



Waipapa
Taumata Rau
University
of Auckland

20
26

Master of Creative Writing

Faculty of Arts and Education



MCW 2025–26
University of Auckland



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This was an unusual year for the MCW: I was away on leave for half of it, and relied on my excellent colleagues, Selina Tusitala Marsh and Ruby Porter, to help the three writers in a small but lively cohort.

In 2026 Ruby – an MCW grad – was awarded her PhD here at the University of Auckland. This included a dissertation ('Anticipating the Present: a Literary Blockchain') and the manuscript of her second novel, *Lost Property*.

This year we also celebrate a number of books by recent graduates. Four of these are first novels: *You Envy the Coutinhos* by Michelle D'costa (Tranquebar); *The End and the Beginning* by K. J. Holdom (Simon & Schuster); *Rua* by Candice Tutauha (Bateman); and *LIT* by Anna Woods (Echo). Gavin Strawhan published his second novel, *Slash* (Allan & Unwin), and Sarah Ell, well-known for her nonfiction and writing for children, published her first novel written for adults, *A Sky Full of Fire* (Bateman). Sarah, Candice and K.J. all wrote the first drafts of their novels during their MCW year.

This is the fourth year of the Phoenix Prize, named for the influential literary journal published at the University of Auckland in the early 1930s. Our prize is entirely funded by MCW alums and faculty, as is the annual MCW writer-in-residence – awarded this year to Erica Stretton, who is completing work on a short-story collection. One of her stories, 'Losing Out', is included in this sampler.

Many thanks to our generous alums for supporting their fellow writers, as well as Tāwhia Copyright Aotearoa for its annual scholarship, and the colleagues and writers who serve as our examiners. Please visit our site, The Three Lamps, to find out more about creative writing at the University of Auckland.

Paula Morris MNZM

Director, Master of Creative Writing



Master of Creative Writing

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Megan Fowlie

Megan grew up on a dead-end road on the aukati line in a household of brothers, foster children and 'youth at risk'. At the time, no one seemed certain whether she stood in Waikato, Waipā or King Country. An anti-Catholic slur and a verbal stoush between the principal and their father halted the enrolment of Megan and her brothers into the local primary school. Aided by a Ministry dispensation, they rode the college bus through a Land War circuit of Hairini, Rangioawhia, Ōrākau into Te Awamutu. In her twenties she met her eldest sibling, a tāne Māori who had been taken through forced adoption. Her parents told her not to be a farmer. She is self-employed and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Russian and French from the University of Otago and a Bachelor of Business from Massey University.

Blindfolds & Bleach is an experimental work of New Zealand rural gothic inspired by a name which disappeared from a press statement after the discovery Rewi Maniapoto's cloak in a Sussex cupboard. The poetry collection is anchored in places and memories of Megan's childhood. She magnifies maps and follows fence lines, bloodlines and trade lines into historical inquiry— names open and close doors, cyphers and codes lie in plain sight, hard ground becomes quagmire, larders become wastelands, wastelands larders. Hidden layers, erased names, and lurking silences of unseen power twist into a maddening *Alice-in-Wonderland* world.

Hazelmere Crescent

Behind the morning school bus
a pink ribbed ribbon
and two halves of a black dog.

Hyperion Drive World Federation Wrestling Champs

Saturday's throwdown on the stadium floor begins.

One slender Ngāpuhi, one Ngāti tāone
battling it out in a game of 'who-is-blacker-than-who'
at the Hyperion Drive World Federation Wrestling Champs.

Nine-year-old stepbrothers, strutting, flexing, coaxing.
Young taniwha-slayers never shy of twisting an N-word
but, held in half nelson between couch & flat-faced gas heater
—— everyone is as black as.

All-time champions! We light up.
Bell Tea leaves in the bulb of the glass bong. Until knock-knock.
Mormons/Johos/ mid-morning police
looking for Syd's LOVE/HATE flashing blue badges.
No luck.

We scoot.
Posse up with the blonde 'afakasi twins from the corner,
feign Bloods & Crips signs with sly thalidomide fingers
and slide into heady head-high aniseed scrub.

And off — traps fast under the fummy overpass.
And out!
We loud kākā to the dairy for one-packet-of-Holiday-Reds
and three-K-bars-please.

Then, sugar-tongued, we halt——
eager for the vibrations of trains, bend our ears to the tracks,
and re-kick honeyed Ados tins
down to the Papakura drain.

A lake and other erasures

Tripping at a watercolour, my thumb jabs
the *Lake of Heaven* (undated).
A paper cut five metres deep,
the whorl of Roto-o-rangi bleeds in my hand.

Who knew?

All this time we summonsed a body of water,
star-fished, learnt to swim width-of-Para-Rubber-pool,
land bound under lake-like-skies.
Walker and Parker drain the lake.
Parker and Douglas drain the lake.
Douglas and Reynolds drain the lake.
Agents and managers
represent [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]

Plastered names: the Firm, the Company,
powerful Australian interests,
a tight bundle of Victorian merchant elite,
the Wizard of Aus twiddling behind a velvet curtain,
Australian companies under British licence,
Squatters of Felix, absentee owners, Europeans.

What else is hidden?

I rifle maps, Waikato, Waipā, Wasteland.
Washed out pages.
On each, a bloody thumb print.

Selvedge

Passing through the thin black
aluminium window frame
of a nineties brick back-bedroom,
the Bernina 1000 Special.

Domestic, heavy duty, purchased on
a provincial main street
to stitch six metres of ivory satin
into boned bodice and fish tail, with
bitchin' Grace Jones shoulder pads &
appliquéd trail.

Then, a two-piece in chequered
chestnut & navy,
a heavy brocade jacket, box-cut,
your cousin's cotton romper suit,
fluting fleece bucket hats—lost
at pre-school, chambray pinafores,
summer skorts in light floral lawn,
Sammy the draft stopper, tablecloths,
hot water bottle covers, hooded terry
towelling, sequinned disco dresses
in stretch velour, silver edges over
black velvet
dance vests.

And so soon — lines, circles, squares
drawn on butcher's paper
and a dusty machine emblazoned
with sticky dots, one to five, guiding
your thread-feed through loops and
levers.

Sewing licence signed, dated.
You begin.

With cushions, carry bags,
rag-stuffed toys, nineteen crimson
gingham swing skirts, buttoned
shorts with hip pockets and turned-
up cuffs, the giant run-as-fast-as-
you-can gingerbread man,
a strapless gown in slippery pink.

How many ballpoint needles
snapped, eyes rethreaded, bobbins
wound, then untangled, hems
loosened, tensions tightened?

Today, machine stowed and only
the clothes on our backs, we roll
in neutral to the roadside. Drive
half-a-million metres up an island.
Double yellow lines—without
unpicking.



Angela Johnson

Angela was born in Auckland and worked in the thoroughbred industry in New Zealand, England, and Australia before completing a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Psychology at Massey University. She is now self-employed, helping people preserve their personal histories by recording their life stories. Angela lives in Beachlands with her husband, two daughters, and the guide dog puppies she raises for Blind Low Vision NZ.

Lockdown is a novel set in early 2020, following two sisters as they navigate the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. Hayley, a flight attendant, loses her job early in the story and spends the lockdown confined to her home. Her sister, Nat, is a nurse at Middlemore Hospital, working on the front lines while living in the garage to protect her husband and daughter. While Hayley is still isolating after returning from overseas, Nat's house burns down and the two families are forced to share Hayley's home for the remaining four weeks of lockdown. As tensions rise in the cramped household, the sisters confront the strains in their relationship with one another, as well as with their partners and children.

Auckland, 5 April 2020

The shriek of a siren ripped Nat awake. She fought her way out from under the duvet. In the dark she stumbled over the extra blanket she'd dropped on the floor. The burglar alarm was mounted on the back wall of the garage. She jabbed at the buttons, and it responded with a chirp to announce it was activated. She checked the blinking light; she'd turned it on, not off. She put a hand to one ear to dull the scream and used the other to re-enter the code to deactivate it. The howl continued. A battery must have failed in one of the fire alarms and set it off.

She hesitated at the door. Should she wait and let Dan turn it off? It wasn't like he could be sleeping through it. He must be on his way to sort it out. It would be so embarrassing apologising to the neighbours in the morning.

The piercing tone drilled its way inside her head, driving everything else out. It was dark other than the two orange dots glowing on the keypad. Her eyes gradually adjusted and shadows of the bed and the table and chairs appeared. They were moving slightly. Not moving—it was just the light that was shifting. Her nostrils stung. She sniffed and spun around. The back garden was lit by erratic flashes. A flame curled across the glass door.

Nat grabbed her phone from the toolbox-nightstand beside her bed, fumbling it between her hands before stabbing at the emergency call button. Holding the phone to her ear she ran back to the internal door. She shoved it open—slamming it against the hinges. She screamed for Sophie and Dan in between shouting responses to the operator's questions.

Sophie's bedroom door was open. Children under sixteen didn't always wake up to fire alarms. She had no idea where she'd seen that, and no time to consider whether it was true. Sophie was fifteen. Nat had to check before she left the house. Sophie wasn't in her bed. What if she'd gone to the bathroom? If she'd gone to the bathroom, she would be awake and would have heard the alarm. She must have left the house.

'Mum!' Sophie screamed. Nat spun around. Her daughter was silhouetted at the front door where Dan staggered to his feet. They were both obscured by the cloud of smoke that surged down the stairs. The smoke pulsed as though it was breathing. Lit by the streetlight it whirled and glowed with an orange haze like the stuff out of machines in nightclubs, only thicker—black and suffocating. Her throat and eyes burned. She coughed while stumbling to the door where the air wafting in lost its battle with the smoke and they followed it outside, Dan pushing Nat and Sophie ahead of him.

At the end of the driveway, Nat walked away from her family. Smoke

wouldn't kill the virus.

'Mum,' Sophie protested, reaching out for her. Nat curled her toes to grip the concrete, resisting the urge to run back and hug her daughter. Dan held onto Sophie and led her away from the house. Sophie followed him until they were halfway across the road. She whipped around, her eyes wide, and mouthed 'no'.

'No,' Nat repeated. She leant on the letterbox. Above her, the flames cast a crown on the roof of her house. The adrenaline was wearing off. She'd been so focused on getting out she hadn't had any room to think about what was happening. Her house was on fire. How could her house be on fire? Houses hardly ever burned down anymore. What had started it? Was it really happening?

Her stomach was crushed and dragged into a hard ball deep in her body. Couldn't they go back a few minutes, wake up sooner and put it out before it got so big? Her body shook. Goosebumps dappled her arms and legs. Her viscose pyjamas did nothing against the cold night air. Her teeth rattled and her jaw ached.

Nat turned away from her house and crossed the road. A snap rang through the street, the sound amplified, ringing off the road and the houses. She spun around in time to watch the roof above her and Dan's bedroom collapse in an eruption of flames. The fire splintered into the air, cracking in celebration of its escape. Against the black backdrop, the outside of the house was lit in bursts, flickering shadows streaking across the lawn and climbing the walls of the surrounding houses.

Her phone said it was one o'clock in the morning, but a crowd had congregated on the footpath. Many had forgotten about social distancing. The scream of the volunteer fire siren and the yells of people who hadn't gone to bed yet had woken others up. Someone had knocked on Nat's neighbour's doors to get them out of their houses. It seemed as though everyone who lived on their street had come out to witness the destruction and people from the surrounding area were arriving. The fire threw shadows across their faces, contorting their features. The unsteady light hollowed their cheeks or dug holes where their eyes should have been. Nat had trouble recognising most of them. But when the fire glowed brighter it amplified their expressions—eyes wide, mouths twisted—some looked scared or sympathetic, some looked enthralled.

Barry from down the road was propped up in a camp chair. He watched the fire intently, his hands clamped together, fingers working around one another. He was nearly ninety; someone should've taken him away from the smoke.

The fire grew, raging and aggressive. Nat shivered. James and Abby, who lived next door, downwind from the fire, hosed the side of their house and the fence that separated their properties. How did they know to do that? If the

situation had been reversed and it was her house downwind, she would have been on the other side of the road with everyone else. As powerless as she was now.

Another crack announced the collapse of the upper floor. Her bedroom—the bed, the furniture and their clothes—fell, and the flames and black smoke expanded to take their place. The fire accelerated downstairs, lighting up windows as it stormed through the rest of the house.

Sophie's room was next to the stairs. Everything she owned would be gone. Bo, the teddy bear she'd slept with since her first birthday. Nat wailed and doubled over as though she'd been kicked in the stomach. Sophie hadn't said 'no' earlier. The horror on her face hadn't just been because the house was on fire—she'd said 'Bo'. Nat cried the way Sophie had when she'd realised what she'd left behind; the bear had been everywhere with Sophie, sleepovers with friends or at her grandparents, school camps, tucked up on the couch next to her during a movie on a Saturday night. Now he was gone.

Against the backdrop of the burning house, Sophie looked like a little girl in her green and brown striped pyjamas, holding her father's hand.

There were certificates pinned to Sophie's corkboard; awards from last year's school prizegiving that hadn't been taken down yet—first in science and maths. The most improved trophy from the previous netball season had been sitting on the shelf over her desk. Last year's art board was propped against the wall. The microscope Sophie bought with her birthday and babysitting money. There wouldn't be anything left of them.

The external walls of the garage were still standing. The door hid what was happening inside. Fingers of flames reached through the blown-out windows and the holes they had clawed through the roof. Almost brand-new bedding. It seemed like such a waste.

The increasing glow from the living room's windows showed the progress of the flames down the hallway, past the family photos. A frame that documented the first twelve months of Sophie's life, Nat and Dan's wedding photos, a favourite photo of Jenny—their cat who died when Sophie was six.

The flames followed the light into the living room. The old dry wood of Granny's piano would burn quickly. Would the fire melt the metal pedals? Would they be all that was left, three tarnished thumbs lying on the concrete foundations?



Penelope Thomson

Penny grew up in Feilding and studied medicine at the University of Otago, graduating in 1988. Her years in Dunedin and the friendships she made there have stayed with her. After several years travelling overseas, she trained in radiology in Christchurch and currently works as a radiologist in Auckland. A radiologist's job is to describe images in words, as accurately as possible. Penny has enjoyed the freedom that fiction brings, while continuing to look for what lies beneath the surface and for what goes unsaid. She lives with her husband and their two dogs. Their three daughters live overseas.

Her novel, *One Song*, moves between a student flat on Castle Street, Dunedin, in 1988 and a reunion in Central Otago twenty-two years later, when a group of old friends are drawn back together and the secrets of that year begin to surface. It is a novel about friendship, loss and the things people carry without saying. This extract follows Anna, a lawyer, through one long evening in Auckland.

One Song (extract)

A midweek dinner party. Anna hadn't wanted to go and had even suggested that Mark go by himself.

'No way. I could do with the moral support. You know how bloody dry the Robertsons can be.'

Bob Robertson was the senior partner at Mark's practice, tall and stooped with watery eyes. His wife Virginia was petite, with powdered cheeks and hair that didn't move. A cloud of hairspray hit Anna as she leaned in for a kiss. On arrival they were handed champagne in cut crystal coupes, whether they wanted it or not. Anna spilled hers almost immediately—of course she did—the dark stain spreading across her silk shirt.

The villa was two-storied on a point looking out to sea. Tall bay windows framed the view through gnarled pohutukawa branches. A huge chandelier hung at the entrance, and the living room was full of French antiques and gilt mirrors. There was a single lightbox with red and black Māori motifs. A Kiwi villa with a faux French heart, Anna thought.

'Anna is a lawyer too,' their hostess announced. 'What is it that you do again, dear?'

Anna explained about the recent case with the workers from the Islands and the conditions they'd put up with. She was going into too much detail but couldn't stop herself. The other wives nodded and smiled—those skinny social smiles. The men and women had separated from the moment they were handed their glasses. Anna's eyes went to the men's corner, and she had the urge to cross the room.

In the women's corner, the conversation turned to children.

'So, you have just the one child?' someone asked.

The word just hung in the air. Anna's fingers tightened around her wine glass. She was drinking the Chablis too quickly and not listening to the conversation around her.

'Sorry, what was that?' The women were watching her, waiting.

'I asked what school your son goes to, dear? He's at high school, isn't he?'

'Um, yes, he's in year nine. It's his first year at Western Springs.'

Then someone brought up the new headmaster at King's and the women became very animated—everyone had an opinion.

When they sat down for dinner, one of the women asked more about Toby. What it was like being an only child. Anna explained that Toby had struggled at times, that he had learning difficulties and that making friends hadn't always been easy for him.

'You know, one of my good friends is a teacher at Dio.' The woman leaned closer to Anna as if about to share a secret. 'She said that two working parents are the worst of all. The kids get left with a nanny and no one really knows or cares what's going on. The kids fall into the gap and it's the poor teachers that are left to deal with it.'

'Well, we try to keep a close eye on things,' Anna said. 'And he seems to be doing OK at the local high school...'

'Have you thought about King's? The new headmaster is excellent, truly excellent. And I know what I'm talking about—my husband has been on the board for years. Of course, it won't be easy to get in now since your son has already started year nine but I'm sure we could help you. I think you'll find it might be what he needs. Especially with his learning problems.'

'Of course,' Anna said. 'A private school—how stupid of me. Why didn't I think of that?'

She reached across the table for the red wine decanter, pouring it into her glass. The liquid turned pink.

'Just one child!' Anna said in the taxi home. 'As if it was a choice I made because I was a working mother.'

'Anna—'

'It made me feel as if Toby was some sort of consolation prize. And the bloody private school thing. Like some exclusive club. They sit in their narrow little worlds.'

'They're harmless,' Mark said, in that measured barrister's voice she found maddening. 'They're just from a different—'

'They're so out of touch. None of the wives work and they act as if it's a badge of honour.'

'Well, you weren't exactly great company tonight,' he said.

'Oh, I see. I embarrassed you.' She let the words sit. 'Right.'

'That's not what I meant.'

'I think it's exactly what you meant.'

He didn't answer. She stared out the window, the city sliding past, wet blurred lights.

The IVF years. The endless appointments, the sympathetic pats that were closer to condescension. Finding bathrooms to jab herself on the way to hearings. Lying flat for weeks, unable to work, mastering cryptic crosswords but little else. The bags of half-finished knitting and embroidery still shoved somewhere in the back of a cupboard. All of it invisible—a grief with nothing to show for it.

'I think I just need to get away,' she said at last.

Mark didn't reply. Anna snatched a glance at him, but his head was turned away. She hated the ugly bits of herself that showed up at times like these. Hated the childlike way she wanted to provoke him into having a fight, wanted to ruffle his composure. She brought up the same old things, material they'd hammered flat over the years—like a sheet of copper, so thin it could split. Mark listened. He always listened.

When Anna made her way to bed, Toby's bedroom light was on. She considered saying goodnight, then let the moment pass. The spare room was cold. The headache was already starting. She should have slipped into bed with Mark and offered a tacit apology. A cuddle even.

Anna lay on her back in the dark, listening to the house and its night-time sounds—the occasional creak, tree branches against the roof. From down the hall, nothing. Mark would be asleep already. He had always been able to do that—close his eyes and simply leave. Such a gift. Most nights Anna's mind ran on and wouldn't stop, revising things she'd said, rehearsing things she should have.

Perhaps they should have stopped trying? It wasn't something they'd ever really discussed.

And then finally a pregnancy that held. She had secretly treasured her swollen breasts and the morning nausea. Every week was a new discovery. Then just as they were beginning to hope, the miscarriage at twenty weeks. Their baby daughter. They'd seen her, held her. Sarah Jane, named after their mothers. Just a few hours with her. Small enough to fit into two hands and perfectly made, every tiny fingernail. A nurse took photographs, and they made a plaster mould of her hands and her feet and put them in a beautiful box. Anna had put the box in the back of her wardrobe when she got home from hospital and had never opened it again. There was a small white cross with Sarah Jane's name in the lawn cemetery at Purewa. Anna always visited on her own. Often the grass edges had been cleared and sometimes there was a small knot of palm leaves.

Mark had gone back to work that same week. He'd said he needed somewhere to be and something to focus on. She hadn't known how to ask him not to—especially when she didn't want to be inside her own skin either. They'd never found the words for it together. At the time, she'd understood—that they needed space to heal—and had presumed that things would soften with time. She wasn't sure what she thought now.

Toby had come the next year. Their one child. The word just settled over him again and she turned her face into the cold pillow.



Erica Stretton

Erica is a writer from Tāmaki Makaurau and editor of Kete Books. She has an MCW (First Class Honours) from the University of Auckland. Her work has been published in Newsroom, Headland, Mayhem, Flash Frontier, takahē, and others. In 2024 she was awarded a Surrey Hotel Residency and she is this year's MCW writer-in-residence.

This short story is from a collection in progress.

Losing Out

When I drive in alone in my red Micra, my parents' faces droop. It must be there in my face, the finality, because Dad scoops up my duffel and the baby's travel cot and carries it into my old room without a word. His feet, in his old faithful slippers, drag on the fraying carpet.

'Hi, Dad,' I say, but he doesn't reply, just stares back at my car like something's missing.

They'd trusted Michael from the moment I brought him home; he'd sauntered into their kitchen, run a hand over the shining coal range, admired its gloss and taken a cup of tea. Mum's pride and joy; Dad's favourite engineering. After that, they treated him like their own. He cut firewood with Dad; rounded up stock with Mum. I basked in their approval. They'd never have said, but I thought they'd always wished for a son.

Now, the house smells like old people, even though my parents are only sixty. I reach for my phone, and remember: I pulled over at the creek on the way and flung it in, watched it splash and sparkle through the depths. Instead, I dig my toes into the dark green carpet, trace the paths worn into it, eye up the floral curlicues on the wallpaper.

It's barely morning. I packed in the howl of early hours, drove through the furious red dawn. The bruise at the corner of my jaw throbs; I push my hair down over it. Baby hasn't stirred since we left. I admire her fresh new skin, her blush cheeks.

The sun sulks behind clouds. A herd of steers in the front paddock yell, wanting more grass. My duffel sits in the centre of the floor in my childhood bedroom.

Michael and I lived like two islands. Or two ships, one bigger and bruising when it rides against the other. Towards the end I'd made my own spaces, leaving him the communal areas, kitchen lounge and bathroom; only when he'd left for work did I emerge, trying not to leave traces, whisking the baby's cloths into the washing basket, only changing her in her nursery.

They're watching you... they're looking at your slovenliness.... they can see the unmown lawn. They see you forgetting the bins. They know you've not swept the porch in weeks.

His words tumble inside me. I press my fingertips into my forehead, remembering the imagined eyes of our neighbours, trying to eat me alive. They're watching you.

The dog barks, nose inside the breezeway. Baby shuffles and turns in search of the breast. That strange surge of my heart jolts me again. Michael can't whisper his paranoia and fear into her. I won't let him.

The dog circles me like a sheep to be rounded up. Barks at the door again. He'll come, when he realises what I've done.

People are having smoko in the kitchen. Not just Mum and Dad. More voices, solid and homely. The clatter of chipped mugs. I've forgotten about just dropping in. Forgotten about casual. I leave baby sleeping and pad down the lino hallway in bare feet.

Michael's lists. Dress more formally. Learn brands. Practise your heels. Don't mention longdrops, cows, farms, chooks, beef sales. Ask about others. Shoulders back. Meet the kitchen designer. Ring the gardener. Take the car for a service. When the neighbour comes with biscuits: reciprocate within a week. This recipe, not that old one. Buy a nice box. Wrap in ribbon, ask about allergies. Don't drop over there until they reach out to you. It's the rules. Don't offer to walk their dog. Nobody wants your plant cuttings.

From behind the kitchen door, a booming voice. Tommy Jones, and his wife. Him big, bluff, in Stubbies and Red Bands, with his slight lisp on the letter s. All his life he's been here, Māori and colonist ancestry, his wife a small scrap of a Russian immigrant.

Perhaps she feels the same as me, living with Tommy and his fishing equipment.

'So your Sally is back, is she? Arrive in the night? That her tiny car out there?'

'Aye. She's back,' my father says. I can see him giving away nothing, not in an unkind way, just private.

'She'll need something safer than that wee box, around here.'

I've never thought of the car like that, but now: a fragile shell, the panels that would gasp and crumple if hit. The way it shakes on the motorway out of the city, like it could one day take off and fly.

Putting baby at risk.

Maybe I do need a ute like my parents. But how Michael had laughed when my parents drove to the city, into his driveway, in theirs. The Beverly Hillbillies are here, he'd muttered under his breath.

'She gonna be out there on the farm in those wispy skirts and heels she always wears?'

I will Tommy to be quiet. Dad's moving, saying something about how I became a townie. Offering more tea with a barb in his tone.

The ring of the phone breaks the tension.

My body churns. To be out there in the scorching sun. Breathing the grass through my boots. Like I was once, Mum and Dad's unblemished girl, heading to university in a blaze of glory. Unknown territory they were certain I would own.

My long-abandoned buttery-soft overalls hang on the hook. Slashes across the knees. I brush the fabric lightly, unable to breathe. They almost pulse. A moment, two. I'm standing on a precipice.

Baby screams.

I snatch up the overalls, yank them over my legs and knot the arms low over my hips. Reach for baby, nestle her into my chest. Rock from side to side. Open the kitchen door. Square up to Tommy Jones, with his muscled arms resting on the dining table, and an open welcoming smile on his face. Watch my parents' faces twist with both dismay and a shy glimmer of hope.



Ruby Porter

Ruby is a writer and teacher. She was the inaugural winner of the Michael Gifkins Prize in 2018, with her debut novel *Attraction*. Her second novel, *Lost Property*, was written as part of her recently completed PhD with Creative Practice. She taught the MCW for semester one of 2026.

These are the opening pages of *Lost Property*.

Router

At our grandmother's funeral, Ma saves a seat between me and her, in case you show up. She spent hundreds on the death notices, in every paper and on every website. But the rest of the church is empty. It smells of smoke and damp beneath the floorboards. Light floods the saintless windows. It is a sacrilegious midday, sun cold and hard. The dust shivers. We both turn when a silhouette cleaves the doorway, but it is just an elderly woman who probably thought this was mass. When she sees there's only the two of us, she recedes. Ma keeps squirting sanitiser onto her palms and rubbing them together. To the priest, it must look like hand wringing. I am surprised to find the service over. The only funeral I remember is my grandfather's, as a child, and that seemed to sprawl across a whole afternoon. People came who had never talked to us before. They didn't talk to us there, either. But a few of them stood beside Poppa's casket and spoke to the dead instead. Grandma's casket is closed. We don't speak; we don't sing. We just go out the way we came in. Hired pallbearers carry our grandmother to the crematory's van.

A red Buick Century, the car of my childhood, is parked up front like a hunched animal behind the rose bushes. A man leans against it, balding now, older than I remember. He is watching us, I can tell. I can tell Ma has seen him, too, by the way she avoids turning in his direction. 'Don't be long,' she tells me. She asks for our keys, and I watch as she scurries down Argyle Street, bent over. She drives an Impala now, or, more accurately, I drive her in it. She unlocks the passenger side, then opens the door with a tissue on the handle. Inside, she will lock it again. I will need to knock.

'When's the reading?' The balding man has come up behind me.

'Ma hasn't set a date,' I say, without turning around. She wants to wait for you. If anything could bring you back, perhaps it would be inheritance.

But I'm not so sure. Money never seemed real to you. Whatever you had in your wallet would be spent by the end of the day. You refused to count.

In one version of this story, you died at birth. My mother, like her mother, developed preeclampsia, but the doctor missed the protein in the urine until it was too late, and only one of us could be saved.

'Finn! Finn!' I am looking right at him, this young man, one of the pallbearers, barrelling towards me up the sidewalk, but still it makes me twist around to search for you. I get a glimpse of the Buick pulling away. 'Finn.' It's been years since I answered to your name. We used to do it all the time. Slowly, I face him. The sun is

behind his head, tangling in his hair, making it look wet. His whole outline glows. I can't see his face, not properly, and I don't recognise his voice.

'I'm not Finn,' I say. 'I'm Eliot.' He tilts his head to look at me, and his smile tumbles down with it. A side smile, open-ended, like a question. 'We're twins.' I almost say, 'we were', but catch myself.

'I never knew he had a twin.' His head stays there, on his shoulder. It looks floppy and heavy and I feel a sudden desire to put my hand on his cheek, straighten him back up. But that is immediately followed by the desire to check the Century is really gone, that the man, the balding man, isn't still watching. His head bobs upright. 'I'm Keiran,' he says. 'Your brother taught me to swim.'

I have an image, then, of you two together as boys. All skinny legs and collarbones, pale against the dark of the lake, shining like coins before they drop. 'He's out of town,' I say.

'Oh, well let me give you my number.' Keiran's hand disappears into his pocket, pulling out pen and paper, which he presses against my shoulder. I try to push down through my heels to steady myself. I don't know where to look. The scratch of his pen is almost ticklish; I am disappointed when it stops. 'Here,' he says, folding the paper in half. I see then that it is a receipt. I wait until he has walked away to read it.

Gorton's Crunchy Breaded Fish Sticks, \$6.99. The number on the back is smudged.

This is a story about money. Poppa inherited his father's share of our town's lumber mill. My father said he made a small fortune out of a large one. Grandma lived in a rest home since Poppa's death, which is about as far back as I can remember. We grew up in her house, but now I think of it as Ma's. It isn't though, not yet, and maybe not even then.

Cover photo:

Paula Morris

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