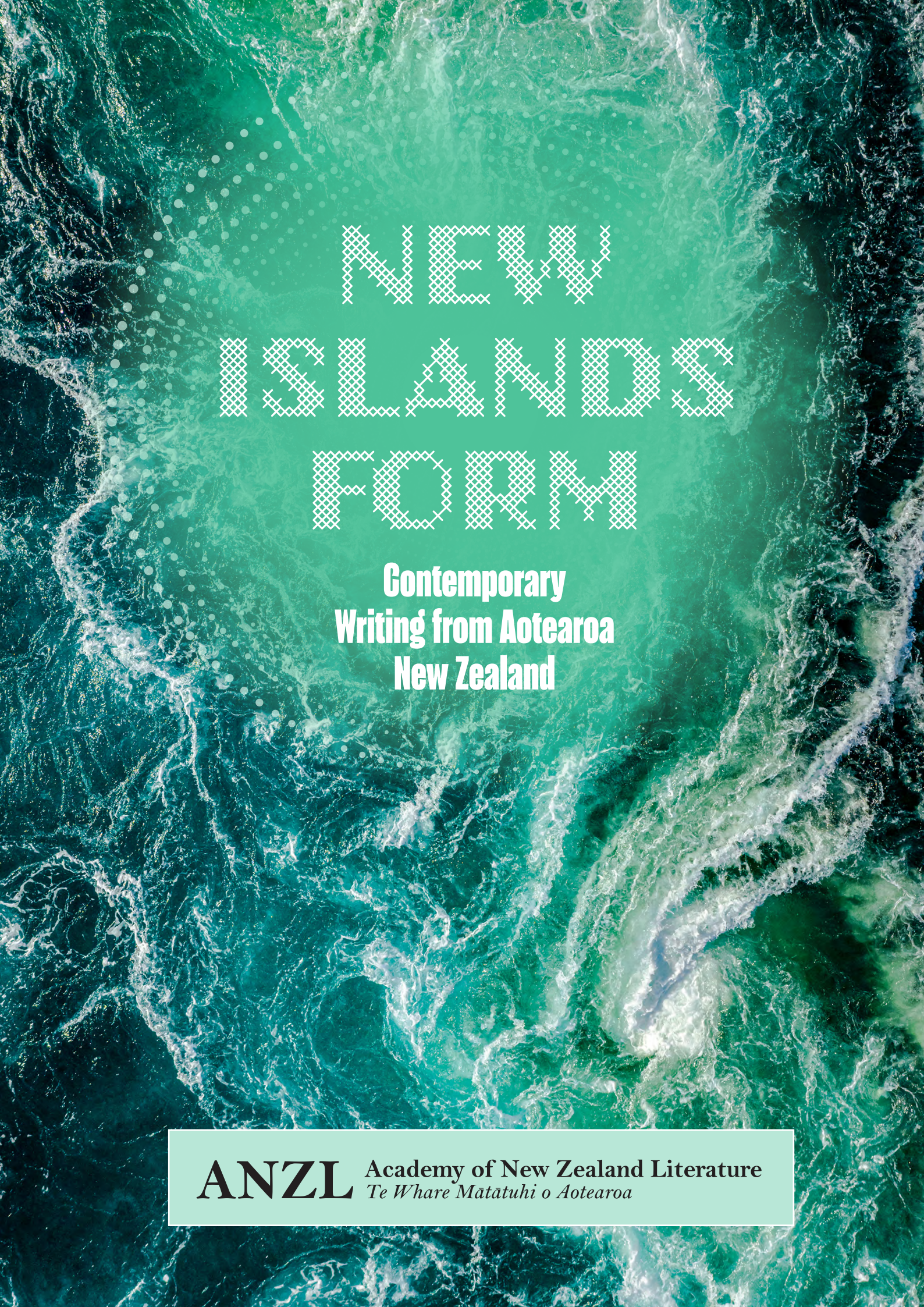
NEW
ISLANDS
FORM
Contemporary
Writing from Aotearoa
New Zealand
ANZL
Academy of New Zealand Literature
Te Whare Mātātuhi o Aotearoa

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Aotearoa
New Zealand
Review of Books

ANZL Academy of New Zealand Literature
Te Whare Mātātuhi o Aotearoa

Contents

Introduction

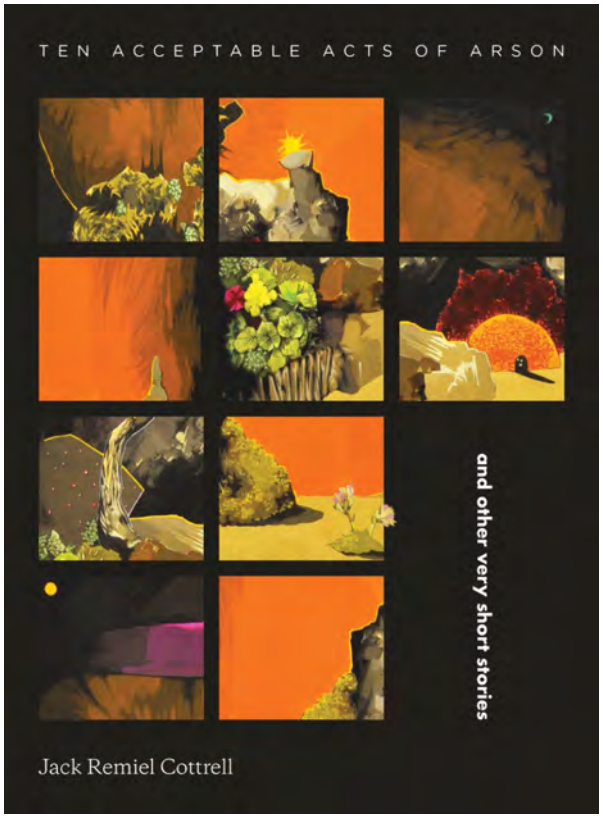
This sampler was created for the Sharjah Biennial to respond to its theme of 'to carry'. Contemporary literature from Aotearoa New Zealand encompasses a diversity of experience and histories, of 'embodied pasts and imagined futures', of points of view.

The title 'new islands form' is taken from the essay excerpt by Nina Mingya Powles, a writer of Malaysian and Pākehā (European) descent. Her life and work suggest the words of a Māori whakatauki (proverb) from northern New Zealand: 'Ahakoa e tu ana ki te whenua, e noho ana ahau ki te moana' – 'Although I stand on the land, I also sit on the sea'. Many of us from Te Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific) share that experience, whether it implies carrying a multiplicity of allegiances or a deep connection to the land and waters of our island nations.

Twelve writers are showcased here, writers of poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction, exploring different dreams, concerns and cultural inheritances. Together we form new islands and find confluences with the old.

Note: The names of Māori writers are followed by their iwi (tribal) affiliations, e.g. 'Ngāti Wai'.

Jack Remiel Cottrell



Jack Remiel Cottrell (Ngāti Rangi) is a short fiction writer from Te-Whanganui-a-Tara, Aotearoa (Wellington, New Zealand). His debut flash fiction collection *Ten Acceptable Acts of Arson and other very short stories* was published in 2021 by Canterbury University Press. This manuscript won the 2020 Wallace Foundation Prize at the University of Auckland and was shortlisted for a Sir Julius Vogel Award. In 2022 he was the Verb Festival Writer in Residence, and in 2024 he was awarded the Louis Johnson New Writer's Bursary by Creative New Zealand.

Jack writes:

Some years ago on Tumblr there was a trend of goth-ifying places different from the usual gothic settings of large castles and spooky houses. It was great – writers used gothic tropes to highlight the absurdities of where they lived or went to school. I decided to get in on it by going hyper-specific – my first gothic piece was set in a welfare office.

In 2019, I was trying to log into a government portal with my 'RealMe' account, and the website was not cooperating. First I cursed the website, then I wondered – was I real at all? Perhaps not. From there, this piece was born.

I wanted to contrast the literary horror of an eldritch creature with the true horror of the bus driver not knowing the route when you're already running late. To poke fun at the Kiwi trend of getting excited whenever the rest of the world notices we exist. And I wanted to point out the weirdness of the path between the terminals at Auckland airport.

The Absurd is a frequent feature in my writing, and 'New Zealand Gothic' distils that down to its purest form – a reflection of the strangeness we have become accustomed to.

Flash fiction: 'New Zealand Gothic'

You are waiting for a bus. One drives by, empty. The second is cancelled as the bus arrives. The third is driven by a Lovecraftian being with an infinite number of limbs. It does not know the route.

You glance at listings of vacant houses to rent. The moment you look closer they are occupied. They have always been occupied.

'Clean and green,' the cows low. Rivers run an unearthly viridian. The water is rumoured to grant eternal life. The water is rumoured to kill instantly.

Road cones grow sentient. They whisper secrets about you.

You must sign up for a RealMe account. The captcha asks you to identify shifting pictures of ancient runes. As you click the squares, it comes to you that you are not real. You never were.

The path between the domestic and international terminals is a test of virtue. Sages say that only the pure of heart may enter. Oracles counter that only the pure of heart may leave. The truth is guarded by those souls stranded in the smokers' hut.

'We must build up, not out.' 'We must build up, not out.' Towers stretch into oblivion. Many children have never touched the ground.

Clothing in the capital grows darker by the day. Soon every jacket is its own black hole, sucking in tourists who disembark from gargantuan cruise ships.

The motorways are under construction. They are always under construction. They stretch to unimagined planes of torment and ecstasy. They will allow you to reach those dimensions seven minutes faster.

The country is mentioned in a blockbuster movie. The populace rises up to cheer as one. You do not know what you are cheering for. You do not know that there is a movie. You are in the movie.

Manisha Anjali

Manisha is a Fiji-born writer, artist and researcher who has lived in Suva, Auckland and Melbourne. Her first book, the narrative poem *Naag Mountain*, was published by Giramondo in 2024 and shortlisted for the Judith Wright Calanthe Award at the Queensland Literary Awards. Manisha is the founder of *Neptune*, a research and documentation platform for dreams, visions and hallucinations. She is one half of *Whelk*, an ambient music duo. Manisha is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne.

***Manisha writes*:**

Naag Mountain is a spirit-infested book. I am a descendant of the girmityas, Indian indentured labourers on Australian-owned sugar cane plantations in colonial Fiji, so my ancestral stories are marked by themes of departure, horror and misrepresentation – or are missing completely.

I wanted to write a narrative poem that would tie together the living, the dead and restore agency to girmityas who are portrayed in colonial archives as subhuman. I communed with oral histories and archival records, unearthing souls, dialogues and songs. I found dreams, ghosts and poems were stitched into oceans, trees and flowers.

Dreams were the means through which I navigated the past and that crafted the shape of the manuscript, as I wrote much of it by following instructions I received in my dreams. In *Naag Mountain*, the descendants of girmityas have lost access to their dreams and are receiving them through the surrogacy of their friends across the Tasman, who are spirits of Indian hawkers in Aotearoa.

Geographically, *Naag Mountain* takes place in the three countries I have lived in – Fiji, Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. The Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the company that indentured my ancestors, was also established in these three places.

Extract: 'Naag Mountain'

Paper jackal laughs.

Palms flower to catch the rain. Watercolour visions of green iguanas and wailing crayfish. Black smoke. Pawpaw sky. Gold nose ring. Hawk and mongoose. Cooked mackerel eyes. Johnnie Walker bottles. And some forgotten things:

Coolie falls into the misty flowering jungle, songs of protest hand-stitched to plantation chords with cassava thread, split at the end of the sun line, watery apparitions of white stallions and star blisters, breathing romance and death.

The Naked Saint squints and raises his emigration pass up to the saffron Vanua Levu sun. It is written in a language he does not understand. The document is dated 28 February 1879. In bold lettering it says MAN, followed by Trinidad Emigration Agency. The word Trinidad is crossed out, and F'iji is handwritten in cursive. The name of the ship is *Leonidas*. The first vessel to undertake the three-month journey from Calcutta to Levuka, carrying 498 passengers, smallpox and cholera. The Naked Saint tears the emigration pass in two unequal pieces. He rips the smaller piece in half, puts in some Bihari ganja and rolls. The larger piece he folds into the shape of a jackal. The golden jackal who howls wildly in the blue nights on the fringes of the sleeping Patna village where the saint was born. The document contains imaginal cells with instructions for metamorphosis. The paper jackal comes to being as a spirit. The saint blows out smoke at the lithe palm fronds. Two silvery goshawks fly in figure eights around the man, smoking his emigration pass alone, in a jungle composed of paradise and longing.

***

A photograph of my mother, Anju, wearing a red and white floral cotton dress and holding a black naag, is aging backwards. They become babies writhing together in the disembowelled South Pacific Ocean. My father, Bob Singh, took this photograph on a plastic disposable camera. When the film was developed, the saltwater exposed the discrepancies between our dreams and our acts. This is how I became unborn.

After the overthrow of democracy. Anju does not remember the dreams we had when we shared her body. But she remembers this:

When you were born, I saw Shayṭān. His face hung above the hospital bed. He had long black hair and a fraying beard. Shayṭān was singing the way we did in the old rivers of our childhoods, where amma washed our floral cotton dresses, and we sank our faces in the bloodline of the stream. Shayṭān flew into my heart. And the Colonial War Memorial Hospital bedsheets were soaked in our blood. And the two moons in the window turned red.

Paper jackal fly, into half-moon watering holes, drunk on visions of blueness, howling songs of departure.

My father never speaks about being held at gunpoint in the *Fiji Sun* newsroom by the military. Our teeth and tongues were dreamed in the coolie lines one hundred years earlier. I wear the aftermath of violence in my curls, and later, in my school shoes, and later, as an adult, I continue to wear my school shoes as though I never left the institution.

Paper jackal dream of fish bone in the throat.

Paper jackal dream of girl with the head of mongoose.

Tusiata Avia

Tusiata Avia MNZM is an award-winning poet, performer and writer of Samoan descent, born in Christchurch. *The Savage Coloniser Book* (2020) was the first collection by a Pacific woman to win the poetry prize at New Zealand's national book awards. Both that book and Tusiata's 2004 collection *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt* have been adapted for the theatre and performed around the world. This poem, 'Tualima', is taken from *Big Fat Brown Bitch* (2023).

Tusiata writes:

Tatau/tattoo is one of the parts of Samoan culture that survived colonisation. Today, during the current resurgence of Samoan tatau, many of us now wear the marks, whether it be in the traditional form of malu and pe'a (on the lower body, done with traditional instruments) or tualima on the hand or some other configuration done with modern instruments.

Today more Samoans are born outside the country than in, and many of us are of mixed heritage. Tatau has become a marker of our cultural identity, particularly for those of us from the diaspora. We find ways to connect with our whakapapa/gafa/genealogy even if we have not been brought up with our language and cultural knowledges. Sometimes we must rely on the DNA in our bones, the ancestors who have gone before us and our intuition.

Tualima

(*for Kolotina*)

My niece has decided to get the tualima// on both her hands/

Tua/ back/
Lima/ hands/
Tatau/ tattoo/

She is searching for the whakapapa/
of our symbols/
the symbols that will help her tell our story/
tell the story she is searching for/

Can you help me, Aunty?

She reminds me we have a tapa/
her great-grandmother made/
it's up in our rafters/
I have forgotten this/

Can you help me, Aunty?

I remember the tapa/
I wonder what it might say/
and how we might read it/

Above the head of my bed is a sketch of my grandmother/
the great-grandmother of my niece/
sketched by my mother/
sixty years ago// in Sāmoa/

My grandmother is weaving a fala/
it could be an ie toga/
I can't tell which/

I think about the tapa in the rafters/
and wait for my niece to come/
she wants to find her whakapapa there/

I wonder what my grandmother intended sixty years ago/
when she painted those patterns on the tapa/
perhaps they were just what looked good to her at the time/

Can you help me, Aunty, please?
(My niece wishes for so much.)

We look at my tatau books and ring the museum/
where our symbols are guarded by pālagis//
I wonder if the whakapapa of our symbols are locked away in there too/

We have to make an appointment to see them/
so we hope for the best/
we hope that whoever collected those symbols/

whatever German anthropologist (in eighteen hundred and something/
when Samoa belonged to him and his Kaiser)
asked someone who knew the stories/
and decided to tell the anthropologist the truth//

Aunty, who's Margaret Mead?

I smile and tell her that sometimes our ancestors
told those anthropologists all kinds of crazy stories
and laughed behind their backs.

What a egg, ay, Aunty?
Yeah, babe, what a egg.

<>

The whakapapa of a symbol

<> malu
< > at the back of a knee
< > on the back of a hand
<> a net
<> a portal
< > a protection

<>

How do we trace the whakapapa of our symbols < > when our grandmother is dead < > and our father is dead < > and our great uncles and aunties are dead < >

We go to the museum

<>

When I got my tualima

I spoke to my father// dead a year
I put what he told me on paper and passed it to the first female tufuga//
since Taemā and Tilafaigā.


The frigate bird who flies across the seas


to where my father lives now
beyond the horizon


the footprint of the tern who treks
back and forth taking messages
to the heavens


the portal between
child and parent


protected

This is the story I have told on the back of my hand.

<>

My niece and I are lost travellers

We have to find our way,
we have to search for our symbols

and pray to the marrow in our bones
for our stories,

for our whakapapa.
This is what I tell my niece.

Joanna Cho

Joanna Cho is the author of the 2022 collection *People Person*, a poetry finalist at the 2023 Ockham NZ Book Awards. She was the 2022 University Book Shop Emerging Writer in Residence in Dunedin, living in the Robert Lord Writers Cottage, and recently took part in the Fresh Off the Page programme for Asian playwrights. A graduate of the University of Auckland and Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, she lives in Ōtaki on the Kapiti Coast.

Jo writes:

This is one of the last poems I wrote for the book. I was working at Playmarket at the time, and there were construction workers next door; they worked noisily and really did listen to Steps one day. The summer before I'd spent in Waitetoko (on Lake Taupo), and learnt to fish. I became obsessed with fishing and fishing imagery.

I wrote it as a sestina but then broke the form. I love using repetitive, strict poetry forms and then crumbling them a bit. The root of the poem is about not fitting in. I was thinking about family and my Korean heritage. And I was thinking about the use of the word 'they' as 'other' and how we slide between 'they' and 'us'. And the carefree weightlessness that people in a solid community seem to have, at least from the outside.

They

are working on the brick apartment on the other side
of the office, floating above the street—
orange fish in an aquarium. We
lock eyes, the pierce of a hook. The water
wavers, my heart gasps—a pulled, lipless mouth—and I look away
and continue with administrative tasks, but the scaffolders are vivid
as a radiant heater. On sunny days
the window looks wobbly, like clear jelly I could swim through

and they

are there late into every afternoon. Their laughter filters through
silt, neon bodies glinting from the passing of steel tubes
and galvanised clips, from one side
of the clock to the other, building something. They sparkle
like a thousand dislodged scales and I wonder if we
could coordinate our movements, synchronise enough.
My daydreams bait me and catch me
and I dream of belonging in that school, in that part of the water

and they

are wearing bone hats and heavy boots but are weightless.
My colleagues and I sigh at the noise. Our annoyance ripples through
the glass but they don't notice or don't care, and
sometimes on my side of the glass it is perpetual summer.
Fish overheat, rise—a hard smear of silver. We
exist in the space of a fork pressed down into a baked day

and they

are muffled by repetition, but on rainy days
we notice their absence, the gap between two buildings now still water,
and we
are reminded of the way fish tails flicker only to disappear
through clouds, and I thought my side
of the glass was home, but sometimes I am a heavy piece of driftwood,
barely floating, and sometimes I am a shoe, caught in seaweed.
Don't get me wrong, sometimes I am a large rock . . .
Sometimes I am a set of perfect waves, rolling in at the pace
of fabric by the metre

and they,

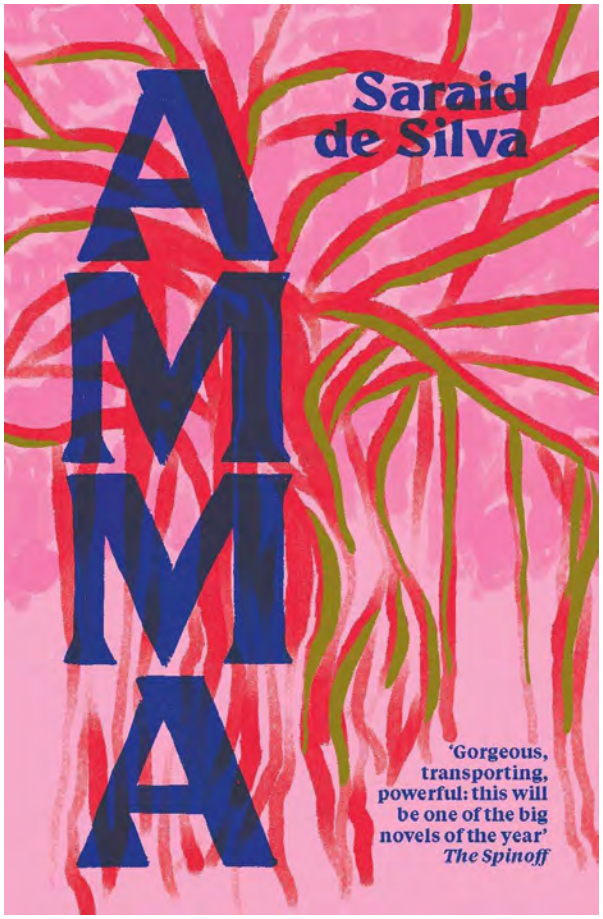
they are long, flat mango seeds, swimming …

Today I arrived and saw them singing and dancing to Steps,
packing down after days, months, of building something,
and I suddenly felt a desperate need to be beside
familial gills, taking oxygen in the water
of our shared histories, but by the time I had shut down my computer
they were gone

but still I rushed to the window and threw
my body against the glass, smashing repeatedly with all my strength,
hoping the heat from the long days
would have decreased the glass's viscosity, so that the waters
could join, and what I mean is, sometimes I think about how we
will end up on our sides

in a sink, belly rising and falling.
How a knife pops the skin, quick as unpicking thread,
and how we only caught one side
of the reflection. When we're gutted, innards yanked out and
tossed to the dogs, you might not know that I spent a lot of my days
wishing I had learnt to swim in your part of the water.

Saraid de Silva



Saraid de Silva is a Sri Lankan Pākehā writer and arts creative based in Auckland. She was the co-creator and co-host of three seasons of Radio New Zealand's podcast and video series *Conversations with My Immigrant Parents*. Her debut novel, *Amma*, a story of three generations of women in one family, won the Crystal Arts Trust Prize at the University of Auckland and was published in 2024 in Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia and the UK. It became a bestseller in Aotearoa within the first year of its release.

Saraid writes:

Amma is a book about the lives of three women over many years and across many different countries. It is a book written in an attempt to better understand the kind of lives my people might have lived before I knew them.

Amma moves from London in 2018 to Singapore in the 1950s all the way to Invercargill, at the bottom of Aotearoa, in the 1970s and 80s. It is full of grief, rage and revenge. When I started writing fiction I was holding scraps of some imagined reality. I hoped I could use them to create a story I could feel at home in. I quickly found out that what I love about writing fiction is how far from reality it allows me to go.

Excerpt from **Amma**

Sithara

1984. Invercargill

Maria Louisa Sithara Fernando sits on the floor of her bedroom getting ready for school. It is seven on a frozen morning in July. Her room is lit by one bulb on a stand with no lampshade. Her hair, long enough to kiss her waist, is dead.

Back home in Colombo, her hair was alive. It floated outwards as though underwater when she was sad, unfurling soft around her face. Sometimes it said the things that she could not. Her hair reached out to her amma when they lay down after lunch, too full and too hot to do anything other than bask like lizards on the wooden seat they called a couch and watch the ceiling fan twist slowly above them. Things have changed since she got here. Her family, herself. Both have shrunk. And when Appa died, her hair gave up.

The sun has not yet risen. The edges of the sky are fading from black into ghostly blue. If she loses concentration when leaving the house on mornings like this, her school shoes will slip on the black ice like she has two little enemies on her feet, and she will have to windmill her arms to stay upright. That moment between success and failure is an eternity.

Sithara is all triangles. She has a skinny neck and a pointed, almost hooked chin. Long eyelashes interrupt the severity of her face, giving her a sweetness. She avoids her reflection in the mirror nowadays, scared that the longer she looks, the more likely it is she will see something two-dimensional, something empty.

A section on the other side of the road is home only to a few sheep fenced in with wire. They are missing this morning. She wonders if it is too cold even for sheep. Tiny scraps of plastic are stitched around the wire, bouncing in the wind.

She brushes and ties her hair like she always does for school, with a strong middle parting, weaving it into a plait. It shrugs itself into the elastic and hangs heavy between her shoulders, plain and unfeeling.

Invercargill is a small town that thinks it is a city, at the bottom of a country full of white people who think they live in England. Everyone on television and radio here speaks like the Queen. Sithara hasn't been anywhere else in New Zealand yet. She hopes it isn't all like this.

The three of them – Sithara, her amma Josephina and her brother Suri – live in a narrow red house in Clifton. They came six years ago with her appa. They were shocked into silence by their new home. The blood-red wood, the sharp skinny window frames, the way it leered at them.

Amma wore a jacket and a coat over a bright yellow sari. She stuck out on the dull street like a sunflower. They had no real winter clothes. Amma stuffed a pink sarong under a sun hat for warmth; it drooped out from the rim like big wilted petals. She let her suitcase fall to the footpath, pushed both hands deep into her sleeves and scowled.

Appa just looked at the empty roads, checked left and right as though he had missed something. His hair was like Sithara's used to be, an extension of his thoughts, breathing. He kept it long at the top, brushed back from his face in an elegant side parting. When he was happy his curls rustled together like leaves.

Appa loved to listen to Sithara recounting her dreams, and to Suri reading poems aloud. He laughed at himself so quickly. He was the only one who could turn Amma's moods around. It was like he freed her from herself. He was by far the friendliest of the lot of them, but because he was dark with a thick accent he made the white people wary.

Sithara and Suri stood still, as paralysed as their parents, waiting for a cue. Suri's chubby fingers held Sithara's tight. She had to make being here okay. She tried to think of something to make Suri smile but lost the words in surprise when she opened her mouth and saw her breath materialise in front of her. She reached out a hand, trying to touch the ghost of her thoughts.
Where are all the people? Appa said softly, as the strangeness of the place poured over them.

Sithara yells for Suri to get out of the bathroom. She rests her forehead on the plasticky beige surface of the door, annoyed but unsurprised to be kept waiting. Since Appa died, Suri' s attention span has deteriorated. Now he will often start doing one thing and then stop halfway. In these moments he looks as though he is being pulled under, deep into a memory. One of Appa's lungis draped over the stair rail will turn Suri into a statue.

Sithara knocks again, harder. Still no response. She goes to her bedroom and returns with a five-cent coin, pushing it into the fake silver lock and turning until it pops open.

Suri is sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, resting his chin in his hands and staring at the wall. He doesn't flinch when she enters. His legs are longer than hers now, but his eyes behind large wire-rimmed spectacles are still gentle. She sits on the floor in front of him and leans her back against the wall.

What's wrong? she asks. She tries to sound casual. The silence between them stretches.

Ethan called me a cockroach, so I punched him, Suri says.

Mohamed Hassan

Mohamed Hassan is a poet and journalist born in Cairo and raised in New Zealand. His collection *National Anthem* was a poetry finalist at the 2021 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. His essay collection *How to be a Bad Muslim* (2022) maps the personal and public experience of being Muslim in the 21st Century through essays on identity, Islamophobia, surveillance, migration and language. He hosts the podcast The Big Picture and is the creator of *Miles From Nowhere*, a 2024 TV comedy about love, music and mass surveillance from SKY Originals and Red Arrow Studios International.

When they tell you to go back to where you came from

Tell them
you are an unrequited pilgrim
two parallel lives that never touch
a whisper or a window
to what your country could be
if only it opened its arms
and took you whole

Tell them about the moon
how she eats at your skin
watches you pray and fast and cry
while the world sleeps
how she gives birth to herself and dies
and you wish upon her children

How you wander her night
plant cardamom in your friends' eyes
cumin in their teeth
zaatar on their brow
lick the rest off your fingertips
it tastes of visa-on-entry
heaven with no random checks

Round the iftar table everyone speaks
of politics and God
trans rights and colonialism
we forget we didn't speak the empire's tongue
once

When they ask you why you speak so well
for an immigrant:

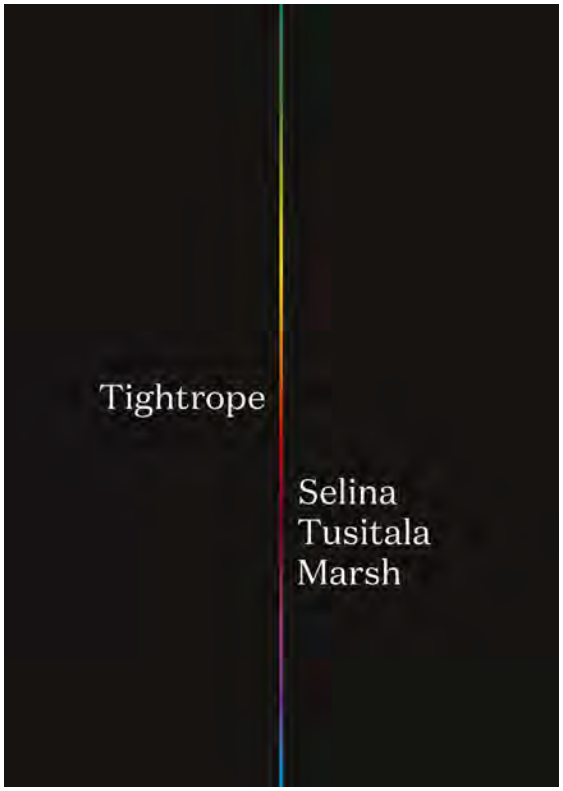
Tell them about your grandmother's laugh
how you never quite knew whether she was story or myth
the upper lip in your conviction
or a song ringing in your bones
drifting through the kitchen window
with the fried shrimp and newspaper voodoo dolls

Tell them how you have always been a voodoo doll
your feet licking the flames
the stove top eye a television screen
a news bulletin
an open casket
the needle pushing and pulling through your skin
every puncture a question played by an accusation
every bullet hole an answer you have to fill

with silence
with religion
with Xanax and daytime television

And when the muazzen calls you to pray on the radio
you will wrap your limbs in cotton sheets
walk through the crowd with your hands in your mouth
waiting for the gun.

Selina Tusitala Marsh



Poet, author and scholar Ahorangi / Professor Selina Tusitala Marsh ONZM, FRSNZ was born in Auckland, of Samoan, Tuvalan, British and French ancestry. A former Poet Laureate of New Zealand, Selina was awarded the 2024 Katherine Mansfield Menton Fellowship: she is the first Pasifika writer to receive this honour. She will spend the last three months of 2025 in France, writing a book on the first 20 Pacific women poets (1964–2024), completing her fourth graphic memoir, *Mophead and The Mutt: Letting Go*, and a fourth poetry collection.

Selina writes:

In Tuvalu, the island where my grandfather was born, the constant negotiation between tradition and survival, between staying and retreating, shaped every image in this poem. The woman carries forward ancient pandanus weaving techniques, but she's also innovating with what's available – those discarded Tip Top bread bags become something new and necessary.

For me, the transformation of these bags mirrors the larger question of how one carries a disappearing homeland. The colours I chose – road-cone orange, sunflower yellow, Frigidaire white – are all imported colours, colonial colours, contrasting with the reality that there 'are no sunflowers in Tuvalu'.

What we carry forward changes, adapts. The rust, the erosion, the borrow pits – these are also part of what we must carry now, along with the traditional practices. When Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa forces that retreat to higher ground, the carrying becomes both metaphorical and desperately physical.

I wrote this while witnessing how Tuvaluans carry their homeland in their practices, even as the sea carries away the land itself. The weaving of the hats – both traditional and transformed – becomes an act of resilience, a way of carrying culture forward even as the ground beneath shifts and disappear.

Bread Bags

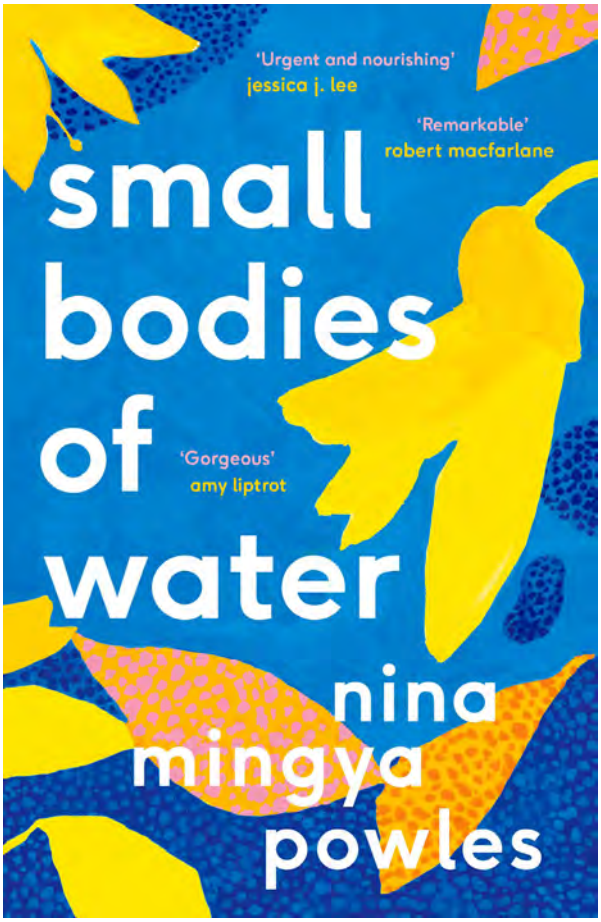
The pole house
shades the woman
straightening furled
strands of pandanus
pulling knuckle-tight
plaiting into submission
for the kula
– a chief, like the tide, will rise.

Yesterday she used
the same technique
to weave hats from cut and stripped
Tip Top bread bags
waterproof panamas, boaters, bowlers, fedoras
in road-cone orange
sunflower yellow, Frigidaire white.

There are no sunflowers in Tuvalu
but plenty of road cones
pimple Funafuti's eroded coral-packed paths
plenty of Frigidaires
rust off their hinges
in borrow pits.

Tomorrow she will weave more hats.
Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa
fusses at floorboards
whacking the mat
she shuffles back
to higher ground.

Nina Mingya Powles



Nina Mingya Powles is a writer and poet from Aotearoa New Zealand, currently based in the UK. She is the author of several books of poetry and essays, including *Slipstitch* (2024), *Magnolia* 木蘭 (2020) – a poetry finalist at the Ockham NZ Book Awards – and *Small Bodies of Water* (2021), the winner of the inaugural Nan Shepherd Prize. She writes a monthly Substack on food and memory titled 'Crispy Noodles'. Her next poetry collection, In the *Hollow of the Wave*, will be published by Auckland University Press in 2025.

Nina writes:

Memories of water carry me everywhere I go. My collection of essays, *Small Bodies of Water*, began with this fragmentary piece of writing about swimming, girlhood, language and the body. I soon realised that bodies of water, islands and coastlines shape much of my work, from Aotearoa New Zealand where I was born to the island of Borneo, where my mother was born. I played with the personal essay form in this work, making it slippery and flexible enough for me to write about water and memory in strange and imaginative ways, sometimes mirroring the drifting, fragmentary feeling of growing up with mixed heritage.

Essay excerpt: 'A Girl Swimming Is a Body of Water'

THE SWIMMING POOL is on the edge of a hill overlooking the valley where the town begins. From up here I can almost see Mount Kinabalu's dark rainforests. I know the names of the things that live among the trees and streams from flicking through Gong Gong's natural history books: the Bornean sucker fish, the Kinabalu serpent eagle, the enormous Rafflesia flower, the Atlas moth with white eyes on its wings.

My cousin Sara and I are ten. We were born just a month apart but she already knows how to dive head first into the deep end and I don't. I slowly lower myself down the cold metal ladder and swim out after her, kicking up a spray of white waves behind me, until my toes dip down and there is nothing there to catch me. I reach for the edge, gasping. I am happier where there's something solid to hold on to, where I can see our splashes making spiral patterns on the hot concrete. From here, I use my legs to push myself down. I hover in a safe corner of the deep end, waiting to see how long I can hold my breath. Looking up through my goggles I see rainforest clouds, a watery rainbow. I can see the undersides of frangipani petals floating on the surface, their gold-edged shadows moving towards me. I straighten my legs and point my toes and launch myself towards the sun.

Gong Gong used to drive us to the Sabah Golf Club whenever we came to visit. He would go off for his morning round while Sara and I went straight to the pool, our mums lagging behind us. Po Po stayed home, as usual. Over many years of visiting my grandparents in Malaysia, I can never remember Po Po coming with us to the pool.

~

I am white and Malaysian Chinese, though not everyone can tell this straight away. My mother was born in Malaysia and moved to Aotearoa New Zealand when she was seventeen. I was born in Wellington. We moved to New York when I was three for my parents' work, moved back to Wellington four years later, then packed up again four years after that and relocated to Shanghai. I was fifteen when we left Shanghai to move back home again, although by then, home was a slippery word.

Where is the place your body is anchored? Which body of water is yours? Is it that I've anchored myself in too many places at once, or nowhere at all? The answer lies somewhere between. Over time, springing up from the in-between space, new islands form.

~

My first body of water was the swimming pool. Underwater, I was like one of Gong Gong's little silver fish with silver eyes. Like one of those he catalogued and preserved in gold liquid in jars on the shelf in the room where I slept, trapped there glimmering forever. It was here that I first taught myself how to do an underwater somersault, first swam in deep water, first learned how to point my toes, hold my legs together and kick out in a way that made me feel powerful. Here, we spent hours pretending to be mermaids. But I thought of myself less as a mermaid and more like some kind of ungraceful water creature, since I didn't have very long hair and wasn't such a good swimmer. Perhaps half orca, half girl.

~

There were pink crabs scuttling along the bottom of the outdoor pool next to my international school in the outskirts of Shanghai. They shone through the chlorine like bright, fleshy gems. My friends and I were shocked to see the creatures here, right under our feet, in this colourless stretch of land where there were no birds and no insects but mosquitoes. The sea was not far away from us then, a dark mass just beyond the golf course and a concrete sea wall. It was always there but its presence felt remote, somehow not real, somehow not really full of living things. I felt an urge to scoop up the crabs in my hands and carry them back over the wall that separated us from the biggest body of water I had ever known, the Yangtze River Delta, and beyond that, the East China Sea.

In the concrete city of Shanghai, the over-chlorinated pool became our sanctuary. It sparkled aquamarine against a skyline of dust. Within my close group of friends, we had grown up all over: Singapore, Beijing, Michigan, Wellington. Shann, the coolest and most stylish of us all with her blue-rimmed glasses; Jessie, a blonde cross-country runner and mathematical genius; and Bex, a guitarist who read Russian novels and Kurt Vonnegut in her spare time, who was mixed like me. All of us had moved around the world every few years, and all of us could feel that our time together was running out. We were thirteen, almost fourteen, but underwater we pretended we were something other than human. Or maybe we weren't pretending at all.

Underwater everything was different, bathed in holy silence and blue echoes. The slanted windows cast wavering lines of liquid light beneath the surface, across our bodies. We felt the way our limbs moved, lithe and strong and brand new. We pushed off from the edge into the blue again and again, diving deeper and deeper each time.

~

On a beach on the Kāpiti Coast of Aotearoa, my dad and I wade out across the sand to where shallow waves lap against our calves. Buckets in hand, we feel with our toes for pipi shells poking through the sand. At the place where the Waikanae Estuary widens and empties into the sea, I stand at the edge of the low sand bank and push hard with the balls of my feet. Cracks form in the sand like an ice sheet breaking apart. At the slightest touch of my foot, small sand cliffs crumble beneath me into the shallow estuary. The slow current shifts to make room for the new piece of shore I've created. I learn that with the lightest pressure I am capable of causing a small rupture, a fault.

When we moved back to Aotearoa I taught myself not to be afraid of open water. There is no sand here at the edge of Wellington Harbour, on the beach by my parents' house, only pebbles and driftwood and shells. Everything scrapes against me, leaves a mark on my skin: rocks, wind, salt. The cold hurts at first but we push ourselves head first into the waves and come up screaming, laughing. I push away all thoughts of jellyfish and stingrays, the ones the orca sometimes come to hunt. The shore in sight, I float on my back and let the ocean hold me in its arms. Big invisible currents surge up from beneath, rocking me closer. I dip my head backwards and there is Mākaro Island hanging upside down in my vision, perfectly symmetrical and green, as if it's only just risen out of the water.

To swim in Wellington Harbour is to swim in the deep seam between two tilted pieces of

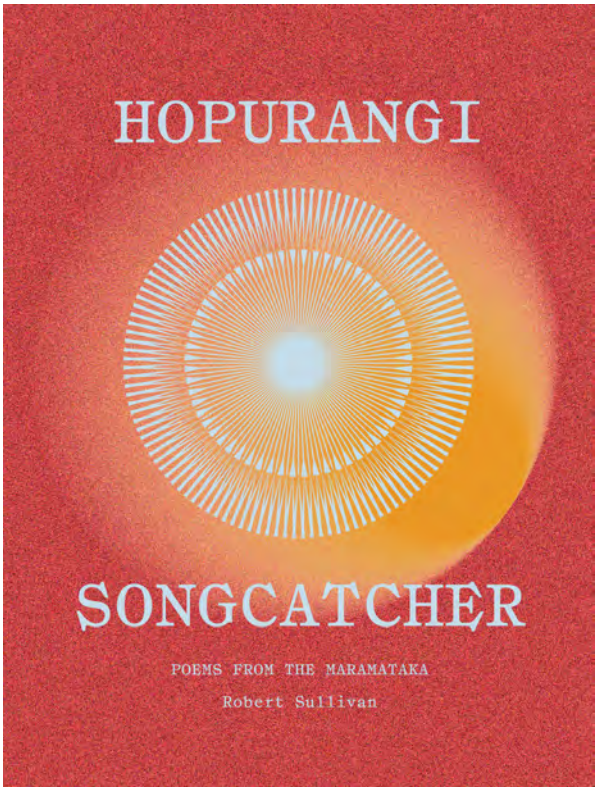
land that have been pulled apart over time. Repeated movements along the Wellington Fault have caused cliff formations to rise up above the harbour's western shore. Little islets Mākaro, Matiu and Mokopuna, which punctuate the narrow neck of the harbour, are actually the tips of a submerged ridge that runs parallel to the taniwha-shaped Miramar Peninsula.

Near Oriental Bay, the harbour carries debris from a summer storm just passed: shattered driftwood, seaweed blooms, plastic milk bottle caps, the occasional earlobe jellyfish. The further out I swim, there is a layer of clear, molten blue. It's January, the height of summer, and I've flown home from Shanghai, where I've been living for a year, studying Mandarin at university. My friend Kerry and I dive above and below the rolling waves. At this moment in our lives neither of us is sure where home is exactly, but underwater, the question doesn't seem to matter. Emerging from nowhere a black shape draws close to my body and I lurch, reaching for Kerry, but then I see the outline of wings. The black shag is mid-dive, eyes open, wings outstretched and soaring down into the deep. Kawau pū, the native black shag. They perch on rocky beaches all over the Wellington coastline holding their wings open to dry in the wind and sun. Another wave rises over us and we turn our bodies towards it, opening.

~

Home is not a place but a collection of things that have fallen or been left behind: dried agapanthus pods, the exoskeletons of cicadas (tiny ghosts still clinging to the trees), the discarded shells of quail eggs on Po Po's plate, cherry pips in the grass, the drowned chrysanthemum bud in the bottom of the teapot. Some things are harder to hold in my arms: the smell of salt and sunscreen, mint-green blooms of lichen on rock, wind-bent pōhutukawa trees above valleys of driftwood.

Robert Sullivan



Robert Sullivan (Ngāpuhi, Kāi Tahu) is a renowned poet, writer and editor, the author of nine books of poetry as well as a graphic novel and an award-winning book of Māori legends for children. He co-edited, with Albert Wendt and Reina Whaitiri, the anthologies of Polynesian poetry in English, *Whetu Moana* (2002) and *Mauri Ola* (2010), and an anthology of Māori poetry with Reina Whaitiri, *Puna Wai Kōrero* (2014). He is also the editor, with Janet Newman, of *Koe: An Aotearoa Ecopoetry Anthology* (2024). His most recent collection is *Hopurangi / Songcatcher*, inspired by the Māori lunar calendar.

Robert writes:

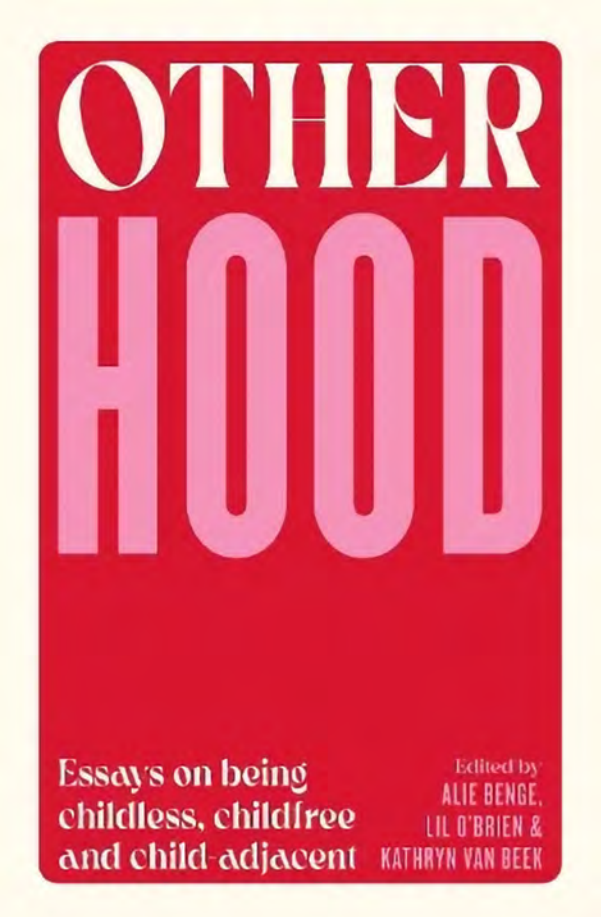
In *Hopurangi / Songcatcher*, I draw inspiration from the cycles of the moon as expressed by our tūpuna [ancestors] through the named days of the lunar calendar. These days of the maramataka [lunar calendar] are each characterised by different energies, and are continually used to choose times for fishing, harvesting, planting and other forms of labour including, in my case, writing. These energies are of course cosmic and, in my mind, connect with other forms of cosmic writing. The spiral images – particularly of Jill Purce and William Blake – inform my work in that they are visual and poetical representations of mauri or life force. Such energy is required to counter the effects of colonialism, and to promote harmony in the multiple relationships we have with people and creatures every day.

Tangaroa Whariki Kiokio: 'Another grey day'

((((((((((((((High Energy))))))))))))))

Another grey day, but when you think about
our colonial history, they're all Grey days
since his twice governorship and single
premiership bequeathed us a matrix
of suction cups (aroha mai, Keanu):
fencible cottages, block houses
and misrepresentation of purakau,
whakatauki including our sexualities
not only here but along every arm
of the islands described as wheke
by our tūpuna as if it was a wonderful
breathing communicating ocean
creature that stretched warm arms
over the equator and sucked
southern icebergs like going
to the fridge for a cold one
or was killing me softly
on the pinkest corals
fanned by colourful fins
but the English translation
messages us to die like sharks
and not to die like squid.
How do sharks die?
Why? Tell me why, tell me.

Paula Morris



Paula Morris MNZM (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Manuhiri, Ngāti Whātua) is an award-winning novelist, short story writer and essayist. Director of the Master of Creative Writing at the University of Auckland, she is the founder of the Academy of New Zealand Literature; Whārerangi, the Māori literature hub; and the online Aotearoa NZ Review of Books. She edited the anthologies *A Clear Dawn: New Asian Voices from Aotearoa NZ* (2021, with Alison Wong) and *Hiwa: Contemporary Māori Short Stories* (2023).

Paula writes:

Creative nonfiction is more challenging for me than fiction: it demands self-interrogation. I wrote this essay for the anthology *Otherhood* about the various childless aunts in my life, and about being a childless aunt myself. It's about the first loves of my childhood, and about loss – of people, relationships, places, memories. 'It's our fate to be forgotten,' I say at the end of the essay, 'or at least to be shuffled further and further back in the pack, because memories can't be inherited. But stories can.'

Essay excerpt **'Auntie'**

In Auckland I was born into a house of adults and a world of aunties. My grandparents lived in a big, draughty villa on the corner of Douglas Street and Ponsonby Road. Across the road was a hat shop, Bhana's fruit shop and Tordoff's dairy, joined in 1964 by the now-famous Ivan's restaurant. This was the year my father, Kiri, returned from his OE with an English wife and daughter – my divorcée mother and my six-year-old sister. The house was large enough for all of them, and also for my father's only sister, Dawn. Apparently, I was an unaffectionate child, resisting hugs and kisses, and I wonder if this was intuitive self-defence: there were five adults and a big sister all trying to get their hands on me.

Dawn's full name was Dawn Rahui Te Kiri, and she was the mātāmua, the oldest child of the oldest child of the Te Kiri line of our hapu. When I was little, Auntie Dawn was in her late 30s, slim and dark and glamorous. Her bedroom was a stage set from a musical, with a curtained dressing table, wrought-iron umbrella stand, and slippery bedspread. Every Saturday morning, she snapped on rubber gloves and mopped the wooden floor. She wore mules with pom-poms around the house and 'flatties' when she drove her Ford Prefect. A giant shower cap with a hose attached was her hairdryer, and she used the hot air blasting from the hose to dry her nail polish as well.

Dawn worked in retail, starting with a job selling gloves at George Court's. By the mid-60s she was working at another shop on Karangahape Road called Lady in Waiting, selling maternity and baby clothes. She'd already lived for a while in Australia, and by the time I was five or six she'd returned there to live in Brisbane and work at the Myer department store. She spent the rest of her life in Australia. She never got married.

I remember small things, like sitting on Auntie Dawn's knee at the Formica dining table, eating a fried egg doused in black pepper. Lynn-Elisabeth, my sister, remembers more. Auntie Dawn was a doyenne of the Auckland Operatic Society and would take my sister to rehearsals on Grafton Road. She got my sister the one child's role in the musical *And So to Bed*, staged at the Town Hall. Our whole family was musicals-mad, singing and dancing around the radiogram or the piano. When I was a toddler, I could say, without hesitation, 'supercalifragilisticexpialidocious'.

The five adults of the house were all desperate for Lynn-Elisabeth to get the part of a royal princess in *The King and I*, so Auntie Dawn coached her audition number, 'Do Re Mi' from *The Sound of Music*. My sister was not a great singer, and she had blonde hair. When my mother tried to dye her hair black, it turned blue. Still, Auntie Dawn took Lynn-Elisabeth to the audition and comforted her when she didn't get the part.

A few years ago, at a tangi at our marae, my cousin Myra heard me singing and beamed at me. 'You sound just like Dawn,' she said. My mother thought there were similarities as well, not only in our singing voices.

'You're selfish,' she said to me on numerous occasions. 'Just like Dawn.'

Sophie van Waardenberg

Sophie van Waardenberg was born in London, England, and grew up in Auckland, New Zealand. Her poetry, essays and reviews have been published throughout Aotearoa and internationally, including in *Cordite, Copper Nickel, The Spinoff, The Aotearoa New Zealand Review of Books* and *Best New Zealand Poems*, and her chapbook-length collection, *does a potato have a heart?*, was included in the Auckland University Press volume, New Poets 5. Her first full-length poetry collection is forthcoming in 2025, also from Auckland University Press.

Sophie writes:

The poem takes its title from the opening gag of an early episode of *The Simpsons*. Why not? When I wrote the poem, I had recently emerged from a relationship of several years, and a friend had prescribed me several frivolous pieces of media to consume — none of which put romantic love front and centre — including the first few seasons of *The Simpsons*. But it turned out love was in everything, even in Homer Simpson's desperation to acquire what was, if I remember correctly, an exquisitely dangerous trampoline for his yard, having seen one advertised in that morning's newspaper.

I was mesmerised by the bright, four-fingered hands of that show's characters, how they reached and grasped and held things deliberately, often violently; how, in doing so, they demonstrated satisfaction. Okay, they were greedy little cartoons with quivering edges, but their needs seemed urgent and clearly defined. They reached for what they wanted; they usually got it.

A partnership involves each person carrying the other. I think, when you are with any kind of companion, you must decide how much of them you can carry. At a certain point, you might need to decide to let them go. It is a shock to be lifted up and carried — a shock, too, to be let go.

Free Trampoline

If I could, I'd praise the world—
how this, how that, how the darling other—

but all I do is sit down, hang on,
come home. It has to be enough.

On the walk from the station
all the sidewalk dogs were lying flat.

Slough off the old love, they said
and I said Don't tell me that.

I'm not done with it. I used to think
my own joy was the best good stuff

but now I drink from other people's
and you know what, it fills me up alright.

Yum, goodbye. Yeah, when I'm so tired,
I do watch television. I see the cartoon hands

moving fast like real hands, the real hands
moving slowly, as sinister as love.

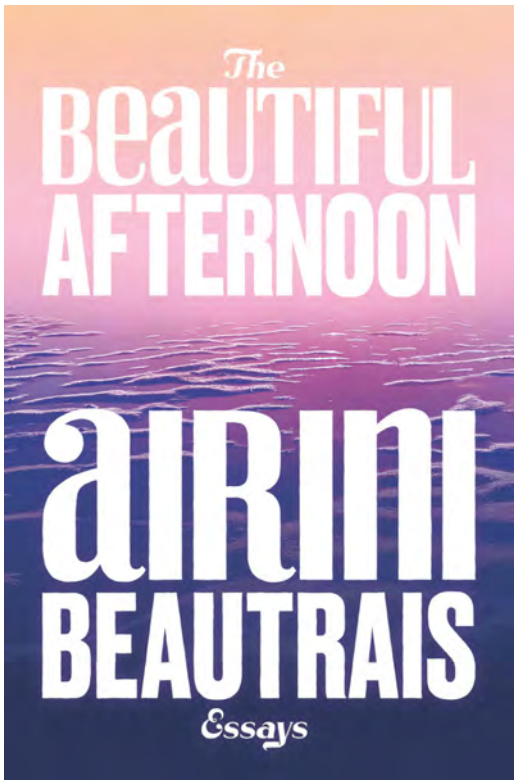
If someone grabbed me
like those hands in the television

grab what they want so bad
I'd get a shock, I wouldn't go along with it.

Some people don't they put their hands
around the world just like that

and it's all done? But other people let go
and leave the question open.

Airini Beautrais



Airini Beautrais lives in Whanganui. She writes poetry, fiction and nonfiction. Her story collection *Bug Week* won the 2021 Jann Medlicott Acorn Foundation prize for fiction at the Ockham New Zealand Book Awards, and in 2024 Airini was awarded the Janet Frame Literary Trust Prize. Her most recent work is the essay collection *The Beautiful Afternoon* (2024). 'Beautrais has an original take on every topic she tackles,' Anne Kennedy wrote in the Aotearoa NZ Review of Books. 'She is difficult, imaginative, daring.'

Airini writes:

In this essay I wanted to explore the tension between what is revealed and what is withheld. I also wanted to address the difficulties I feel in being alone. I am quite extroverted and need a lot of human contact to stay mentally healthy.

The essay deals with a time several years ago when I was recently separated, going through the Family Court and adjusting to life as a single co-parent of young children. I thought it would be empowering to go on a road trip alone but instead I found it very confronting, particularly camping in areas where there were families.

The title is deliberately ironic. The idea of a 'beautiful afternoon' is the idea of a fantasy that doesn't correspond to reality. There is an interlude that felt 'beautiful' because it was pleasurable. Once it was over, I realised that particular chapter of my life was finished, and I could never go back to it. It's interesting to me how conclusively our subconscious can come forward and say, I am done.

Essay: 'The Beautiful Afternoon'

Beneath our feet the seafloor is hairy. We swim through the fur of seaweed, step out onto rocks, place foot after foot in the beautiful afternoon. We are emerging from the water like life from the primordial soup. The sea has a damp organic smell. We come out of the brine, where sailing boats tack, where swimmers push away from land. We arrive on land again.

Sun warms the brown necks of beer bottles. I lend you my towel to dry yourself. Then we sit on it. It doesn't matter if the coloured diamonds on the towel are the wrong colours. It doesn't matter that my bikini is patterned with flamingos,or your shirt with words. It doesn't matter if we are clothed or unclothed. We are in our bodies, beside each other. It doesn't matter how many times we have seen each other's bodies before, or what our bodies have been to each other, or how. We have made this time. We sit on my towel, and there are harakeke bushes, there are pōhutukawa trees, there is grass, sharp and green, and sand. There are other people in and out of the water, but only you and me in the beautiful afternoon.

'What is that bug?' you say, picking a small black creature off my leg, but I know the bug is not important, you just want to touch me. I want to touch you, too. We hold each other, and kiss each other, as we have before, as if we never have before. Both our mouths taste of beer, and of the sea: salt, minerals, aquatic matter. The sun is on the water. I don't notice if anyone sees us holding each other.

We walk along the beach. We talk about human bodies: not so much our own bodies, but bodies in general. You are easy to talk to, although there are. some subjects we have never broached. The beach is full of people, their bodies having been let out for a romp, for a few hours. So many bare bellies and limbs, all shapes and sizes, all ages. In the restaurant beside the beach people are eating and drinking. Some of this is pleasure, some of this is homeostasis.

Back at the beach house, we have sex. The sheets get sweaty, sprinkled with sand. While we are having sex, we both say things we would never say in other circumstances. We say things that would make me laugh if l was not aroused. Then we lie in the warm air of the beautiful afternoon, in the beach-house bed where so many transient people have slept and wanked and fucked. Our conversation is now mundane. We are talking about the plot of *Star Wars* when you lean over mid-sentence, and we have sex again.

The beautiful afternoon is passing. The twilight is falling. The twilight here is also beautiful: I feel as if I could live in it. Not with you, but with the streets, the warm air, the subtropical gardens. I know I need to leave. Even if I could stay, I know I can't deal with a whole night of this, and breakfast. It's too much. You make me a cup of tea, then we get in the shower. All you have is some kind of three-in-one body wash, which you smear over me. 'You're going to smell like a dude,' you tell me, and I reply, 'There's probably worse things I could smell like.' The water runs over my head, through my hair, the bubbles of surfactant travel to my feet and swirl down the plughole. You run your hands down the length of my body, from my head to my toes, over and over. My body loves this: the pressure on my skin, the repetition. In this moment, I feel like a statue of a goddess, who people might visit from time to time, leaving flowers or food at her feet. I feel like a statue that gives people things. You stand

up and we kiss each other again. Our bodies would go another round, but I need to get on the road. We turn off the water and step out into the generic white towels.

I am a few blocks away when my phone rings on the passenger seat, your name on the screen. Are you going to ask me to stay? Would I? Are we going to talk about the things we never talk about? No – I have left my towel and bikini on the washing line. When I get back I see you standing in the driveway, under the pōhutukawa trees, holding everything neatly folded. I race the sunset, drive to a basic campground in a park where my family used to go for extended-family picnics. I get there just as the pink goes from the sky and the gates are being locked for the night. I have a new tent unopened in its bag in the back of my car. In the last mid-grey of evening, I figure out how to put up the tent. Then it is completely dark. I make a cheese-and-tomato sandwich in the darkness, using the car boot as a table. It is a disgusting sandwich, but I am so hungry I just eat it, with a cup of cold water. Then I unroll my bedroll and sleeping bag and go to bed. Kids are still up, playing spotlight around the campground, and some of them hide between my tent and my car. I don't care, I am so tired. I am so tired I don't even feel the sharp pain in my heart I normally feel when I hear the sound of other children playing, and my own children are far away.

In the small hours I am woken by a voice calling 'Mama! Mama!' It goes on for a bit, then dies away. Then I am woken again by a very pronounced 'Quack!' as a duck walks by. I brush my teeth in the communal bathroom sinks, alongside mothers brushing their children's teeth. I feel wrong and out of place. What am I doing here, a woman on her own, without her children? Why would a woman alone be camping here?

At your beach house, you will be eating breakfast. I am not particularly thinking about you this morning. And, I imagine, vice versa. I go for a walk along the beach, through nikau palms and over sand, feeling like I am in some faraway jungle. I am a secondary character in the story of your life, and when I exit stage left I no longer exist. I am not angry at you now. We had a beautiful afternoon. I am angry at you weeks, or months, or years later, for a raft of reasons. But it is not really anger at you, it is anger at myself. Or anger at structures. And then that too passes and there is nothing left of it. Like a table where food and drink is served and spilled and made a mess of; then the plates and glasses and cutlery are all cleared away and the table is wiped clean.

I pack up my tent and my car. 'You're off, are you?' says one of the campground dads. We have a friendly conversation. The campground is full of mums and dads, throwing frisbees, hanging wet togs on tent ropes. They have remembered the gas stoves and the picnic blankets. They are all good at being families. Flame trees arch over the road out. I stop at Orewa for a coffee, in an Italian cafe full of elderly people. There is a man at a table with four women. The ratios get like that, as people age. Are they a group of platonic friends or have they decided that as they are retired and have money, they will abandon societal norms? Do the women share the man? They all look happy, talking animatedly. How do we get old? How do we do it?

***

I am in Kawhia, spending a second night in my new tent. I have come here because I have never been here, and I have discovered that the main reason people come here is fishing. The village is a mix of fishing baches, run-down houses, overgrown sections, a couple of campgrounds. I am not here to fish, and my presence again feels somehow inappropriate, like turning up at an event in the wrong kind of clothing. A toddler is fussing in the tent

next door. His parents and grandparents are with him: he is a first baby, he is reassured from all sides. On the other side of me is lawn, then an insignificant fence between the campground and the neighbouring property. The campground's neighbours have a loud family fight, with lots of accusations and swearing, then a visitor drops by and the woman has a jovial, friendly conversation with him, as if nothing has happened. Maybe families just get into the habit of yelling and swearing when they are upset, and sometimes it's meaningless. And sometimes it's not.

It is kind of nice lying here in my tent, with the door open and the light deepening over the estuary. The water is metres away. Coastal reeds grow at its edge. I have the peace and quiet and rest I have craved. On the other hand, it is lonely lying here, eavesdropping on other people, and I will probably drive home tomorrow. I am running out of enthusiasm. I take a photo of the view from my tent, but don't send it to anyone. The beautiful afternoon, which was yesterday, already feels like the distant past. I go for a run around the village. I have a shower. Children and their mothers cluster around the bathroom block and the trampolines. Everyone here is with family or friends. I am discovering why no one goes solo camping.

My children are on a two-week holiday with their father. I have made a brick path behind my garage, digging the sand, placing the bricks. I have tended to my plants. Reading *Spinster* by Kate Bolick, I decided to challenge myself to holiday alone. I packed a notebook and a pen, *Spinster*, and some other feminist books I got out of the Whanganui library. lam slowly making my way through the small feminism section. I have journeyed up through the middle of the fish then down one side. In Tokoroa I stopped at an op shop and found a book of Sandra Coney articles, *Out of the Frying Pan*. 'There is no longer a rigid life course for women consisting of school, work, marriage, motherhood and menopause,' Coney writes in her introduction. 'But many of the old issues remain for women and there are new ones.' It felt a little like the book had found me.

Darkness falls again. In the cabin behind my tent, a group of people are drinking. A young couple have returned from the harbour, where they crashed their jet-ski on a sandbar. The woman has injured her wrists in the impact, but thinks the whole thing is hilarious. Her laughter encourages her partner, who tells the story multiple times, his drunk voice braying above everyone else's. Then he lapses into homophobic jokes. There is no one here I want to talk to, nowhere I can sit and drink companionably and feel content and safe. I lie in my tent, in my sleeping bag, hoping I have gone undetected, that no one will ask me who I am and what I am doing there.

In the morning I go to the communal kitchen, have a tin mug of black tea and a plastic bowl of muesli, wash my dishes when the sink is free. I have a brief conversation with some strangers about where I am from and where I am going. 'Oh, Whanganui, Whanganui's a great place,' one of them says. I am doing what I have always done when I have been alone: latching onto any human connection, wanting to prolong it, wanting to surround myself with it. Aloneness does not appeal to me at all. I walk along the beach looking for the hot springs, but don't find them. I take the back roads through rural Taranaki, through hamlets I am too scared to stop in, where seagulls pick over rubbish piles, and men with wild hair sit on front porches staring. I am too scared to park my car to eat lunch, even with the windows up and the doors locked. I eat at the wheel. I am not having fun any more. I am just tired, lonely and terrified of the things I have seen. The road has narrowed right down, native forest grows up steep hills on either side. Low over the car, a falcon swoops.

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