for her poem ‘Not What You Wanted’, which featured in Landfall (Otago University Press, Spring 2022) and the anthology No Time To Lollygag (Caselberg Press 2023). Her short story ‘The Lost One’ was published in JAAM (May 2003, NZ) and Pendulum (Wishbone Press, Australia 2003). In 2006 Yvette adapted The Lost One into a short film funded by Creative New Zealand, which she also directed. It appeared at the 2007 NZ International Film Festival and others, including the Seattle International Film Festival, São Paulo International Film Festival and the Los Angeles Film Festival. It won the Silver Award (runner-up) for Dramatic Short Film at Worldfest, Houston (2007).

Ten Thousand Nights is a collection of mainly confessional and lyric poems which address identity, family, addiction, mental illness, highs and lows with lovers— and which move increasingly beyond the personal to larger issues such as social and political pressures and upheavals, global warming and religion.



EXTRACT from ‘Ten Thousand Nights’

Allegiance

It takes patience
to live with an octogenarian,
would have been simpler
to drop her
at Fairway Gardens
or Coronation Lodge,
let her see out her days
playing bowls,
watching matinees,
bingo on Tuesdays.

But our Filipino roots
would not allow it,
our customs,
our chromosomes,
our deoxyribonucleic acid,
retirement villages
with contrived names,
resident evenings
and chair yoga
unusual in Southeast Asia.

You must understand
I cherish my mother,
I want to look out for her,
to be her protector,
I do not want
her to slip and fall,
to be sucked in
by a scammer,
to be treated
like a silly little old lady.

Here with us,
she still makes dishes (cont.)
from back home,
adobo and lumpia,
leche flan and halo-halo,
she still sings
love songs in tagalog,
'Dahil Sa Iyo'
and 'Sampaguita',
forever a romantic.

She still plays her ukelele
like there is a fiesta
in our living room,
but sometimes I forget
the food and dance,
the songs and laughs,
especially when I am tired
and she asks me
to sort out problems
with her cellphone.

Not What You Wanted

I could have been your Boadicea,
your blossoming lavender in July,
your secret treehouse, your starfish in a rock pool,
your dirty girl who did all the things you wanted,
whenever you wanted,
I could have been your underwater cave, your shy muse,
a sweet voice singing in the distance
or a red helium balloon with “I Love You” written on it,
I could have been leaves doing amber backflips in the
wind for you
or an abstract painting hanging on your wall,
I could have been your Azure Window,
your lighthouse, your pyramid, your temple,
maybe even your very own Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

Instead I was a meerkat hiding in a burrow, an insomniac,
a lover of benzodiazepines and Scrabble,
I was a dense thicket, a message in a bottle,
a secondhand device with missing instructions,
a thrashing epileptic, a tea party for one,
a rock crab scuttling across the shore,
a signpost written in a foreign language,
I was a frantic pacer walking up and down,
an unlikely prophet who predicted terrible things
which came true,
but most of all I was midden,
animal bone, ash and mollusc shells,
glass shards, broken tools and fish hooks.

Herewaka

Harbour Cone
is a dear friend
she stood by me
through long days
of recovery
whenever I felt like

slipping

over

the

edge

I would gaze
at her depleted slopes
plucked like a chicken
of nearly every feather
her wonky curves
which once held gold
that cluster of houses
near the foreshore
attached like barnacles
on a baleen whale
her presence
a constant reassurance
better days are ahead
her unspoken message
she led by example
in inclement weather
wild Otago winds swirled
through Hooper's Inlet
over and around her stoic
ransacked beauty

Ten Thousand Nights

my computer will not boot up no matter how many times I switch it off and on at the wall or press the big button I resort to bashing random keys once I arrive at the hysterical stage my satellite map also went berserk today it did not understand my Kiwi accent I wound up somewhere in New Windsor turned left four times and was back on Rosamund Avenue where I began an hour late for an important meeting I phoned in my apology but I could tell they were not impressed on days like this I feel like an imposter I hope ice cream is in my freezer so I can comfort eat myself into oblivion before slumber gain a kilogram in a single devastating evening whilst re-runs of RuPaul's Drag Race play but what if I have just ten nights left before I die my computer problems would be forgotten getting lost in the backstreets of West Auckland would be insignificant my workmates would be sympathetic if one thousand nights remain I would not make it to sixty perhaps a sudden exit my shocked friends would mourn then bury me in a handcrafted wicker casket before getting on with their lives or ten thousand nights if I am lucky would take me to approximately eighty 'a good knock' my cricket friend would say fingers crossed I could feed myself before my final day walk unaided solve a crossword puzzle without cheating but now as I step out into this evening light I see scarlet clouds bleed across the sky I hear thrushes rustle and ready their nests for sleep I smell jasmine as it creeps along broken trellis instead of checking messages from colleagues I watch the new moon rise behind a nikau palm instead of scoffing Häagen-Dazs I feel a light breeze blow across my face one by one stars turn on I note each change while the sun departs a slow fade from grey to black I commit each streaky cloud to memory

The Tortoiseshell Won

Big breath in at 3am.
Nerves lit up like festive lights.
Flash intermittent.
Two fingers on my wrist to count.
Is my heart bowing out?
Try to recall the day before.
Was there bad news?
Did someone walk out?
Did I shout?
Did I lose something?
An earring from my grandmother?
My cash and credit cards?
Did my teenage son get home
from that party in one piece?
I did not hear the back door open.
Please let him not be lying in a gutter.
I should get up and check.
Would that make me
a helicopter parent?
I always talk too fast.
Pace and remonstrate.
No gentle nodding patience.
I must chill out.
I must not do a number on myself.
Listen to those two cats on the roof.
Snarl and hiss.
Lash out.
Quick pads on tin.
Then silence.
Which was the winner?
The ginger from number 27?
Or the tortoiseshell from number 9?





Candice Tutauha

Candice Tutauha is a descendant of Ngāti Ruanui and Te Atihau. An avid reader of historical fiction, fantasy and theology, she is based in Auckland where she works and studies full time.

Rua is an NA coming-of-age novel. Set in Whanganui during the late nineties the heroine, Rua, struggles to overcome a generational mākutu handed down by a disgraced tipuna. She faces many challenges: gaining respect as the eldest moko of her burgeoning yet dysfunctional whānau; growing up in a neighbourhood displaced by hip hop culture, gang violence and drug trafficking; and coming to terms with her disability. After travelling abroad, Rua returns to her ancestral land to uncover the truth behind the long-forgotten mākutu that threatens not only her own life but generations to come.



EXTRACT from 'Rua'

Kōwhai Grove was napalm in summer. Hot, triggered days. A flaming bomb of broken families and troubled teens with idle hands and restless minds. By mid-morning the air pressed in, sticky and sly, trickling sweat between your thighs. Even the tide seethed in and out with hot water. Our neighbourhood slept as the sun rose, and by the sultry afternoon a hot beach and a hangover didn't mix well.

We were a horseshoe fixed at the bad end, shod with different races. Poor people, pinched-tight faces. Then the gangs moved in and spread a violence that no-one dared to name.

Nana Peta tried to protect us from the worst of it. We were kids growing up fast. She fed the neighbourhood like we were starving, bowls of steaming porridge. Our faces cherub'd with the fat of butter and cream. The kitchen counter her standing ground and a cup of steaming black tea to mask the tears in her eyes. We tried everything we could to make Nana smile.

But the kettle whistled a discordant tune.

The bomb still flamed, and the tide still seethed.

23rd December 1995

My sweet sixteenth had an unfortunate alignment with the Chinese New Year. My party not worth mentioning. I crash-survived it.

In the same month Nana had an altercation with the principal over matters related to diversity and inclusion. The cancelled funding of an elevator to the new mezzanine library prompted a seething letter I provided to the board which became the talk of interested parties. On the first day of the protest non-labour, un-intensive iwi-affiliated Māori activists lined up outside the school gates. On my way to morning class, a broad nose with a tattooed fist gave me a hongī.

Plastic bottles, banana peels, and orange peels littered the footpath. The protestors set up camp, some of which had Māori flags flying from tent poles. White koru sailed above the campsite and a blockade of cars. Parents lodged complaints by week's end, claiming the protest violated their rights.

What was all the fuss? Why the frustration?

Not a what. Or a why. I had quoted myself as 'another brown face of failed government funded sponsorship'.

Mr Ferry suggested I revise my letter for the school yearbook. I swear my English teacher was a gay anarchist in his former life. Until a double major in English and History straightened out his path.

I agreed to the yearbook idea and a snapshot of me braked at the bottom of the mezzanine stairs. The second-floor bookshelves were out of focus. My new shiny-chromed electric wheelchair, a consolation gift, if you would.

In a similar event, our small beachside suburb attracted local news. Again.

On a sunny afternoon a reporter from the Mana Tangata newspaper knocked on the front door at 8 Kōwhai Grove. He smiled as he coached our five-generation family onto the couch. He pushed his steel-framed glasses onto the end of his nose as he sat, one suited leg crossed over the other. On the other side of the living room, our arses sunk into the deep cushions. It didn't take long for Nana Peta to start mouthing off. Her honest account opened a floodgate. So many swear words.

By the end of the interview the reporter had scalded his way through two cups of milk tea. Nana had her balloon skirt hitched up around

her knees.

It was the first time I'd ever heard her talk about our whānau to a stranger. Her spectacles fogged with tears as she recounted the births of all her tamariki: dead and alive. Then her moko: all alive.

She leaned forward, proud. Like she was about to kiss the reporter or give him a hongī. A fellow conspirator on everything that was wrong with the world.

'I row my own waka'. One of her favourite sayings. She kept telling the reporter to write it down.

And when he'd encouraged her to keep talking, she kept right on.

Bragging about her one moko who got 'School C in everything'. Me.

A week later Nana slammed the newspaper on the kitchen table, upsetting the milk bottle and Momo's honey puffs.

'Pah'. Another one of Nana's favourite sayings. She buttoned her lips and refused to say anything else.

Turns out the reporter had more syllables than sense. No mention of Nana's waka, or the mouths she'd fed trying to get our arses to school every day. He'd captioned our photo, 'unprecedented representation'. Of what, he hadn't elaborated because like most reporters, he was all about the exclusive scoop. His article was bullshit.

Not long after the article became posterity, Crackles passed away, and then her father, my great-great grandfather. That cut our family generation down to three. Cousin Momo, the youngest.

Aside from Momo, not many birthdays are celebrated in our hood.

My seventeenth, not worth celebrating.

It didn't matter. Everyone was more excited about Hiri Madden's. Gangstas, even.

Hiri was our cousin—third or fourth cousin, Nana Peta said. We never called his dad Uncle Madden, an old army mate of Koro's. The word Uncle didn't seem to have the same respect as Mister. But we all shared one thing in common: the same whakapapa. Which meant their generations traced back to the same waka that hauled our ancestor's arses from Hawaiki. I kept researching about this island for clues: how did we get from there to here? how did we survive? what if we came from somewhere else? and why did any of this matter? The World Wide Web had a lot of rabbit holes that nobody had bothered to plug with the truth. Not yet anyway. Mr Ferry said it was OK to speculate

because one day the truth would come out. Hei aha, we'd survived on half-truths for so long, maybe the Web would one day spin a good yarn into a true story. Maybe.





Anna Woods

Anna Woods is a Tāmaki Makaurau writer. Her short fiction and poetry has been published in a wide range of journals and anthologies, including Landfall, takahē, The Poetry NZ Yearbook and elsewhere. Her story ‘Pig Hunting’ won the 2023 Sargeson Story Prize, judged by Vincent O’Sullivan.

The manuscript she completed with the support of Alison Wong during her 2019 NZSA mentorship was shortlisted for the 2022 Michael Giffkins Prize for An Unpublished Novel. She was the Caselberg Trust Elizabeth Brooke-Carr Emerging Writer Resident for 2022, which enabled her to visit some of the locations in her novel, Tomahawk Beach.

Set in contemporary Auckland and Dunedin, Tomahawk Beach examines one woman’s ambivalence about motherhood. Finding herself pregnant, jobless, and in therapy, the unnamed narrator goes in search of the mother who left when she was a baby. Reckoning with the past isn’t easy though—navigating fraught relationships, family secrets, and failing memory, it’s only in writing letters to her absent mother that she discovers there are some inheritances you can’t escape.



EXTRACT from ‘Tomahawk Beach’

THE EXHIBITION—FEATURING one of Renessa’s art school friends—is at a tiny gallery on High Street. I’m too tired to go, but Bryn insists. He knows what it means when I get all squirrely, he’s seen it before. I guess he thinks spending time with Renessa might distract me before I do something stupid.

The installation, *Anthropocene*, consists of a giant double-sided projector screen hanging in the centre of a white room. It plays a looping film on both sides of an endless flat sea. Sky against water, blue against blue. Stills are posted at ascending heights around the walls in a helical shape. The first, labelled *TODAY*, is less than thirty centimetres from the ground. The last, at the ceiling, is labelled *A CENTURY FROM NOW*.

Bryn skulks in the corner, drinking red wine from a plastic tumbler, while Renessa and I talk to the artist. Renessa's a graphic designer at a big shot agency now, but she keeps in touch with all her art school friends. She drags her fingers through her glossy black hair while she talks. Her outfit is monochrome, but her lips--metallic red--leave prints of themselves around the rim of her glass. Like the psychologist, Renessa is always composed. She has an artist's eye for everything, especially beauty, especially in her men.

The artist tells us she sourced the film from a research crew who spent months in the Drake Passage off the coast of Patagonia. Closest landmass to Antarctica, she tells us. She has an undercut that runs up past her ears. The rest of her hair is chopped at an angle and swept, black and silken, across her head. She keeps flicking it out of her eyes. Her movements are languid, as though she's taken on the liquid of the sea on the screen behind her.

They were filming blue whales, she says. In three hundred hours of footage, they only got twenty minutes of whales. I edited them all out.

She tells us she was born in Shanghai, but her family was originally from Xinjiang. Its capital, she says, is the farthest city in the world from any sea. She's obsessed with the idea, she tells us, of an unimaginable distance to the ocean. It's why her work centres on water.

It reminds me of a story Daddy used to tell about driving around the Midwest of America a lifetime ago. After weeks spent inland--the Prairies, the Rockies, the Great Lakes--when they headed towards California, he could smell the ocean, the dry tang of salt, days from the coast.

When we've exhausted the conversation, and stand in an awkward triangle, Renessa points at Bryn.

That's the guy I was telling you about, she says to the artist, The musician.

Renessa still speaks with the slightest hint of an accent, as though words are jewels she keeps in her mouth. She adds an extra syllable to musician, so it becomes muzi-she-an.

The artist sharpens, standing more erect. You have to introduce me, she says. I need someone to score my next piece.

Bryn glowers as we approach but turns complaisant when the artist explains what she wants. It helps that she's heard of his band. It helps that she knows all their songs. All hint of languor is gone as she

gesticulates, describing her vision. A wild arm movement sends a tumbler flying from the hand of a black-suited, black-booted woman behind her. After a lackadaisical apology, she leads Bryn into a quieter corner. They huddle together, plotting, while I try not to watch them and fail.

People ease around me, pushing. The noise is all bluish, like the inside of a wave. Renessa talks to more art-school friends. Her voice gets quicker when she's around them, louder. Her vocabulary changes too, becomes stilted with Latinate--she's all, *iconography* and *deconstruction*, *post-structuralism* and *semiotics*. It's all part of, or excluded from, *The Canon*. She waves her hands around.

I sit on a white box in front of the screen, snatching glances at the corner where the artist leans into Bryn. She probably does so to be heard--the gallery is loud and full of echoes--but something about her smile, the light way she touches his arm, annoys me. From where I sit, the silver line of the horizon is at eye level. There's the sudden flare of an iceberg on the horizon, a cragged cerulean blue, then it disappears as if edited out. The infinite horizon resumes. It seems I could step into it if only I could figure out how.

It takes a long time to sleep after the light and the noise of the gallery. Blackness is only beginning to swallow me when I wake with a suddenness that collects like a ball of spit in my mouth. My mind slipping out of its knot towards sleep, my body yanking it back. In the ashy-light of an uneven moon, panic edges up my spine. My heart jerks against my ribs. If I stand, the room will spill away from me. Vertigo, my old friend. I lie there, blanket pushed off in a cold sweat, while the chill of the night numbs my outlines.

I reach for my notebook. Curved away from Bryn in the darkness, in the cupped blue light of my phone, I write.

[...I've started this letter so many times. I don't know what to call you-- I have so many names for you, but they all get stuck in my mouth. I guess I've been writing, one way or another, since I was born. Do you remember that day? Sometimes I imagine it--the blue-white lights of the hospital, the drum of feet, the hum of machines, the steady beat of my heart inside yours. It's what I do with your life, secret-mother. I make up stories. Collect shiny images, paste them together to construct you.

It was the psychologist who told me to write. In our first session, we talked about why I was there. All the things that had led to it.

There's a branch of psychology called narrative therapy, she said. It's about the stories we tell ourselves. What stories do you believe about your mother? Are they true?

I shrugged.

Write them down, she said, Your stories. Start with your earliest memory. Tell your mother about your life...

...my earliest memory then--I'm five years old. It's my birthday, which means you've been gone four years, five months and an indeterminate number of days. Daddy doesn't remember exactly when you left--sometime before Christmas, he says. I don't know where you are, Mother. Daddy never told me. He'd stiffen at your name, a sudden frost travelling, fracturing his face. I learned early not to ask. To others, to strangers, he'd tell them you left when I was a baby. Moved south, was all he'd say.

In this memory, he has tried to make a cake. A supermarket sponge he covers in sprinkles but doesn't think to ice. The sprinkles roll off the dry top and gyrate in hurried circles on the plate. There's a thin smear of red-flavoured jam and mock cream so stiff with sugar it stands by itself. I pick a sprinkle off the plate with a moistened finger. It's so small, it sits on my tongue like grit. The cake, soft and light, leaves a chemical sweetness in my mouth...

...it's coming up again, my birthday. I'm close now to the age you were when you left.

I wonder about you. Always, but especially at this time of year. I can't tell you what I wished for that sponge-cake-birthday. They tell you not to speak your wishes, or they won't come true. I don't believe in wishes anymore. Still, I won't tell you, just in case...

...my life is small, Mother. You made it that way...]





Cover photo: Tom Moody

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