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Poetic Lives:
Verse Biography in Aotearoa New Zealand

A thesis
submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy in English
at
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by
Aimee-Jane Anderson-O'Connor



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Abstract

Bringing together a selection of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographies, and drawing on perspectives deriving from decolonizing methodologies, and from historical and feminist revision and reclamation, as well as my own experience as a creative practitioner, this thesis explores verse biography in Aotearoa New Zealand, with special reference to common thematic and personal preoccupations, and the settings in which these play out. I am led in this research by a few key questions. What techniques are available to the verse biographer, and what opportunities for innovation and intervention do these techniques afford? What limitations remain? What key settings shape and are shaped by the lives of those who live here? What can we learn by exploring the relationship between the individual life story and the cultural stories which take shape in what Philip Fisher has called the ‘privileged settings’ of any national literature? I focus in particular on a selection of longer verse biographies: Allen Curnow’s ‘An Abominable Temper’ (1973), Ian Wedde’s ‘A Ballad for Worsler Heberley’ (1993), Robert Sullivan’s *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), Airini Beauvais’s *Dear Neil Roberts* (2014), Chris Tse’s *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (2014), Gregory Kan’s *This Paper Boat* (2016), Karen Zelas’s *The Trials of Minnie Dean: A Verse Biography* (2017), and Nina Powles’s collection of chapbooks collectively titled *Luminescent* (2017). I have chosen longer works because of the scope they offer to trace the broader sense of the life story and pick up on imagery and voices which repeat and echo within the texts. I am also interested in the way that Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers often extend their subject’s life story beyond the barrier of death and imagine their subjects’ afterlives in sensory poetic terms. While this selection is diverse, and showcases a wide range of subject matter, poetic approach and voices, each of these verse biographies dramatizes the subject position of the poet, and partakes in a poetics of intersectional revision and reclamation.

My exegesis identifies and explores the fundamental role of setting in the canon and analyses the energizing concerns that verse biographers unpack in these settings. I am interested in the ways that Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers maintain attention to key local settings throughout their works, and critically engage with the cultural stories which persist in and around them. I am especially interested in the way these poetic explorations afford space for decolonial and feminist approaches. Four major settings appear often. The beach is a space of encounter in which ongoing processes of colonisation and crossing unfold. The home is marked by instability and hidden harm, in which domestic disorder is

unearthed. The police station is exposed as a space of class and gender power imbalance which informs law making and enforcement. The beyond constitutes a liminal space of exchange and unrest, as the poets grapple with cultural exchange and complexities of life and death.

The final portion of my thesis takes the form of a creative practice component. It consists of a verse biography titled *Keepsake*, centred on the lives of my paternal grandparents, Kevin Buxton O'Connor and Mary Helen O'Connor (née Fryer). It engages explicitly with the issues raised in the analytical component of my thesis. *Keepsake* is a collection shaped indelibly by the sudden death of my grandmother midway through my thesis, and my experience of weathering the seasons of grief with my grandfather, and our shared attempts to find the words to hold tight to her life. Like many of the other verse biographies in Aotearoa New Zealand, it operates as a poetic and historiographic record of my research process and the time in which the thesis was written. It has allowed me to deepen my understanding of the ways in which verse biography allows for a simultaneous autobiographical exploration, examining the role of the verse biographer as researcher and intermediary between the past and the present. The process has especially strengthened my appreciation for verse biography as a form which takes us into the beyond and affords a space where we might speak to the dead and hold space for an answer, where we might make a home of language, ripe for haunting.

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Poetic Lives: Biography, Aotearoa New Zealand Verse Biography and Setting

There is a lasting and lucrative hunger for life stories. The biographies of famous and infamous figures crowd bookshop bestseller shelves and library high-demand lists. Biopics take streaming services by storm, and prompt furious debate around accuracy and creative licence. There has been a boom in life writing, with the rise of ‘creative nonfiction’ as a popular genre. Long-form and narrative journalism has increasingly foregrounded the positionality of researchers and writers. Collections of personal essays flourish in Aotearoa New Zealand, with collections by Ashleigh Young, Madison Hamill and Nina Mingya Powles combining imaginative imagery with historical, biographic, scientific, and autobiographical detail.¹ While these works combine the creative with the factual, this hybridity is not without controversy.

Conversations around the writing of life stories and the high stakes of the label ‘non-fiction’ have featured in popular media in recent years. James Frey’s memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* was initially featured in Oprah’s Book Club to great acclaim, only to be exposed as a work which was largely fabricated.² Frey’s failure to adhere to the imperative of truth-telling constituted a violation of the contract between the memoirist and his reader and caused an international uproar.³ Recently in New Zealand, Charlotte Grimshaw’s *The Mirror Book* has sparked discussion about the relationship between writers and their families, and the friction that can be generated between competing familial accounts.⁴ Grimshaw’s assertion about memoir, that ‘telling your story is existentially important’, is one which perhaps underpins and enables every act of autobiography.⁵ If writing autobiography is existentially important,

¹ Ashleigh Young, *Can You Tolerate This?* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016); Nina Mingya Powles, *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai* (Birmingham: Emma Press, 2019); Madison Hamill *Specimen* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2020), Powles, *Small Bodies of Water* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021).

² James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Anchor, 2005).

³ This is an example of a text which transgressed its audience’s sense of ‘literary competence’, as it defied the generic expectations with which readers framed the text. For more on this, see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics; Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Charlotte Grimshaw, *The Mirror Book* (Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2021).

⁵ Emma Espiner, ‘A Life Rewritten: Charlotte Grimshaw’s Memoir *The Mirror Book*, Reviewed’, *The Spinoff*, 30 March 2021 < <https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/30-03-2021/a-life-rewritten-charlotte-grimshaws-memoir-the-mirror-book-reviewed/> > [accessed 9 June 2021].

an iterative act essential in understanding the self, then we might understand biography as a practice which is existentially important for the understanding of other people, and distant cultures and times. Where power, fame, or public image hang in the balance, biography can reinforce, interrogate, or shift national narratives.

The stories that we tell about others from the near and distant past bear the mark of the time of their telling, and act too as an artifact of the present. Historian Christopher Hill emphasises the influence of the present in the rewriting of the past:

History has to be rewritten in every generation, because although the past does not change the present does; each generation asks new questions of the past, and finds new areas of sympathy as it re-lives different aspects of the experiences of its predecessors.⁶

Biographers continue to revisit and revise familiar lives in order to include previously excluded perspectives, and these works both reflect, and reflect upon, current cultural values. Verse biography is one literary genre which foregrounds processes of revision and reclamation and explores processes of remembrance. Indeed, just as the verse biographies studied in this thesis pulse with the questions asked by their writers, this thesis also asks the questions of its writer—a Pākehā woman and emerging Aotearoa New Zealand poet with a background in history and literary studies, writing in the years from 2018-2022.

This thesis is one contribution to the opening stages of an exciting conversation about verse biography, and a small contribution to a wider and flourishing discussion around Aotearoa New Zealand poetry. It is important to note that any attempt to describe or demarcate any genre is necessarily a provisional act. In the introduction to the book *Telling the Real Story: Genre and New Zealand Literature*, Erin Mercer reminds us of the slipperiness of any genre definition:

Although one critic's 'genre' might conceivably be another's 'sub-genre', 'super-genre', 'style' or 'mode', every text is shaped by a certain set of rules and those rules

⁶ Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (Temple Smith: London, 1972), p. 13.

are in turn shaped by every text. Genres are not fixed and unchanging but are in constant flux, hence contemporary critics point out that genre is historically relative.⁷

Any genre is shaped by the texts it encompasses, and our readings of these texts are also shaped by our understanding of the genre in which we read them. The public response to James Frey's work would have been markedly different had it been promoted as a work of fiction featuring some autobiographical detail. Indeed, it has, through public trial and celebrity disownment, been widely rejected as a work of valid autobiography. Mercer reminds us also of the historical influences which shape genre definitions. For instance, while the hagiographies of the Middle Ages presented figures to be revered and wholly imitated, contemporary biography tends to present complex and often fallible biographical subjects. Any line around a genre is one drawn in sand, set to be shifted with the next cultural high tide.

A fixed set of rules and qualifying features for inclusion within a genre is of limited use. Katie Wales writes that 'practice may differ from precept, and literary innovation has always balanced conformity. Viewed historically, and in any one period, genres present a more dynamic, flexible aspect, one genre developing out of another'.⁸ However, genre still offers a useful way to draw together works with common features, functions and forms.

Wales writes:

However arbitrary may appear to be the boundary between one genre and another, what distinguishes them, and what determines how genres are traditionally defined, is usually the set or cluster of structural and stylistic properties that have come to be associated with them, which have come to be 'dominant' in the formalist sense; also certain functions, tones, subject matter, worldviews and audiences.⁹

Mercer agrees with Wales's interpretation of genre most usefully deployed as an 'intertextual concept'.¹⁰ Genres are best understood through the intertextual analysis of the texts which shape and are shaped by the genre and its shared features. It is these aspects of 'structural and

⁷ Erin Mercer, *Telling the Real Story: Genre and New Zealand Literature* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017), pp. 13-14.

⁸ Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 188.

⁹ Wales, p. 188.

¹⁰ Mercer, p.13; Wales, p. 235.

stylistic properties’ and ‘functions, tones, subject matter [and] worldviews’ within verse biography from Aotearoa New Zealand that are the focus of this thesis.

Biography

The biographical focus is what distinguishes verse biography from other forms of poetry. Biography is no generic newcomer. John Geraets emphasises the deep history of the term, translated from medieval Greek: ‘Biography (Gk. *Biographia*) is quite literally the place where the subject’s life (*bios*) is met with the written account of it (*graphie*).’¹¹ This meeting place is one which can take many forms, and biography continues to find its expression in new mediums and contemporary tastes, with a wide variety of biopics, podcasts, musicals, documentaries, and books published each year.

Written biography is an essential and resilient form. Ancient texts like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Aeneid* remain celebrated works of literature focused on known historical figures. The Roman biographer Cornelius Nepos’s *Excellentium Imperatorum Vitae* (‘Lives of outstanding generals’) survives from circa 20 BC, the Old Testament from the fifth century BC, and Plutarch’s *Lives* from circa 2AD.¹² Particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand, the written life story inherits the context of oral histories which track genealogical lines back centuries, and even to legendary figures and deities. The life stories of tūpuna and the Pacific have been passed on through iwi in Aotearoa, for centuries.¹³

In spite of this long history, theorists often begin their work on biography by emphasizing the maligned position of the genre. Hermione Lee’s 2009 *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* offers a brief history of the genre and highlights the hurdles that it has had to overcome to gain literary or historical recognition. Lee writes that biography remained ‘notably untheorised’ in the turn to theory of the mid-to-late 20th century and carried ‘a lack of legitimacy in the worlds of contemporary critical theory [and] social historiography’,

¹¹ John Geraets, ‘Literary Biography in New Zealand’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 7 (1989), 87-105 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20112167>> [accessed 5 December 2018] (p. 90).

¹² Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 21-22; *Plutarch: Lives that Made Greek History*, ed. by James Romm (Indiana: Hackett Publishing, 2012), p. vi.

¹³ Nepia Mahuika, ‘An Outsider’s Guide to Public Oral History in New Zealand’, *New Zealand Journal of Public History* (2017) <https://www.waikato.ac.nz/__data/assets/pdf_file/0011/384896/02-Nepia-Mahuika-final-2017.pdf> [accessed 7 June 2021].

seeming ‘insufficiently substantial or scientific to merit study or teaching’.¹⁴ However, this trend has shifted, and in recent years, a wealth of critical work has emerged, including that within the journal *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, and the work of scholars such as Ira Bruce Nadel, John Batchelor, Melanie Nolan, Paula Backscheider, Richard Holmes and Lee herself.¹⁵ This biographical turn has been influenced by the growing popularity of social history, and the corresponding attention to microhistories, documentary poetics, and the feminist reclamation of neglected lives.¹⁶ Indeed, this turn is closely connected to the work of those striving to decolonize history, an essential project in colonial settler states such as New Zealand. In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith offers further insight into the value of historical revision as an essential tool of decolonization:¹⁷

A critical aspect of the struggle for self-determination has involved questions relating to our history as indigenous peoples and a critique of how we, as the Other, have been represented or excluded from various accounts. Every issue has been approached by indigenous people with a view to *rewriting* and *rerighting* our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes.¹⁸

Verse biography offers one form in which indigenous writers can and do ‘rewrite’ the past. Indeed, it is a genre where tauwiwi (including Pasifika and Asian New Zealanders) who have been systematically mistreated by the Crown and its ongoing processes of colonialism can too reclaim their past. Verse biography is a genre which can be a space for radical remaking, allowing poets to reclaim life stories which have been largely excluded, forgotten, denied or

¹⁴ Lee, *Biography*, p. 94.

¹⁵ *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*; Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984); Paula Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); John Batchelor, *The Art of Literary Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Lee, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2005); Richard Holmes, *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016); Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Malcolm Allbrook and Melanie Nolan, ‘Australian Historians and Biography’, *Australian Journal of Biography and History*, 1 (2018), 3-21 <doi/10.3316/informit.305791396134907> [accessed 17 February 2022].

¹⁶ Miles Fairburn, *Social History: Problems, Strategies, and Methods* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013).

¹⁷ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd Edn (London: Zed Books, 2012), pp. 20-43.

¹⁸ Tuhiwai Smith, p. 29, italics in the original.

appropriated.¹⁹ This reclamation is not a singular or one-off act, but is rather a sustained and ongoing effort which resists hegemonies and their sustaining stories.

There are a series of debates which accompany the genre of biography and provide ample material for debate and criticism. Theorists of the genre spend much of their work negotiating discussions of fact and truth. They appeal to biography's commitment to veracity, highlighting the use of sound research methods and archival material, and biographers themselves almost always speak of their feelings of commitment to the truth of their subject and work. Indeed, this relationship between the hard 'granite' of truth, and the 'rainbow' of creative intervention is the central tension of Virginia Woolf's influential essay 'The New Biography' (1927).²⁰ Woolf argues that while the combination of these two aspects might at first seem 'incompatible', it is nevertheless essential, and is what allows biography to evoke a sense of the personality of its subjects, rather than merely providing a list of actions.²¹

As well as the need to consider biography as a genre with a central commitment to verifiable fact, there is space to consider its inherent need for narrative and literary invention. On the very first page of his 1984 book *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form*, Ira Bruce Nadel writes that 'for too long criticism has centred on the content rather than the form of biographical writing, undermining its literary properties.'²² He writes that biographical theory has been plagued by a 'distrust of figurative language in non-fictional prose and the preference for seeing biography as a positivist, empirical genre.'²³ However, biography, indeed not unlike history, engages many imaginative and literary techniques, while still upholding a commitment to verifiable historical fact: 'A biographer, bounded by facts, still invents his form and, through language, directs his reader's impressions, images and interpretation of the subject'.²⁴ The biographer seeks to affect her reader, to add to or shift

¹⁹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241-299 <doi:10.23074/1229039>; Mahuika, 'New Zealand History is Māori History: Tikanga as the Ethical Foundation of Historical Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 49.1 (2015), 5-30; Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 'The Colony', in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 4th edn, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp. 242-251; Steven Toussaint, 'Such Noise! So Many Voices!', *Academy of New Zealand Literature* <<https://www.anzliteliterature.com/feature/such-noise-so-many-voices/>> [accessed 6 November 2018].

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), pp. 149-55.

²¹ Woolf, 'The New Biography', p. 155.

²² Nadel, p. 1.

²³ Nadel, p. 157.

²⁴ Nadel, p. 154.

understandings of people and the past. Biography depends upon an explicit exchange between fact and creativity. In his article ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth’, Richard Holmes describes this relationship as an illegitimate tryst:

The problematic, delightful, and disputed nature of biography derives from its original two forebears, who one secret, sultry morning formed an Unholy Alliance. Fiction married Fact, without benefit of clergy. Or as I prefer to say, Invention found a love-match with Truth. These are the Adam and Eve of our subject. The result was a brilliant, bastard form—Biography—which has been causing trouble ever since.²⁵

This love child, however, is not the only one of its kind, and increasingly the work of interpretive-mode historians has turned to consider the interplay between historical fact and methods of construction. Hayden White’s *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, considers the role of narrative in history-writing, and employs tools of literary analysis to expose the figurative features operating in even the most traditional history making.²⁶ White emphasises the processes of selection and ordering which enable the construction of narrative history. The archives through which historians trawl are themselves not politically neutral spaces and are curated according to many often-obscured imperatives. In his work ‘Making Ends Meet: Archives and Narratives’, Ian Wedde writes of the need for both archives and stories: ‘We know how desperately storytellers, including historians, need excellently catalogued archives. What’s sometimes less apparent is how much archives need excellent storytellers and other mediators between information and communities.’²⁷ In order for a history or biography to constitute something other than a box of source material and ephemera, the writer must intervene. She must add something more to her source. She must make connections and offer contexts within a wider argument. To write history is to engage in a creative process. However, this storytelling should not be dismissed as wholly creative or free fictional play. Like history, biography has a commitment to the truth. Lucasta Miller writes that:

²⁵ Holmes, ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth’, in *The Art of Biography*, ed. by John Batchelor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 15-25 (p. 15).

²⁶ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Hayden White, ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’, *History and Theory*, 23.1 (1984) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2504969>> [accessed 3 September 2018].

²⁷ Wedde ‘Making Ends Meet: Archives and Narratives’, *Making Ends Meet Essays and Talks 1992-2004* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), p. 285.

We should not see biography as a failed empirical science striving to produce definitive, objective results but doomed to failure. Nor should we take the extreme postmodernist line which completely collapses the distinction between biography and fiction, regarding both as undifferentiated ‘textual constructs’. Instead, we should regard it as an amphibious art form, which ideally has both to obey the constraints of evidence *and* to respond creatively to the challenge of making shape, form and meaning.²⁸

When we acknowledge the subjectivity of the author, we do not excuse her of her commitment to the ‘hard facts’ of history.²⁹ Rather, we require her to confess to her involvement, admit to the tools she uses and the position from which she creates. Historical revision is, importantly, not the same as conspiracy theory or historical denialism. History can be reconfigured, but not entirely invented. History and biography are also distinct from fiction. Evidence must win out. The sources remain.

However, we should remember that any arrangement of these hard facts is one of many possible configurations. Each book is one of many possible books. This ordering and shaping of narrative are necessary processes, as biographer and scholar Lee emphasises:

Any biographical narrative is an artificial construct, since it inevitably involves selection and shaping. No biographer is going to write down every single thing their subject did, said, and thought on every day of their life from birth to death, or the book would take longer than the life itself.³⁰

Michael Benton adds that this compression necessitates creative invention: ‘...the art of biography involves invention as well as interpretation, [...] the skills of narrative are essential to quicken the life on the page.’³¹ A biographer must combine selected details in a way which builds a convincing portrait of their subject, and present them in such a way that the compression of time does not unintentionally jar or displace their reader. Benton sees the application of narrative technique as a process which is inherent in writing a life:

²⁸ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 169.

²⁹ Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

³⁰ Lee, *Biography*, p. 123.

³¹ Benton, Michael, ‘Literary Biography: The Cinderella Story of Literary Studies’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39.3 (2005), 44-57 <doi: 10.1353/jae.2005.0026> (p. 48).

Narrative imposes a shape on real life that, compared with the messy unpredictability of real life, is both necessary and illusory. For biographers, like the rest of us, need narrative in order to make sense of life; and the sense thus made is a provisional construct created from that mixture of elements—selection, continuity, coherence, and closure—that constitute the structure of narrative.³²

The desire to construct a singular life story is not merely an exercise in exerting power or wielding biographical authority, but an attempt to find order and sense in historical knowledge. We tell the life stories of others to try to understand our own, and perhaps the conventions we tend towards in prose biography—selection, continuity, coherence, and closure—tell us something about our desires for these in the remembering of our own lives. It is worth noting Benton’s use of the word ‘illusory’, which echoes an awareness of the distorting potential of this intervention, as necessary as it may be. This intervention is a process which verse biographers largely foreground, and their means of poetic shaping is one of the main focuses of this thesis.

It is worth noting that the primary sources which inform histories and biographies are also constructed, conceived in relation to specific purposes and contexts. This, the ‘bias’, or ‘perspective’ of a life story, is present even before the historian or biographer’s intervention. Richard Holmes reiterates the diversity of perspectives in even the most carefully researched historical narrative:

Biographers base their work on sources which are inherently unreliable. Memory itself is fallible; memoirs are inevitably biased; letters are always slanted toward their recipients; even private diaries and intimate journals have to be recognised as literary forms of self-invention rather than an ‘ultimate’ truth of private fact or feeling. The biographer has always had to construct or orchestrate a factual pattern out of materials that already have a fictional or reinvented element.³³

If every person is a storytelling creature, then every biographical source has an agenda. This is, again, not to say that biographies and their historical sources should be dismissed as unhistorical, but that history itself should be recognised as an inherently human endeavour, filled with all of the contradictions and multiplicities that are central to the human condition.

³² Michael Benton, ‘Literary Biography’, p. 49.

³³ Richard Holmes, ‘Biography: Inventing the Truth’, p. 17.

We lie, stretch the truth, misremember. Biography's intimate sources—Holmes's slanted letters and self-inventive journals—are the contemporary record of a living person before they are recontextualised and understood as an historical source. Biography is at its very essence about people connecting across time and place. It is a form which peeks into the conversations between its historical subject and their historical moment, their material conditions, their friends, families and foes. This marks biography as distinct from both traditional history and historical fiction. Biography focalizes a single, living, or once-living subject: someone who once spoke from within an actual breathing, beating, body. Lee emphasises the importance of this: 'What makes biography so curious and endlessly absorbing is that through all the documents and the letters, the context and the witnesses, the conflicting opinions and the evidence of the work, we keep catching sight of a real body, a physical life'.³⁴ Biography has the power to put us into contact with the dead.

This reality has prompted a rich and necessary body of work exploring the ethical implications of undertaking historical and biographical writing.³⁵ The biographer and her literary work bring the life of an often-departed into focus, and tell their story on the terms of the biographer. This fact raises important questions: Who has the right to tell which stories? What permissions are required, or possible to attain? What does it mean to make historical people subjects? Subjects of a story? Subject 'to' a narrative? Processes of constructing history are inherently political. Historical narratives, by their necessary compression, include only select people, events, and places, relevant to the writer's aims. These creative processes exert power, as subjects and facts beyond the boundaries of any given historical narrative are excluded. Over time, these acts of narrative selection mean that important collective memories can be overshadowed and even largely forgotten. Fiona Hamilton reminds us of this in action in New Zealand's history:

Above all, pioneer memories and public remembrances of pioneers (jubilees and settler associations) celebrated the creation and replication of community and society. This foreclosed other memories, such as disruption, loss and displacement of Māori. Fashioning a past is a crucial part of the process of colonization. Colonization requires

³⁴ Lee, *Body Parts*, p. 3.

³⁵ Lee, 'Examined Lives' in *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal*, 50.4 (2000), 297-305 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/eic/50.4.297>> [accessed 17 February 2022]; Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984); Mahuika, 'New Zealand History is Māori History: Tikanga as the Ethical Foundation of Historical Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand', *New Zealand Journal of History*, 49.1 (2015), 5-30; *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. by John Paul Eakin (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).

the construction of a new ‘civilization’ in all senses of the word, including a cultural infrastructure. The deliberate attempt by migrants and subsequent generations to record and create historical narratives—in this case, foundational narratives—was part of the colonization process.³⁶

Hamilton emphasises the political power of colonial narratives of belonging and highlights how these dominant narratives can serve to obscure historical and ongoing processes of colonization.

Biography, as a form of history writing, must be undertaken critically—with concern and care for its subjects and their communities, and for its readers—and biographers must self-reflexively examine their motivations and positionality. This is especially important when members of underrepresented groups are made biographical subjects. Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice open their introduction to the 2016 edition of *Biography: Indigenous Conversations about Biography* by reminding us of the ways in which biographies have been ‘instrumentalized for deeply ideological purposes’.³⁷ Somerville and Justice write that these biographical studies ‘flatten our Indigenous subjectivities and reduce complex lives to one-dimensional types, and this never works to the benefit of living, dynamic Indigenous peoples and communities’.³⁸ There exists a well-populated canon of work written in service of Empire and homogenizing nation-making. Even the best-intentioned writers and readers of biography must remain alert to the ways in which works might serve or harm their biographical subjects, as well as their descendants and communities. Within wider historical processes, indigenous knowledges and experiences have often been displaced, and indigenous ways of telling their own stories have been systematically excluded and repressed. This issue becomes especially clear when the only published or academically recognised narrative is that told by an ‘outsider’.³⁹ The relationship between a biographer and her subject then is an important one, and biographers

³⁶ Fiona Hamilton, ‘Pioneering History: Negotiating Pakeha Collective Memory in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 36.1 (2002), 66–81 <<http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/document/?wid=325&page=0&action=null>> [accessed 15 January 2019] (p. 77).

³⁷ Alice Te Punga Somerville and Daniel Heath Justice, ‘Introduction: Indigenous Conversations about Biography’, *Biography*, 39.3 (2016), 239–247 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2016.0034>> (p. 241).

³⁸ Alice Te Punga Somerville and Heath Justice, ‘Introduction: Indigenous Conversations about Biography’, p. 241.

³⁹ Mahuika, ‘Telling “Us” in the “Days Destined to You”’, *Biography*, 39.3 (2016) <[doi: 10.1353/bio.2016.0042](https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2016.0042)> [accessed 10 December 2018].

need to engage with challenging questions around who they select as subjects, how they write about them, and why.

Biographical styles continue to reflect the contemporary contexts of their creation. In the conclusion of her 1999 book *Reflections on Biography* Paula Backscheider claimed that '[w]ith the continued entry of feminists and people of colour, new lives, new issues, and new methodologies will be developed'.⁴⁰ Her prediction has proven accurate. Biography is increasingly employed in a wider contemporary feminist reclamation project, as previously neglected lives are restored to the historical record. Richard Holmes writes that '[b]iography can indeed alter our fundamental assumptions about what lives have been significant, and why. The contemporary influence of feminism has been a notable force for justice and revaluation in this respect.'⁴¹ The biographical process can challenge existing assumptions and power imbalances. By writing a life story into the centre of the text, biography enacts a bold claim on the value of every single life, and widens understandings of what constitutes 'historical' peoples, places and moments. Historian Susan Ware associates this rise in women's biography with a flourishing of women's history, supported by the rise of social history, which focused on the lives of everyday people: history told 'from the bottom up'.⁴² This approach to biography has received popular acclaim. Internationally, an illustrated biographical anthology written for children, *Good Night Stories For Rebel Girls*, was crowdfunded and sold over a million copies.⁴³ It was closely followed by *Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different*.⁴⁴ In New Zealand, *Go Girl: A Storybook of Epic New Zealand Women*, and *Oh Boy: A Storybook of Epic NZ Men* have also topped bestseller lists, and the end of 2021 saw the publication of *Kia Kaha: A Storybook of Māori who Changed the World*.⁴⁵ This proliferation of biographies is not for children only. 2018 saw the 125th anniversary of suffrage in New Zealand, and the launch of the *Our Wāhine* website, featuring

⁴⁰ Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 230.

⁴¹ Holmes, 'Biography: Inventing the Truth', in *The Art of Biography*, ed. by John Batchelor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 15-25 (p. 19).

⁴² Susan Ware, 'Writing Women's Lives: One Historian's Perspective', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 40.3 (2010) 413-435 (p. 416).

⁴³ Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo, *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* (London: Penguin, 2017); Esther Walker 'Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: a revolution at bedtime' *The Times* <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/good-night-stories-for-rebel-girls-a-revolution-at-bedtime-k8clzwlmv>> [accessed 9 June 2019].

⁴⁴ Ben Brooks, *Stories for Boys Who Dare to be Different* (Pennsylvania: Running Press, 2018).

⁴⁵ Barbara Else, *Go Girl: A Storybook of Epic NZ Women* (Auckland: Penguin, 2018); Stuart Lipshaw, *Oh Boy: A Storybook of Epic NZ Men* (Auckland: Puffin, 2018); Stacey Morrison and Jeremy Sherlock, *Kia Kaha: A Storybook of Māori Who Changed the World* (London: Puffin, 2021).

illustrated biographies of New Zealand women.⁴⁶ The *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* is hosted on the government history website Te Ara and includes more than 3000 biographies, with around 500 focused on Māori subjects and translated into te reo Māori. The historical value of biography is clear. The genre fulfils an important role within a wider practice of historical revisionism, which seeks to see the past with new eyes.

Another of Backscheider's predictions has proven prescient: 'Increasingly biographies will be judged by the quality of storytelling, by sensory fullness—and by willingness to use terrifying reportorial candour.'⁴⁷ As previously excluded voices join the genre, its conventions are broadening and changing. At the start of this century, Elizabeth Colwill emphasised the transformative potential of producing different modes of biography: 'A recent generation of experimental biographers, particularly feminists influenced by poststructuralist theory, has modelled new ways to write lives. The epistemology, hermeneutics, and narrative conventions of heroic biography are all under interrogation and up for experimentation.'⁴⁸ Each generation brings new contexts and questions to the writing and reading of biography, and these concerns drive change in both the content contained within the genre, and the forms in which the genre operates. Diverse modes of biography are emerging as biographers challenge the firm foundations of who speaks and how. One biographical genre emerging internationally, and experiencing a particular boom in New Zealand, is verse biography.

Enter: Verse

Growing in the gaps between biography and poetry, verse biography combines the biographical impulse with creative experimentations in language and form. The genre is budding and growing both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally.⁴⁹ If biography is, as

⁴⁶ Kate Hursthouse and Karen Brook, *Our Wāhine: 125 Extraordinary New Zealand Women* <<https://www.ourwahine.nz/>> [accessed 24 July 2019].

⁴⁷ Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, p. 230.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Colwill, 'Subjectivity, Self-Representation, and the Revealing Twitches of Biography', *French Historical Studies*, 24.3 (2001), 421-437 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/11891>> [accessed 26 April 2019], p. 423; Colwill suggests further reading: 'For creative directions in feminist autobiographical writing, see the essays in Margadant, *New Biography*. See also the contributions by Alison Booth, Cheryl Walker, and Sharon O'Brien in *Contesting the Subject: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*, ed. William H. Epstein (West Lafayette, Ind., 1991).'

⁴⁹ Jordie Albiston, *The hanging of Jean Lee* (North Fitzroy, Vic: Black Pepper, 1998); Marilyn Nelson, *Carver, a life in poems* (Asheville: N.C Front Street, 2001); Padel, *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (London: Vintage

Holmes claims, a ‘brilliant bastard form’, positioned in the space between invention and truth, then verse biography is yet another brilliant bastard, one which confesses the poetic modes of its conception in every line. The Australian academic and verse biographer Jessica L. Wilkinson offers insight into the place poetry has in biography:

The art of biography, then, requires a complex negotiation of materials and storytelling in order to fit the pattern of biographical narrative in a frame chosen by the biographer. For me, the troubling aspects of biography—the anxiety of not knowing; the difficulty of distinguishing fact from fiction; the influence of the biographer’s selection and representation of material—present the seeds for innovative representation.⁵⁰

Eschewing many traditional narrative conventions such as strict chronology, and sustained and consistent characterisation and setting, verse biography often works to ‘expose the seams’ of a work’s construction and encourages its readers to consider the literary techniques of representation at play in the creation of a life story. The genre is characterised by experimentation and openness. Ruth Russ’s essay ‘Collage biography: Writing a Life With Poetical Truth’ celebrates the productive potential of the verse biographer’s fragmented approach: ‘It’s like showing your working as well as your findings’.⁵¹ The image of collage resonates with verse biographers including Gregory Kan, who has described the process of writing *This Paper Boat* as a process of ‘splicing’ his words with those of his biographical subject, Iris Wilkinson.⁵²

While biography is a form which is concerned with its combination of fact and narrative shaping, verse biography often necessitates an even more heightened and reflexive engagement with the relationship between fact and feeling. This negotiation is one at the heart of emerging scholarship about verse biography. In her 2021 essay ‘A Life in Lines:

Books, 2009); Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010); Jessica L. Wilkinson, *Marionette : A Biography of Miss Marion Davies* (Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2012); Jordie Albiston *The Book of Ethel* (Glebe, NSW : Puncher & Wattmann, 2013); Sarah Howe, *Loop of Jade* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015); Ruth Padel, *Beethoven Variations: Poems on a Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2020).

⁵⁰ Jessica L. Wilkinson, ‘A Poet Walks Through an Archive: Processing the Poetic Biography’ in *Associations: Creative Practice and Research*, ed. by James Oliver (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2018), pp. 192-216 (p. 194).

⁵¹ Ruth Russ, ‘Collage biography: Writing a Life With Poetical Truth’, *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook*, 55 (2021), 312-318, (p. 313).

⁵² Ellen Falconer, ‘Poetry from a séance: Gregory Kan on his collection *This Paper Boat*’, *The Wireless* <<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/the-wireless/373951/poetry-from-a-seance-gregory-kan-on-his-collection-this-paper-boat>> [accessed 8 December 2021].

Katherine Mansfield and New Forms of Biography’, Jackson writes that verse biographers perhaps seek to ‘reinvent biography in terms of intimacy and affection’.⁵³ This intimacy is achieved in part through an attention to the poetic techniques of writing a life in verse: in the affective potential of poetry, to command the breath with every beat, to shape the voice with every line break, to carry the reader through the room of each stanza.

This endeavour, to draw close to real people from the past, and more—to make poetry from this encounter—is fraught with ethical dilemmas. The titles of the critical works on verse biography speak to the tension between the poetic pulse of the genre, an imperative for ‘beauty’, and the biographical commitment to ‘truth’. The term ‘verse biography’ itself invokes a conjunction which might appear almost as an oxymoron. However, Jackson guides us to consider the ways in which truth and biography, verse and beauty are complementary forms.⁵⁴ The combination of these two imperatives, to evoke the truth of a life story, and shape it in such a way that it is beautiful, comprises the challenging yet generative space of possibility at the heart of verse biography.

Scholarship around verse biography is still-emerging. In 2014, the first conference dedicated to verse biography was held at Victoria University of Wellington, convened by poets and literary scholars Anna Jackson, Helen Rickerby and Angelina Sbroma, and attended by fifty participants.⁵⁵ This conference, and the accompanying creative collection *Truth or Beauty* was soon followed by the publication of the 2016 special issue of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, featuring an introduction by Jackson in which she notes that the issue was ‘the first sustained study of verse biography as a genre’.⁵⁶ The first book dedicated to the genre quickly followed, with the publication of the essay collection *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand* in the same year, edited by Jackson, Angelina Sbroma and Helen Rickerby.⁵⁷ This collection is composed with the work of theorists and practitioners, and offers a useful introduction to the genre. The title hearkens to the central concerns raised in Woolf’s essay on ‘The New Biography’ and so

⁵³ Jackson, Anna ‘A Life in Lines: Katherine Mansfield and New Forms of Biography’ *Journal of New Zealand Literature* 38.2 (2020), 120-137. (p. 121).

⁵⁴ Jackson, ‘Introduction’ *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, ed. by Anna Jackson, Helen Rickerby and Angelina Sbroma (Victoria University Press: Wellington, 2016).

⁵⁵ *Truth or Beauty: Poetry and Biography* ed. by Anna Jackson, Helen Rickerby and Angelina Sbroma (Wellington: Wakefields Digital, 2014); Jackson, *Truth and Beauty*, p. 13.

⁵⁶ Jackson, ‘The Verse Biography: Introduction’ *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, 39.1 (2016), iii-xvi, (p. xiii).

⁵⁷ *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand*, ed. by Anna Jackson, Helen Rickerby and Angelina Sbroma (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016).

positions verse biography in relationship with earlier biographic forms. Verse biography is a genre in conversation with many others, and draws on the modes of other literary forms, but is nevertheless distinct. In the introduction to *Truth and Beauty*, Jackson defines verse biography as

a collection of poetry that tells the life story of a historical person, by analogy with the “verse novel”—now generally understood to describe a fictional story told across a sequence of individual poems, whether or not they are actually written in metred verse.⁵⁸

Jackson here highlights the nature of the genre as an ‘emerging cultural practice’, a phrase akin to the understanding of genre as a collection of related texts which I have adopted for this thesis. But if verse biography is an emerging genre, Jackson assures us that it is one with many deep roots and related branches, and she traces its origins to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and reminding us that early literature was written largely in verse, with much of it recalling the exploits of important historical figures.⁵⁹ In addition to this early biographical influence, she emphasises more recent cultural trends at work in the genre, stating:

[...] the popularity of the verse biography today is more closely related to developments in the long poem over the 20th century, the rise of the verse novel in the 1980s and, to a certain extent, the growth of academic writing programmes and the institutionalisation of a research component as part of a higher creative writing degree.⁶⁰

Verse biography has attracted practitioners interested in hybrid forms, in the fruitful collision of the poetic line and the pull of the narrative of the life story. It makes sense, too, that the

⁵⁸ Jackson, ‘Introduction’, *Truth and Beauty*, p. 8; for more discussion about the relationship between the verse novel and the long poem, see Catherine Addison, ‘The Verse Novel as Genre: Contradiction or Hybrid?’ in *Style* 43.4 Illinois (2009), 539-562.

⁵⁹ Jackson, ‘Introduction’, *Truth and Beauty*, p. 9; And indeed, Jackson argues that it is fruitfully populated, citing a substantial body of mostly book-length verse biography published in the past 25 years in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, including: ‘Jane Holland’s *Boudicca* (2006), Craig Raine’s *History: The Home Movie* (1994), Robert Sullivan’s *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (2002), Chris Orsman’s *South* (1996), Marilyn Nelson’s *Carver* (1997), Jordie Albiston’s *The Hanging of Jean Lee* (1998) and *The Book of Ethel* (2013), Ed Sanders’s *Chekhov* (1995) and *The Poetry and Life of Allen Ginsberg* (2000), Chris Tse’s *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (2014), and Sarah Howe’s *Loop of Jade* (2015)’ as well as Anne Carson’s 1995 ‘The Glass Essay’.

⁶⁰ Jackson, ‘Introduction’, *Truth and Beauty*, p. 9.

research-rich core of the genre attracts graduate researchers and creative practitioners interested in the intersections of historical and poetic inquiry.⁶¹

Jackson elsewhere reminds us that verse biographies ‘show a hybridity in terms of genre’, sharing and overlapping with the verse novel, narrative poem, personal essay, myth, the epic, autobiography, biofiction, and traditional biography.⁶² Indeed, there is a wealth of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand poetry which explores historical places and people, and in his 2016 reflection on New Zealand poetry, Steven Toussaint particularly highlights the prevalence of work which ‘explor[es] the hinterland between poetry and history, through a new kind of documentarian poetic that incorporates, variously, biography[,...] memoir [...], criminal investigation [...], and historical portraiture.’⁶³ This ‘documentarian poetic’ bears a striking resemblance to verse biography, and Toussaint is right to highlight its prevalence.

We might need to pause for a moment to consider how we can usefully understand verse biography as a form which operates in its own distinctive ways, and makes use of its biographical and poetic techniques. Indeed, there are very few poets who have not drawn on historical or biographical sources as poetic fodder. How, then, to distinguish verse biography from other forms of history poem, or indeed, from any poem which features any person at all? Jackson’s work is of great value here. She tells us that verse biography is characterised by its commitment to a central biographical figure across an extended poem or collection of poems, even while other complex and interesting characters of course enter the frame of the work.⁶⁴ The central energy of the verse biography resides in the presence of a life story. We are reminded of the ‘bios’, in play in the first half of the word ‘biography’. This is a genre, which for all its poetic play, is primarily concerned with the writing of a life.

Aotearoa New Zealand Verse Biography

There is a lot of space and diversity within this wider generic label, and we might gather a group of varied texts in a brief survey of New Zealand verse biography. Nina Powles’s

⁶¹ Jackson, Anna, ‘Introduction’, *Truth and Beauty*, p. 9.

⁶² Jackson, Anna, ‘Introduction’, *Truth and Beauty*: p. 13.

⁶³ Toussaint.

⁶⁴ Jackson, ‘A Life in Lines: Katherine Mansfield and New Forms of Biography’, pp. 120-137.

Luminescent is comprised of a folder of five chapbooks which each contain a short biography of five subjects.⁶⁵ Four chapbooks concern verifiable historical figures—Betty Guard, Katherine Mansfield, Phyllis Porter, and Beatrice Tinsley—and the fifth chapbook (*Auto*)*biography of a Ghost* draws close the poet’s life and the tale of her school ghost.⁶⁶ This close relationship between the biographic and the mythic is a key feature of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, as poets explore processes of memory-making and cultural myth-making. A focus on culturally mythic biographical figures drives a number of works works including Anna Jackson and Jenny Powell-Chalmers’s collaborative collection *Locating the Madonna*, which sees the Madonna traverse contemporary Aotearoa.⁶⁷ Vana Manasiadis’s *Ithaca Island Bay Leaves* is identified in the second half of its title as a ‘*A Mythistorima*’, and combines history with autobiography and mythmaking.⁶⁸ Tusiata Avia’s *Bloodclot* is identified as a work of ‘biomythography’ on its cover, and it draws close the stories of the poet and Nafanua, the Samoan goddess of war.⁶⁹

Verse biographers often tread where traditional biographers might only dip their toes, boldly going into the beyond in search of their subject in the afterlife. Robert Sullivan’s *Captain Cook in the Underworld* radically recontextualises Captain Cook, and largely concerns his life after death, placing him in contact with mythic figures from both European and Pacific traditions, including Orpheus, Venus, Lono and Māui.⁷⁰ Chris Tse carries the tools of the historian into his poetic beyond. *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* opens with a poem ‘(In which the author interviews a dead man)’, and unfolds in the afterlife of Joe Kum Yung, a Chinese New Zealander murdered by a white supremacist.⁷¹

Verse biography in Aotearoa New Zealand is distinctive also for its inclusion and celebration of te ao Māori. Airini Beauvais’s *Flow* is a verse biography which acknowledges the personhood of the Whanganui River, as legally recognised in the Te Awa Tupua Act of 2017.⁷² Many Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographies are enriched with the use of te reo,

⁶⁵ Powles, *Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017). To avoid confusion with individual poems within each chapbook which bear the chapbook’s name, I have treated each chapbook as its own distinct work for referencing purposes in the body of my thesis: *Whale Fall*, *Sunflowers*, *Her and the Flames*, *The Glowing Space Between Stars*, and (*Auto*)*biography of a Ghost*.

⁶⁶ Powles, *Luminescent*.

⁶⁷ Anna Jackson and Jenny Powell-Chalmers *Locating the Madonna* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2004).

⁶⁸ Vana Manasiadis, *Ithaca Island Bay Leaves: A Mythistorima* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2009).

⁶⁹ Tusiata Avia, *Bloodclot* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009), back cover.

⁷⁰ Robert Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002).

⁷¹ Chris Tse, *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2016). Italics in Original.

⁷² Airini Beauvais, *Flow*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017), p. 13

and poets, both Māori and tauīwi, incorporate Māori tikanga and understandings of te ao Māori within their works.⁷³

The tendency of the poets to weave their lives closely to the lives of their biographical subjects is perhaps one of the most distinctive aspects of verse biography, and this intimacy is prominent in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography. Many poets choose writers as their biographical subjects, as in Anna Jackson's *I, Clodia, and Other Portraits*, about Clodia Metelli, Powles's *Sunflowers* about Katherine Mansfield, Helen Rickerby's 'deconstructed biography' of George Eliot, and with Amy Brown's inclusion of Christina Rossetti, Aurelius Augustine and Margery Kempe in *The Odour of Sanctity*.⁷⁴ The commitment to writing is by no means the only shared thread that poets draw between themselves and their subjects. Indeed, there are very few verse biographies which do not feature the poet's life at some point within the frame of the biography. Claire Orchard's exploration of Charles Darwin's life in *Cold Water Cure* transports us vividly from the nineteenth century, into the poet's contemporary moment, watching disaster films at Easter in 2014, parking the car under the watch of a security camera.⁷⁵ Jenny Powell's *Meeting Rita* sees Powell imagine herself befriending Rita Angus in the modern day, and Airini Beautrais's *Dear Neil Roberts* highlights the connections between the poet and her subject, the anarchist Neil Roberts.⁷⁶ Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat* shifts between the life of his subject, the writer Iris Wilkinson (Robin Hyde), and Kan's life and the lives of his family and lost friend.⁷⁷

New Zealand verse biographers have not shied away from selecting their own family members and ancestors as biographical subjects, again drawing their lives into close contact with those of their subjects. Vivienne Plumb's *Scarab: a poetic documentary* tells the story of her son's illness and death.⁷⁸ Lynn Jenner's *Dear Sweet Harry* draws close the poet's family with the life of Harry Houdini.⁷⁹ Marty Smith's *Horse with Hat* examines the poet's family

⁷³ Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld*; Beautrais, *Flow: Whanganui River Poems* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017); Chris Tse *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014); Ian Wedde, 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley', *The Drummer* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993), pp. 25-30.

⁷⁴ Jackson, *I, Clodia, and Other Portraits* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014); Powles, *Sunflowers in Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017); Helen Rickerby, *How To Live* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2019); Amy Brown, *The Odour of Sanctity* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2013).

⁷⁵ Claire Orchard *Cold Water Cure* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016), pp. 108, 109.

⁷⁶ Jenny Powell, *Meeting Rita* (Lyttelton: Cold Hub Press, 2021); Airini Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014).

⁷⁷ Gregory Kan, *This Paper Boat* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2016).

⁷⁸ Vivienne Plumb, *Scarab* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2005).

⁷⁹ Lynn Jenner, *Dear Sweet Harry* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010).

conflict with the hindsight of an adult revisiting childhood memory, and Tim Grgec's *All Tito's Children* traces the experience of Grgec's grandparents in communist Yugoslavia.⁸⁰ Fleur Adcock's *The Land Ballot* is threaded through with her grandparents' experience as immigrants to New Zealand from Manchester.⁸¹ Allen Curnow's long poem 'An Abominable Temper' includes a meditation of the things which the poet inherits from his ancestor and biographical subject, Peter Monro.⁸²

Verse biographers write in service of many different purposes, and there is an abundance of occasional poetry, connecting the work to its moment of conception. Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld* was originally commissioned as the libretto for *Captain Cook in Rarohenga*, an oratorio to celebrate fifty years of the Orpheus Choir, and the poem combines the Pacific stories around Cook's life and legacy with the legendary Greek image of Orpheus as poet and explorer.⁸³ Ian Wedde's poem 'A Ballad For Worser Heberley' was commissioned 'for the Heberley Family Reunion, [at] Pipitea Marae, Easter 1990'. The poem takes the form of a folksy maritime ballad which ties together the Heberley family's European and Māori ancestry.⁸⁴

Verse biographers in Aotearoa New Zealand tend to engage explicitly with the genre and its pressures and their collections are threaded through with reflections on the process of writing verse biography. The processes of remembrance and worship are a generative force in Amy Brown's *The Odour of Sanctity*, in which she evokes the biographical tradition of hagiography as the collection considers six biographical figures, Jeff Magnum, Christina Rossetti, Margery Kempe, Elizabeth of Hungary, Rumworld, and Aurelius Augustine, in the light of their imagined candidacy for sainthood.⁸⁵ Oscar Upperton's *The Surgeon's Brain* focuses on the life of Doctor James Barry, a 'transgender man living in the Victorian era', and contains many lines which provide commentary on biographical processes.

⁸⁰ Marty Smith, *Horse with Hat*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014).

⁸¹ Fleur Adcock, *The Land Ballot* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014).

⁸² Allen Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper' in *An Abominable Temper and Other Poems* (Wellington: Catspaw Press, 1973), pp. 21-35.

⁸³ Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld*; *SOUNZ*, 'Orpheus in Rarohenga: for soprano, tenor and bass soloists, SATB choir and orchestra' <<https://sounz.org.nz/works/16264?locale=en>> [accessed 9 February 2022].

⁸⁴ Wedde, 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley', pp. 25-30.

⁸⁵ Amy Brown, *The Odour of Sanctity* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2013).

In addition to these book-length biographies, there is a wealth of poetic biography which operates in shorter forms. A number of poets embed shorter verse biographies within longer works, as in Helen Rickerby's *How to Live*, which contains an extended 'deconstructed biography' of George Eliot, and Chris Price's *Brief Lives* which contains 'biographical anecdotes and fictional vignettes', and closes with an extended verse biography of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam.⁸⁶ Gregory O'Brien's *Days Beside Water* contains historical sequences featuring the Christian missionaries Samuel Marsden and Mother Mary Aubert.⁸⁷ It is worth noting too the ways in which the focuses and techniques of verse biography energize a wide range of single, short poems which draw on biographical content, without necessarily tracing an extended narrative arc through the lives of those they include. These snapshots are many and contemporary examples include the poems within Michele Leggott's *DIA*, Nina Powles's *Girls of the Drift*, Rickerby's *My Iron Spine*, and throughout Chris Price's *Brief Lives*.⁸⁸ In fact, there are very few Aotearoa New Zealand poets whose corpus does not feature at least one historical or familial figure. Robin Hyde's parents feature in her 'Houses by the Sea' sequence, as they interact with the sands and towns of their lives.⁸⁹ Katherine Mansfield writes also in memorial to her brother lost to war, in the poems 'To L.H.B.' and 'Last night for the first time since you were dead'.⁹⁰ Both Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's *Maori Battalion: A Poetic Sequence*, Robert Sullivan's *Cassino: City of Martyrs/Città Martire* centre the memory of loved ones, Te Ariki Campbell's brother and Sullivan's grandfather, lost to historical moments and events.⁹¹ We can add to this tradition of memorial and family poems, Bill Manhire's 'A Scottish Bride' about his mother, C.K. Stead's 'The Missionary' which features a section about his great-grandfather John Flatt, and Allen Curnow's sonnets about his grandmother and cousin, titled 'Tomb of an ancestor: In

⁸⁶ Helen Rickerby, 'George Eliot: A Life: A Deconstructed Biography' in *How to Live* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2019), pp. 31-56; Chris Price *Brief Lives* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006), cover content, and pp. 109-154.

⁸⁷ Gregory O'Brien *Days Beside Water* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993).

⁸⁸ Michele Leggott, *DIA* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994); Nina Powles, *Girls of the Drift* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2014); Helen Rickerby, *My Iron Spine* (Wellington: HeadworX, 2008); Chris Price, *Brief Lives* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006).

⁸⁹ Robin Hyde, 'Houses by the Sea' in *Robin Hyde Selected Poems* ed. by Lydia Wevers (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 58-70.

⁹⁰ Katherine Mansfield, 'To L.H.B.' and 'Last night for the first time since you were dead', in *The Collected Poems of Katherine Mansfield* ed. by Gerri Kimber and Claire Davison (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2016), p. 147.

⁹¹ Alistair Te Ariki Campbell, *Maori Battalion* (Wellington: Wai-te-ata Press, 2001); Robert Sullivan, *Cassino: City of Martyrs/Città Martire* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2010).

Memoriam, R.L.M.G’, and ‘In Memoriam 2/Lieutenant T.C.F. Ronalds’.⁹² With these familial focuses, the life of the poet and their subject are again called into close contact. This is only a select survey of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, and many more works exist, too, which experiment with the space between verse, autobiography, and biography, including Vana Manasiadis’s *The Grief Almanac*, Robert Sullivan’s *Voice Carried my Family*, Kevin Ireland’s *Looking out to Sea*, Cilla McQueen’s *In a Slant Light: a poet’s Memoir*, Diane Brown’s *Taking My Mother to the Opera*, and Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle’s *Autobiography of a Marguerite*.⁹³ There are a great many more works too which celebrate the combination of biographical portrait and surreal and striking fiction, including Octavia Cade’s *Mary Shelley Makes a Monster*.⁹⁴

While there is clearly a wide range of verse biography in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is, so far, a limited amount of critical material dedicated to the genre. In her article on verse biography, Jackson highlights the many opportunities for extending our understandings of verse biography:

There is work that might be done too on the relation between verse biography and history, and the role of verse biography in revisioning history, recovering facts, changing the record, shifting emphases, and reclaiming forgotten voices. [...] There is theory to be developed about verse biography as narrative, considering aspects of world-building, the construction of setting, the management of incidental detail, and the different approaches that might be taken to historical and geographical accuracy.⁹⁵

My research seizes on some of these opportunities.

In this thesis, I focus on book-length collections and extended poetic sequences, as these provide an opportunity for writers to trace whole, or longer sections of lives, and indeed, even venture into the afterlife. I am interested in the ways in which Aotearoa New

⁹² Bill Manhire, ‘A Scottish Bride’, in *Zoetropes: Poems 1972-82* (Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1984), p. 73; CK Stead, *Collected Poems, 1951–2006* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009), p. 236; Curnow, ‘In Memoriam, R.L.M.G’ in *Allen Curnow: Collected Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Caffin and Terry Sturm (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2017), p. 108.

⁹³ Vana Manasiadis, *The Grief Almanac* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2019); Robert Sullivan, *Voice Carried my Family* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005); Kevin Ireland *Looking Out to Sea* (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2015); Cilla McQueen, *In a Slant Light: a Poet’s Memoir* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2016); Diane Brown, *Taking My Mother to the Opera* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2015); Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle, *Autobiography of a Marguerite* (Hue & Cry Press, 2014).

⁹⁴ Octavia Cade, *Mary Shelley Makes a Monster* (Seattle: Aqueduct Press, 2019).

⁹⁵ Anna Jackson, ‘Introduction: The Verse Biography’, *Biography*, 39.1 (2016), iii-xvi (p. ix).

Zealand verse biographers explore the affordances of the form, and present and complicate the sense of the life unfolding over time. This focus on longer forms also allows me to examine the ways in which these verse biographers self-consciously present their extended research processes, foreground their imaginative interventions and shifts in subjectivity, and engage with the relationships which enliven verse biography. Furthermore, there are repetitions and echoes at work in longer verse biographies which can be less apparent in shorter verse biographies. My focus on these longer verse biographies allow me to trace the ways in which poets evoke, sustain and modify key metaphors and imagery, and elicit affect and sensory response from their readers, and consider the ways that compression and connection shape the overall arc of their texts. It is these distinguishing techniques that I examine in the first section of this thesis. The focus on poetic techniques and extended forms also allows me to track the ways in which verse biographers deploy setting in recurring and shifting ways throughout their collections, and so consider what key concerns might be playing out in these visits.

As we have explored, verse biography is one genre which allows for an expansion of the stories that are told about the past, and the ways in which they can be told. The genre is also characterised by a growing attention to subaltern and marginalised voices.⁹⁶ Many of these poets participate in a contemporary iteration of a reclamation project popularised by intersectional feminism, and postcolonial criticism, in which writers turn their attention to previously neglected historical people and places.⁹⁷ In her poetic essay, *Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay about Captain Cook*, Alice Te Punga Somerville writes of this project undertaken by indigenous poets and scholars writing about the past: ‘We reclaim things and turn them inside out. We make them our own.’⁹⁸ Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography is a genre which is marked by an awareness of the colonial processes of naming and claiming place that have shaped the stories we tell about the past. It is a genre which celebrates Māori understandings of the close connection between people and place, expressed in the te reo identification of Māori as ‘te tangata whenua’, meaning ‘the people of the

⁹⁶ Toussaint.

⁹⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color’, *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241-299 <doi:10.2307/1229039>; Mahuika, ‘New Zealand History is Māori History: Tikanga as the Ethical Foundation of Historical Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 49.1 (2015), 5-30; Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, ‘The Colony’, in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 4th edn, (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp. 242-251.

⁹⁸ Alice Te Punga Somerville, *Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay about Captain Cook* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020), p. 75.

land'.⁹⁹ The integral connection between Māori and the land can be further seen in the use of the shared word 'whenua' for both the land, and the life-giving placenta. This connection between people and place is one which is an essential force in Aotearoa, and an enlivening force in the genre. Each of these verse biographies is rich with specific sites and locations, and many poets engage explicitly and critically with the names given to these places, prioritising Māori names and knowledges. Verse biographers write with an awareness of the land they occupy in the act of telling their stories. Airini Beautrais's selection of the Whanganui River as her biographical subject in *Flow* acknowledges the personhood of the river, and in doing so, prioritises Māori understandings of the connection between people and the land. Beautrais harnesses the river as a biographical subject who is marked by multiplicity and movement. The growing collection of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography is one which is attuned to the multiple historic and linguistic currents which flow through this place.

I have chosen a selection of verse biographies which feature Aotearoa New Zealand settings. I have tended towards works which are fragmented, and resonate with my interest in and commitment to reclamation, as I am interested in the ways in which poets wrestle with their relationships to the people and places of the past. Whether focused on familial or ancestral figures, or famous or largely-forgotten historical figures, the study of verse biography can offer us an insight into the stories that we turn to and the tools we deploy in our storytelling.

Aotearoa New Zealand Verse Biography: Techniques and Key Features

If Woolf wrote in 1927 of 'The New Biography', as a combination of the 'granite' of fact and the 'rainbow' of beauty, we might now conceive of verse biography as an even newer biographical form, perhaps one which favours the refractive rainbow potentials of Woolf's equation. The creative techniques of the poet serve to light up and enliven the biographic project. Verse biography often works to expose the seams of the work's construction and encourages its readers to consider the literary techniques of representation. Verse biographers foreground the fact of their interventions, and explore the relationship between themselves

⁹⁹ *Tangata Whenua: An Illustrated History*, ed. by Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney and Aroha Harris (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2014).

and their subjects, using visual forms and metatextual play to indicate and explore gaps in source material, take creative poetic leaps, and experiment and imagine beyond what is known.

Research

Verse biography is a genre underpinned by research and the pursuit of biographical truth. Despite the relatively slim size of the verse biography, verse biographers, like all biographers, most often undertake extensive research in order to uncover the ‘telling details’ of the lives they evoke. Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers engage with a wide range of archives, both public and private. They seek to expand upon previous archives, and draw on sources from both within and outside of the official, or dominant, story. Poets often sample freely from primary sources, and integrate samples from their subject’s life, including direct quotes from private correspondence, and published and unpublished creative and nonfiction work. These verse biographies are informed by both primary and secondary sources including, but by no means limited to: song, scientific reports, photographs, dictionary entries, zines, newspapers, oral traditions and family histories, literary and religious texts, myth, and existing prose biographies. While verse biography is a genre which is not required to use academic referencing conventions or undergo strict peer review processes, many Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers do include ‘Notes’ or ‘Works Consulted’ pages at either the beginning or the end of their books.¹⁰⁰

Verse biographers bring poetic tools to this exploration, and foreground their intervention, as well as explicitly reflecting on the wider processes of history-making and revision that the genre participates in. Verse biography is a genre which foregrounds the question of how, traditionally, historical narratives have been made and the kinds of evidence that have been used. The historian must draw exclusively on fact, and to a large extent, resist speculation. This has led to exclusions whereby the dominant stories told in biography are those for which there is ample ‘granite’, verifiable facts preserved within public, official or corroborated archives. The preservation of the archive is a selective process and even the

¹⁰⁰ Orchard, *Cold Water Cure*; Powles, *Luminescent*; Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld*.

most carefully curated archives are not politically or ethically neutral spaces. Furthermore, no primary source is 'objective' or without bias. Every biographical trace is in itself historiographic and speaks to its creator and context. Verse biographers often attend to these complexities by engaging a space of self-confessed experimentation and questioning, by foregrounding the questions they ask of the past, and the positions from which they ask them. Verse biographers foreground their creative processes within the poems they write, thus constituting a kind of ongoing statement of positionality. We are reminded often that the verse biographer is not some objective bystander. She is an active creator of the text, and often confesses to the skin she has in the game.

Whereas traditional prose biographies are characterised by extensive and detailed research, authoritative in large part because of their comprehensive reach, verse biographies are comparatively lean books which compress the fruits of thorough research and emphasise the partiality of historical record. Poets often explicitly signal, and revel in, partiality. Ruth Russ emphasises the generative potential of this weaving, in her essay 'Collage biography: Writing a Life With Poetical Truth', highlighting the way in which the combination of partial and disparate sources produces a bricolage portrait.¹⁰¹ It is in the juxtapositions and gaps of the record where the verse biographer does their work. Indeed, verse biographers often highlight the partiality of their sources, and engage with the limitations and complexities of historical record and memory. The speaker of verse biographies often eschew linear chronology and any extended attempt to simulate a removed, third-person voice, and instead evoke multiple viewing and speaking positions, and fragmented timelines. They revel in creative and associative leap, and the ability to inhabit conflicting points of view, and create conflicting versions of their central subject.

Michael Benton maintains that typically in prose biography, 'within a few pages, an orderly chronology asserts itself, charts its course from birth to death, culminating in an appropriate closure.'¹⁰² This linear structure reinforces a Western teleological understanding of time as singular and unidirectional, and can serve to limit the ability to connect memories in associative and multivalent ways. However, this partial and associative manner is the very same way in which we recall memory. Henry James notes this tendency:

¹⁰¹ Ruth Russ, 'Collage Biography: Writing a Life With Poetical Truth', in *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook 2021* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2021), pp. 312-318.

¹⁰² Michael Benton, 'Literary Biography', p. 50.

The figure retained by the memory is compressed and intensified; accidents have dropped away from it and shades have ceased to count; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities.¹⁰³

Lee draws on James's words and traces this tendency in biography, understanding it as a limitation of the genre.

[O]ne of biography's many problems [is] that it can tend to sound too knowing and firm about the shape of its subject's life. Alternatives, missed chances, roads not taken, choices and hesitations, the whole "swarm of possibilities" that hums around our every decision or experience, too often disappear in the "smoothing" biographical process.¹⁰⁴

Lee posits that we might lose some of the sense of the life story unfolding organically, and instead understand the subject's life as a series of foregone conclusions. Here, we might lose something of the shared stumbling in each life, the existence of each person as, in some sense, a fumbler.

Where traditional biography often takes the form of a thick book or series of books, verse biography is typically slimmer, and many of its pages dedicated to an absence of words. Importantly, Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographies do not attempt to capture the whole life and many focus on one or two important events, or episodes from the subject's life. Verse biographers do not have to contend with the expectation of totality that often falls to traditional prose biographers. It is this visual foregrounding of selection and fragmentation, and imaginative treatment of absence and gap, that distinguishes poetry from other forms of writing; and which distinguishes verse biography from other forms of biography at a first glance.

With the lean form of the verse biography, and the white space generated by stanza and line breaks, as well as occasional concrete forms, verse biographers visually mark absence. Jackson writes of poetry's unique form: 'The line breaks, stanza breaks, and spaces on the pages make the works shorter still, at once moving the narrative more rapidly on, and

¹⁰³ Henry James, 'James Russell Lowell', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1892, as quoted in Lee, *Body Parts*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Lee, 'Examined Lives', p. 297.

demanding a different sort of attention from the reader that may slow the reading down.¹⁰⁵ Verse biographers put this form to active use. They self-consciously embrace gaps and absences in the historical record and open this indeterminacy to function as a productive space where readers are invited to participate in a collaborative process of meaning making. The chronology of the life story is often fragmented and reordered. Often, the fact of the subject's death is established early in the text or is even positioned in the title of the text.¹⁰⁶

Poets often foreground their engagement with historical source material within the verse biography itself. Within the poetic body of *This Paper Boat*, an unnamed speaker confesses with a voice that could speak on behalf of all historical researchers and writers as he states: 'I don't know anything about | the past except | for what the past has left me.'¹⁰⁷ With these words, we are reminded that this collection, and every other verse biography, and for that matter, every historical text, operates in a state of incompleteness. The collection's compression, in part, reflects the partiality of available source materials. They are made up of the partial relics of a life that has, most often passed. However, verse biographers approach these gaps with the poet's eye for critical exploration and poetic experimentation and imagination.

In many Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographies, the poets signal their awareness of the partiality of their sources explicitly within the text of the collection itself. Verse biographers often use their speakers to highlight the processes of forgetting which ensure that any recollection is partial, and any biography is, unavoidably incomplete. In Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, Tse's speaker, who while unnamed, seems to speak with the poet's voice, reflects on the way in which details, if not recorded, are lost to the hush of history:

Time is set to thieving
your everything
lost to the barren ink.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Anna Jackson, 'The Verse Biography: Introduction', *Biography*, 39.1 (2016), p. vii.

¹⁰⁶ Tse, *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*; Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld*.

¹⁰⁷ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Tse, p. 5.

How to be Dead in the Year of Snakes reflects on the way in which political and cultural forces of racism and xenophobia ensured that Joe Kum Yung's life was—in the swirl of contemporary news reporting, and the many texts dedicated to his murderer—systematically placed as a footnote to the life of his murderer. Joe Kum Yung's biography was neglected, unrendered, relatively inkless. Tse writes:

The heaviness of the years
tests our defences and
questions our beliefs
so when pain is stretched
across decades of silence
a slip of the tongue could demolish
entire histories.¹⁰⁹

The remedy to this very real risk, a speaker in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* states in a poetic 'interview' with Tse in the first page of the collection, is remembrance, the recalling of Yung's life: 'talking is what will anchor me in their thoughts'.¹¹⁰ It is this act of recalling and remembrance that is the central work of the verse biographer.

Other verse biographers similarly tackle the gaps of the historical record explicitly. Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper' opens using a framing structure which sees the poem's speaker, H.A.H. Monro, addressing his daughter Ada, the imagined intended audience of the poem. However, his anxiety is also that of the verse biographer, as he signals the limitations of his knowledge:

What little do I know?

Really very little indeed.

You suggest that I write it down.

Well, Ada, I shall try.

As much as I remember,

¹⁰⁹ Tse, p. 51.

¹¹⁰ Tse, p. 1.

having forgotten the most.¹¹¹

Verse biography is a genre which makes generative space of this reality, of ‘most’ of the life story having been lost to time, and instead prioritises the distinct, telling poetic details and defining episodes of the life. Later in Curnow’s poem, the speaker again confesses to the blurring effects of time on memory, professing: ‘I forget what, precisely.’¹¹² In a later curious passage, the speaker, while attempting to place the death of his grandfather, directly addresses Ada, and thus the reader:

Trafalgar?

Why not, if it suits you?

Any other battle would do.¹¹³

With these words, we are challenged to acknowledge our position as audience, and the ways in which our expectations influence the speaker here. It seems like the speaker is simultaneously signalling a lack of evidence, while acknowledging that this detail is not central to the story he is telling: the telling detail is that the death is one which occurred in the context of war. Curnow uses this absence of evidence to point us towards a salient truth. The speaker reminds us that there are many battles to die in, and that these battles are perhaps blurred and even lost in the passage of time.

Elsewhere, verse biographers draw attention to the effects of historical conditions upon the creation and preservation of primary sources. Beautrais’s poem ‘Press’ explores the way in which the newspapers of Roberts’s contemporary moment tell a selective story about his life and death: ‘In powdery ink and stinking newsprint | you are pressed into a shape.’¹¹⁴ Beautrais, like each of these verse biographers, remains keenly aware of the processes of shaping which unfold within their own collections. Tim Grgec reflects on historic processes of silencing and their relationship with blank space in his collection *All Tito’s Children*, when

¹¹¹ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 21.

¹¹² Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 24.

¹¹³ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*. p. 39.

writing about the 1948 order from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to remove ‘all state photographs in which | government officials appear in company with Marshal Tito’.¹¹⁵ Even in their contemporary moment, certain figures were subject to active and intentional erasure. Grgec goes on to explore the propaganda that accompanied this erasure, in lines that simultaneously gesture, perhaps uncomfortably, to the poet’s use of white space:

Moscow assures

that these traces of the past will not vanish, but rather bring

another past into view. Officially, the process will be known as

the Recirculation of Blank Spaces.¹¹⁶

In a way, it is the verse biographer’s job to examine and foreground the blank spaces of the historical record, referencing absence in their words, and in the white space of the poet’s page. It is possible, in this genre, that other, more inclusive versions of the past might come into view.

Absence is elsewhere marked with metafictional play, as when Grgec references official documents in which: ‘[remainder of page is missing]’.¹¹⁷ Nina Powles similarly engages visual experimentation to explore themes of erasure and redaction. Powles’s poems ‘Her and the Flames’ from the chapbook of the same title, ‘Lucid Dream’ from *Sunflowers*, and ‘Luminosity’ in *The Glowing Space Between Stars*, make erasure poetry from primary sources, including newspaper articles, journal entries, and scientific writing.¹¹⁸ Powles acknowledges the use of these sources in ‘Notes’ pages at the end of each collection, however she turns these texts to radically different purposes. Indeed, ‘Luminosity’ offers an insight into the task of the verse biographer too, quoted here without the vast grey erasure which serves as line break: ‘the composition of luminosity is stars,[...] and background light’.¹¹⁹ The ‘background light’, or in the case of the poet, the white space of the page, is an integral part of the text and its illuminating powers.

¹¹⁵ Tim Grgec, *All Tito’s Children* (Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington Press, 2021), p. 15.

¹¹⁶ Grgec, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ Grgec, p. 62.

¹¹⁸ Powles, *Her and the Flames* in *Luminescent*, p. 20, p. 15; Powles, *Sunflowers* in *Luminescent*, p. 10, p. 20, p. 9; Powles, *The Glowing Space Between Stars* in *Luminescent*, p. 7, p. 20; Christine Cole Catley, *Bright Star: Beatrice Hill Tinsley, Astronomer* (Cape Catley, 2006).

¹¹⁹ Powles, ‘Luminosity’ in *The Glowing Space Between Stars*, p. 7.

Like biographers, verse biographers often undertake place-based research, travelling to visit the same places that their biographical subjects once occupied. They take road trips and plane trips, and visit libraries and museums, graveyards and monuments. The poet's experience of the place contemporaneously rings loud in these collections, and many verse biographies function as a sort of poetic record of the moment in which the collection was written, and thus an episode within the verse biographer's own life story. While some prose biographers such as Richard Holmes incorporate the story of their research within their books, this is by no means the prevailing practice that it is within verse biography.¹²⁰ This research process is often treated actively and explicitly within the texts of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography. Claire Orchard's poem 'In the library with Darwin's red notebook', speaks to the experience of working with her subject's original manuscripts:

open on the table,
ocean-stained pages of your notebook drift,
pencilled lines, smudgy in places, your handwriting untidy,
at times unclear. I make out *inosculation* with a single line
through it, representation added above, but what word is that,
starting with *s*?¹²¹

Orchard illuminates the experiences of questioning which belong to the poet-researcher. Even in the presence of tangible primary sources, there remain ambiguities, spaces where the verse biographer must fill in the blanks and read for contexts and clues. This research is also an embodied experience, which generates its own autobiographic details, and is a process shaped by, and which in turn shapes, the poet's very body. Another of Orchard's poems, 'Smooth', bears testament to this, and evokes the sense of the poet as a Darwinian subject:

Tonight, my jaw aches;

¹²⁰ Richard Holmes, *This Long Pursuit: Reflections of a Romantic Biographer* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016).

¹²¹ Orchard, p. 33.

I think it's something to do
with too much scrolling through
The Origin of Species, underlining
all the evolutionary haiku
hiding there, and
it may be related to the way
the doctor who had my skull x-rayed
when I was nine
told my mother over my head
that my jaw was *grossly deformed*.¹²²

Orchard reminds us that the writing of the verse biography is a physical process which draws the history of each figure into close, multidirectional contact. Darwin is subject to Orchard's research, and she is in turn subject to the physical demands of researching his life. The sense of research as an embodied process is one which many Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers share with their readers. Many collections contain textual collages that encourage the reader to consider the poetic use of the page, and at times even speak in the imperative voice, urging the reader to turn the book in their hands. Orchard's 'Twelve voices over five courses' collects anonymized quotes from a book *What about Darwin?* by Thomas F. Flick, which gathers a range of historical and contemporary perspectives on Darwin and his work.¹²³ The poem forms a border around the page which urges us to rotate the book in our hands to follow the line. We are reminded also of the materiality of the poet's account, and we are encouraged, quite explicitly, to tip the voices of the past on their heads, to change our way of reading, to revise our way of seeing. Another of Orchard's poems, 'Fully informed', speaks in the imperative voice, and offers the poetic line as bar graph:

¹²² Orchard, p. 71.

¹²³ Orchard, pp. 86-87, p. 10; Thomas F. Glick, *What About Darwin?* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010).

Rotate this verse 90 degrees anti-
clockwise to reveal a graph of the reported sexual assaults in the
Wellington district
between 1995
and 2010. Note how levels of
sexual violence fluctuate
significantly
from year to year¹²⁴

With these poetic techniques, we join the verse biographer in their exploration of the archives and share a sense of encountering data and primary sources. We too encounter the facts both in sentences and a visual form, offering us two modes in which to understand their gravity. Throughout *Dear Neil Roberts*, Beautrais vividly describes her research process, which sees her undertake roadtrips, visit friends and key sites from Roberts's life, and, in the poem 'Finding the dead', a heritage library.¹²⁵ Here, she is not alone:

All these people are after something bygone;
hoarding scraps, paper clipping.
The photocopier opens and closes.
Books disgorge their guts.
A boy walks out with a page of photos,
his ancestors waving in the wind.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Orchard, p. 102.

¹²⁵ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 22.

¹²⁶ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 22.

Beautrais imbues these moments of discovery with poetic imagination and emphasises the piecemeal selection of each of these researchers. Her dual description of the paper and the people depicted on it ‘waving’ too highlights the way that the dead can be resurrected through research, and how through a researcher’s intervention and recontextualization of them outside of the archive, they can be made to move. Just as the ancestors of Beautrais’s poem wave from the page of photos, verse biographers often wink and wave from the pages of their poems.

Poetic Imagination

Just as Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers foreground their research processes, they too foreground their poetic interventions, and the imaginative spaces opened up by the verse form. The publication of the book *Speculative Biography* in 2021 marks a growing recognition of the role of speculation within biography, and the various forms of biography which foreground and celebrate this speculation.¹²⁷ Verse biography is a natural fit within this family of subgenres, and features in three of the book’s chapters.¹²⁸

In Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, many of the poems are arranged in an associative order, rather than a chronological one, and contain moments where the verse biographer speaks in the first person and signals their subjectivity, highlighting the presence of their conjectures and guesses. Verse biographers are permitted to speculate and imagine more freely than traditional prose biographers. Poets are, afterall, permitted and expected to draw on the surreal and the impossible, to wax lyrical, and even invent. They are able to step off the historian’s path of granite, and experiment with James’s ‘swarm of possibilities’.¹²⁹ Verse biographers embrace the unknown, and open this space as a setting in which the

¹²⁷ *Speculative Biography*, ed. by Donna Lee Brien and Kiera Lindsey (New York: Routledge, 2021).

¹²⁸ William G. Pooley, ‘Show Your Workings: Towards a Creative Historical Toolkit’, in *Speculative Biography*, ed. by Donna Lee Brien and Kiera Lindsey (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 75-94; Anne M. Carson, ‘Using Informed Imagination When Writing About Controversial Characters: The Case of Dr Felix Kersten and Himmler’, in *Speculative Biography*, pp. 199-218; Jessica Wilkinson, ‘Choreographing George Balanchine: The Life as Ballet Program’, in *Speculative Biography*, pp. 131-146.

¹²⁹ Henry James, ‘James Russell Lowell’, *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1892; quoted in Lee, *Body Parts*, p. 2.

unknowable can be imagined. One of verse biography's affordances lies in its embrace of the 'might', and the 'maybe'.

Many verse biographers follow their subjects into the beyond, and use poetry to evoke forms which cross the line between the living and the dead. They embrace the spaces of myth and haunting, and write letters to, and hold interviews with, the dead. Margaret Atwood, in her book on writing titled *Negotiating With the Dead* writes: 'perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down, by a fear of and a fascination with mortality – by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.'¹³⁰ Verse biography is a genre which often literalises this trip, creating imaginary space where the setting of the underworld is a place the poet imagines for their subject. Verse biographers including Sullivan, Tse, and Kan explore the spiritual fate of their subjects, and the ways in which their redemption depends, in part, on their remembrance by the living. Elsewhere, verse biographers blur the line between here and the beyond, using language and its exchange as a currency for passage. *All Tito's Children*, and *Dear Neil Roberts* make use of the epistolary form, writing letters to the dead. The epistolary form emphasises the very purpose of the written word, to connect people across time and space. Its traditional address too enacts an intimacy, invoking the 'dear' departed, and opens a generic possibility of an impossible response. Jackson notes 'Letters, of course, are written to compensate for absence, and poems written as letters [...] resonate with the unlikeliness of response.'¹³¹ Indeed, verse biography is, on the whole, a genre which asks more questions even as it uncovers possible answers.

These letters, and indeed these verse biographies often ask impossible questions, probing the gaps in historical fact. One striking example of this is the question posed by Beautrais in her poem 'A nice night'.¹³² The question: 'What went through your head, Neil' circulates throughout the poem and is the central question of Beautrais's collection, as she seeks to understand the final acts of her subject.¹³³ Indeed, this question of what went through a subject's head is perhaps one of the most enlivening questions that biographers and verse biographers can take up.

Verse biographies are rife too with liminal spectres, and themes of haunting. Verse biographers have spoken of the sense of being haunted by their subjects, with Kan describing

¹³⁰ Atwood, *Negotiating With the Dead*, (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 156.

¹³¹ Jackson, *Actions & Travels: How Poetry Works* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2022), p. 167.

¹³² Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 27.

¹³³ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 27.

his writing and research of *This Paper Boat* as a kind of ‘extended séance’.¹³⁴ The genre is one generated by biographical traces and ghostly echoes. The imagination of what lays beyond the knowable beckons.

Metaphor, Image and Compression

As with any biography, the life story within a verse biography is necessarily a compressed one. The poetic affordances of sensory imagery and metaphor allow the verse biographer to create symbols for wider webs of understanding. Fiona Hamilton writes of the metaphoric processes at play in memoir: ‘Memoirs—like all media—have a “schema”: there is a tendency to represent or remember one event or person in terms of another.’¹³⁵ In this way, verse biographies are explicitly relational, and each image and phrase conjures a nexus of connections within both the present and the past. We are invited to read key moments, images and lives in conversation with others. Poetry is a particularly potent site of this kind of representation, and we are primed to notice it in our reading. Verse biographers draw on shared cultural images, in order to encapsulate complex ideas with direct sensory impact. These images both stand in place of ideas, as metaphors, and create rich webs of understanding, and connection to the reader. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s book, *Metaphors We Live By*, argues that metaphor is foundational to all understanding, ‘pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.’¹³⁶ Metaphoric imagery helps us to position memories within shared explanatory frameworks, and so becomes a kind of shorthand or symbol which we call on to make sense of our innermost experiences. We can feel uprooted or out of place. We can map our

¹³⁴ Ellen Falconer, ‘Poetry from a Séance: Gregory Kan on his collection *This Paper Boat*’, *The Wireless*, 13 May (2016) <<http://thewireless.co.nz/articles/poetry-from-a-séance-gregory-kan-on-his-collection-this-paper-boat>> [accessed 8 December 2021].

¹³⁵ Fiona Hamilton, ‘Pioneering History: Negotiating Pakeha Collective Memory in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 36.1, (2002), 66–81 <<http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/document/?wid=325&page=0&action=null>> [accessed 15 January 2019], p. 69.

¹³⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 3.

understandings. We can carry our own moral compass. This process is especially relevant to verse biography which tackles biography and thus history with extreme compression, summoning and building characters and events using relatively few words. Poets draw on the power of metaphor in their work, using single lines, words, or even sounds to quickly recall events, and engage whole webs of associations and subtexts. The poetic use of image is key to this process.

Helen Vendler reminds us that metaphor and imagery is closely related to the aim of poetry to make thought visible:

In poems, thinking is made visible not only to instruct but also to delight; it must enter somehow into the imaginative and linguistic fusion engaged in by the poem. While retaining its fierce intelligence, poetic thinking must not unbalance the poem in the direction of “thought.” [...] The image itself, as both the product of thought and the bearer of thought, becomes thought made visible.¹³⁷

The act of writing is perhaps itself an act of translation, where actual thought is represented by symbols on a page. Verse biography is also a form in which the image is central, and poetic imagery both contains thought, and generates it. Verse biographers deploy image for affective effect and select images as a series of pulse points within their subjects’ lives. These key images often appear as motifs, and connect otherwise temporally disjointed or fragmented moments within the text. While many of these images are, importantly, to do with setting—for example, Kan’s collection returns again and again to the beach; Powles’s *Whale Fall* cannot stray far from the beach and its close home; even as Sullivan’s collection imagines the beyond, it retains a strong sense of the beach—many other key images are also drawn from primary sources, biographical objects which once touched the skin of the living subject, and remain as talismans to obsess and guide the poet.

Additionally, verse biographers engage with the ways in which the very tools of their trade are freighted with inherited meaning. Many verse biographers explore the simultaneous compression and capaciousness of language, tracing the etymologies of select words. Poets foreground the nexus of meanings and inheritances which travel with language, and the

¹³⁷ Helen Vendler, *Poets thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 9.

speaker of Oscar Upperton's *The Surgeon's Brain* speaks of the long line of bodies which echo behind the use of any one word:

Each curve and
corner of my body could be written out with a learned hand, and
each name written has another name behind it.¹³⁸

Elsewhere, verse biographers interrogate the nexus of ideas that accompany words, and the cultural paradigms that give them context and meaning, as with Kan's exploration of the origins of 'garden', and the Māori word 'tangi'.¹³⁹ These explorations highlight the shared ground on which we each meet the past, and the shared vocabulary we each turn to, to express this encounter. Indeed, biography itself can be understood as a metaphor for the human condition. Ira Nadel asserts that metaphor is at the heart of biography, and constitutes a key way of knowing: 'For readers, the appeal of biography is more than curiosity; it is, rather, the discovery and identification of metaphor which is the recognition of universal aspects of human behaviour through the particular actions of an individual life.'¹⁴⁰ Metaphors can be potent sites of connection between the reader and the biographical subject, and hold a mirror up to shared cultural understandings and experiences. We look to the lives of the others to better understand our own.

Affect and the Senses

Core to the biographical project is the life of an embodied subject. Margaret Atwood reminds us of the embodiment and revision so core to memory: "Remembering" as a pun may of course have two senses – it is the act of memory, but it is also the opposite of dismembering. Or this is what the ear hears.'¹⁴¹ The verse biographer's job is to re-member the biographical

¹³⁸ Oscar Upperton, *The Surgeon's Brain* (Wellington: Te Herenga Waka University Press, 2022), p. 19.

¹³⁹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, pp. 4, 25.

¹⁴⁰ Nadel, p. 166.

¹⁴¹ Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, p. 149.

subject, and restore a sense of the body at the centre of the life story. Verse biographers are especially alert to the potential of poetry to elicit embodied affect, and the ways in which this might allow us to draw the past close. Eschewing the suggestion of objectivity or self-removal, verse biography often works in sensory terms, and evokes what Anna Jackson terms a sense of ‘affection and intimacy’.¹⁴² When we encounter poetry, we are clued in to its heightened use of language. From our first glance of its shape on the page, we understand that we are encountering something distilled, something that moves and breathes in a different way to other literary forms. Poetry is a form which seeks to evoke the reader’s senses, and to instruct the reader’s body. In addition to punctuation and word choice, the verse biographer has command of poetic line break, and stanza break, as well as experimental visual forms, to guide as to when to pause, when to breathe, and when to continue, breathless, through enjambment. The poem demands the hush of the white page and asks us to linger longer with each word. This generative potential of poetic technique is especially primed toward eliciting a response that speaks to, and lives in, the body. It also allows for a deepening of ideas and elicits an emotional response—Vendler’s ‘delight’. Cole Swensen writes that

the fully complex version [of truth] must incite the imagination of the reader beyond simply absorbing facts and into a responsive engagement with them because that engagement is a crucial part of truth. It’s the emotional part, which can’t be told; it must be felt, which can be achieved through imagination, but not through idea.¹⁴³

This evocation of the sensory and the felt is perhaps the poet’s greatest asset, and is one that verse biographers use to hold the people of the past close. In this way, verse biographies remind us that feeling and thinking, and writing and reading, are processes that take place within a body. Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers do not shy away from placing their own bodies on the line for, or rather, in the lines of, their work. Ruth Padel further highlights the importance of genuine emotional response which is at the core of poetry:

Responding is what matters: the reader’s unconscious as well as conscious mind is at work in reacting to the poem, just as the poet’s conscious and unconscious thoughts

¹⁴² Jackson, Anna ‘A Life in Lines: Katherine Mansfield and New Forms of Biography’, p. 121.

¹⁴³ Cole Swensen, ‘News That Stays News’, in *Noise That Stays Noise: Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 53- 66 (p. 58-59).

worked together to make it...Borges said a poem is completed by the reader: it does not exist till it is read.¹⁴⁴

Verse biography's poetic affordances create a space in which readers can encounter historic fact in a way which elicits a personal, felt, response. This response is explored in the study of 'Affect Theory', undertaken by theorists including Derek Attridge, Ngai Sianne, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Patrick Colm Hogan.¹⁴⁵ This work aims to explore the ways that different forms of language can elicit emotional response, and examine the consequences of these experiences. Attridge writes:

If the work of art is an event, it is an event that occurs in a medium (or more than one medium), and part of the pleasure we experience as participants in the event is a pleasure in the medium itself as it reveals some of its powers and possibilities.¹⁴⁶

We are invited, in our engagement with verse biography, to take pleasure in the medium of the written word, and its poetic affordances. Part of the pleasure of reading poetry is in the awareness of the slower and intensified attention we bring to the page. Meaning is created in the moment the poem is read, and we are invited, both body and mind, to attend. Helen Vendler reinforces this idea, emphasizing the importance of 'excitement' in forming both ideas and poetry:

Within poems, a drama is formally enacted by which we observe a mind generating forms in an excited state; we participate in that drama as we are worked on by the linguistic processes in view.¹⁴⁷

Indeed, part of our enjoyment in reading poetry, is our surrendering to its ways of working on us. We are invited to be moved, to be changed in the process of engaging with a poem.

¹⁴⁴ Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 57.

¹⁴⁵ Derek Attridge, 'Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance' in *Textual Practice*, 25. 2 (2011), 329-343 <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1080/0950236X.2011.552295>>, [accessed 6 December 2018] (p. 333); Andrew Bennett, and Nicholas Royle 'Feelings', in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, ed. By Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp.88-99; Ngai Sianne, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Affect Studies and Literary Criticism', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2016) <DOI 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.105>; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁶ Attridge, 'Once more with feeling: art, affect and performance', p. 333.

¹⁴⁷ Vendler, p. 6.

Biographical Relationships and Point of View

The central historical subject is the key figure in verse biography. This subject speaks through the presence and echoes of biographical traces, the primary sources with which the biographer must engage if she is to produce something distinct from fiction. However, these traces are made to sing by the poet—the verse biographer must intervene. As the speaker of Upperton’s *The Surgeon’s Brain* muses: ‘To sketch the bones of the hand requires the use of the hand’.¹⁴⁸ No biography can be created, or read, without the intervention of and engagement with another life. The presence of the creator is of course not unique to poetry, as Jane Hirshfield posits:

In the realm of art, knowledge carries with it at all times an inevitable flavor—the individuality of the artist is in the work as the physical hands of the potter are in the clay, no matter how smoothed. It may be said this is true of all knowledge, that even a scientific calculation bears the marks of its human and social context. But in a work of art, the signs of personal sensibility are a part of what we look for.¹⁴⁹

While biography purports to present the life of a central historical figure, it cannot help but bear the mark of its maker and reflect the audience for whom it is written. Verse biography highlights the three-way engagement which biography of all forms necessitates. Paula Backscheider states that ‘biography has always been [...] the dynamic interaction of lives, those of biographer, subject, and the reader.’¹⁵⁰ Backscheider’s description of biography as a ‘dynamic interaction’ is key here, acknowledging the demands of the genre and the many people engaged in it. While all biography navigates this dynamic interaction, verse biographers often make these encounters explicit, producing multiple poetic personas and speaking from many different perspectives. Verse biographers are able to slip between poetic skins, and at times occupy impossible and speculative spaces. They speak at times using a chorus-like collective of imagined dialogues. Through these, and other, creative methods of

¹⁴⁸ Upperton, p. 24.

¹⁴⁹ Jane Hirshfield, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), p. 42.

¹⁵⁰ Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography*, p. 162.

treating the poet's interventions, we are invited to participate in the meaning making of the text. Through its foregrounding of subjectivity, verse biography encourages us to consider our positionality as readers.

Verse biography is a genre which makes space for radical shifts in perspective and point of view, shifting between the third, second and first person. Radical and often unmarked shifts in perspective are present in nearly every verse biography, and verse biographers often seize on the opportunity to inhabit their biographical subjects in the first person, imagining their way into their voices. Sullivan makes Cook plead from the beyond. Zelas imagines Dean's thoughts during her final trial, as she was not allowed to speak. Powles speaks from the perspective of the school ghost at Queen Margaret College in Wellington. Each of these shifts bear the mark of the poet's voice and poetics. Sullivan's exploration is driven by his experiences as a poet of Ngā Puhī, Kāi Tahu, and Scottish descent, interested in the intersection of Māori and Classical stories.¹⁵¹ Zelas's imagination of Dean's thought processes are shaped by her experience as a woman, and a psychiatrist and psychotherapist.¹⁵² Powles's *Luminescent* extends her earlier work on reclaiming historical women in *Girls of the Drift*.¹⁵³

Kan's *This Paper Boat* contains some of the most radical weaving of point of view in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, and the collection directly addresses the fluid shifts that the book makes through time, and between narrative perspectives. Hyde's voice haunts this collection, appearing through Kan's use of her fiction. Kan also evokes wordplay to explore the ways in which she is simultaneously present and absent in these poems. In the collection's front matter, opposite the opening poem, Kan notes: 'The apparition or figuration of Hyde is sometimes indicated in the short, as 'I.' But I also like to think that she, and the other ghosts, can be found in all the white spaces of these poems'.¹⁵⁴ With this note, Kan signals his conception of Hyde as an apparition, and acknowledges the ways in which this collection is marked by her absence in death. When Kan writes of Hyde, he writes of a ghost. In emphasising this, Kan centres the way that poetic silences can reflect and address silences and absences in reality. In an interview, Kan has referred to the collection as a kind of

¹⁵¹ Robert Sullivan, *Jazz Waiata* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1990); Sullivan, *Star Waka* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1999).

¹⁵² Zelas, back matter.

¹⁵³ Powles, *Girls of the Drift* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2014).

¹⁵⁴ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, front matter.

‘extended séance’.¹⁵⁵ Kan’s shortening of Iris’s name to ‘I.’ doubles as a personal pronoun, and so allows the reader to occupy Hyde’s point of view for fleeting moments. However, where this occurs, the third person narrative perspective is reinforced either immediately in the same phrase, or in the next sentence.¹⁵⁶ Kan challenges his reader to both attempt to occupy Wilkinson’s perspective, and understand the limitations of this occupation.

Indeed, this admittance of the marks of the poet within the frame of the work is one of the distinguishing aspects of verse biography, and this intervention is not devoid of consequence. Where a biographical figure is deceased, biographers speak of a feeling of being haunted by the dead, aware of the presence of a very real person, inescapable by any fast-footed literary play. The existence of descendants also haunts the biographer, a still-living trace capable of an all-too-corporeal response.

Rather than seek to minimise this fact, Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers instead foreground this relationship between themselves and their subjects, admitting the subjectivity present in their work and treating it creatively and directly. In doing so, verse biographers often create a space in which the reader is encouraged to reflect upon her positionality too. This explicit and nuanced engagement with subjectivity is a key feature of verse biography. Verse biography is a genre which acknowledges that the very selection of a historical subject to research and respond to, is an act imbued by the personal. Verse biographers draw themselves close to their historical subjects, and in doing so, at times blur the lines between biography and autobiography. Furthermore, the biographer is present in the selection of the details they include, in the language they invoke and the narrative arc they draw. Biography then, is at least partly, unavoidably autobiographical. Emma Johnson notes that:

There is an inevitable jousting between the autobiographical and biographical in any act of interpretation or reconstruction, but verse biography stands apart in its approach – it is deliberate and self-aware, conscious of its subjectivity. Not only does verse biography provide another framing for the story of a historical person [...] [b]ut there

¹⁵⁵ Falconer.

¹⁵⁶ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, pp. 2, 4, 23, 39, 40, 41, 43, 53, 54, 55, 57, 68, 71, 74, 75.

is also a framing of the relationship between subject and writer, which propels us to consider whose voice is speaking through these works[.]¹⁵⁷

Rather than attempting to obscure the author of the collection as an impartial speaker, many verse biographers elect to self-consciously explore their relationship with the construction of the text using first-person pronouns or meta-poetic devices such as direct address to signal their mediation. Colwill reminds us that this experimentation is not undertaken to undermine historical knowledges, but to more deeply examine our engagements with them:

‘Paradoxically, we may best be able to view our subjects at their full historical distance when we interrogate our processes of identification with them.’¹⁵⁸ These interrogations of identification take place both within the verse biography’s content, and at a structural level within the genre. Jackson notes that this relationship can in fact inform the very foundation of verse biographies:

the closeness—and distance—between the writer and the subject often affects the verse biography at a more structural level, while giving rise, too, to sometimes startling flourishes. If writing about the biographical subject is often a way of exploring aspects of the self, in the verse biography this identification can structure a whole collection[.]¹⁵⁹

The relationship between the biographer and their subject is especially pertinent where the two are related. Allen Curnow’s ‘An Abominable Temper’ speaks to a sense of relationship and inheritance. Indeed, Curnow writes himself into the end of the poem, and foregrounds his position as a descendent of his subject:

So far, dear Ada,

so near, perhaps I should say,

I have picked my thread for you,

¹⁵⁷ Emma Johnson, ‘Book Review: Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada Australia and New Zealand edited by Anna Jackson, Helen Rickerby and Angelina Sbroma’, *Booksellers New Zealand* <<https://booksellersnz.wordpress.com/2017/02/23/book-review-truth-and-beauty-verse>> [accessed 13 July 2018].

¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth Colwill, ‘Subjectivity, Self-Representation, and the Revealing Twitches of Biography’, *French Historical Studies*, 24.3 (2001), 421-437 <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/11891>> [accessed 26 April 2019], p. 431.

¹⁵⁹ Anna Jackson, ‘The Verse Biography: Introduction’, *Biography*, 39. 1 (2016), p. ix.

my child, my other children,
your children, their children,
great-grandchildren of mine,
among others, Arnold, John, Allen,
great-great grandsons Wystan, Timothy,
Simon.¹⁶⁰

In this way, Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers actively treat and foreground their relationship to their biographical subjects. They profess that the verse biography provides a ‘way in’, to both learning something about the past and uncovering something about themselves.

Collections such as Tusiata Avia’s *Bloodclot* (2009) demonstrate the generative potential of embracing the relationship between the verse biographer and her subject. Nafanua, the focal character of Avia’s collection, is explored at once within the context of her story as the mythological Samoan goddess of war, and is at the same time radically recontextualised. Avia reclaims the mythic Samoan goddess Nafanua in part by combining her story with Nafanua’s, connecting the two so tightly that they are, for much of the book, quite inseparable, traversing time and space as a single auto/biographical figure. Nafanua crosses borders of space and time and appears as a simultaneously historical and contemporary figure. Nafanua travels in taxis and aeroplanes, she visits Egypt and Russia, she watches *Sixty Minutes*.¹⁶¹ This connection is a distinctive and enlivening feature of the collection. Avia offers a generous insight into her conclusions about the importance of drawing these two lives together as an act of reclamation. Her selection of Nafanua was a decision fraught with difficult questions, as she explains in the essay ‘I Go to my Sister-Artists and We Talk’:

Years ago, when I was writing my second book, *Bloodclot*, I received a friendly warning from a mentor to be careful when writing about Nafanua, the Samoan goddess of war, to be aware She has a gafa or whakapapa, that She has living

¹⁶⁰ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 28.

¹⁶¹ Tusiata Avia, *Bloodclot*, pp. 82-83, 89, 79, 53.

descendants. This warning froze me for a while. I thought: Who am I to be writing about Nafanua? I looked at my piles of research and promptly stopped writing.¹⁶²

We are reminded again of the life story at the centre of every biography, and the lives that are descended from and connected to each biographical subject. This whakapapa is one which every verse biographer writes in an awareness of and must come to terms with. Avia's decision came from her sense of a cultural understanding of Nafanua as a Samoan goddess:

But, after a while, the answer to my question came: I am a Samoan woman and I can't claim physical whakapapa to Nafanua, but, as a Samoan woman, if I can't connect to this mighty goddess, this potent source of inspiration and guidance, if She can't be a guiding force for me — then who can? I don't claim physical whakapapa to Her, but I do claim spiritual and creative whakapapa. The goddess — and we all have our Pacific (and other) goddesses: Hina, Pele, Lilavatu, Hinenuitepō — belongs to us all. As Pacific women, we belong to Her. This is the knowing. The thing we do not yet know that we know. The thing embedded within us that we are chipping away at to more fully reveal.¹⁶³

Avia emphasises the ways in which verse biography can be a space which allows for a creative reconnection to histories which indigenous people have been distanced from through separation from their whenua and ancestral homes. The researching and writing of verse biography can be a restorative act, one where poets can reclaim their stories from the voices of cultural outsiders, and tell them in their own voices, using their own lives as waypoints:

When I write about the legends of Nafanua, the Samoan goddess of war, or of Taema and Tilafaiga, the Samoan Siamese twins, I have to spend hours combing through dusty books written by nineteenth-century male German anthropologists, because: I was brought up in Christchurch. I didn't learn these stories at my grandmother's knee, in my father's village in Samoa.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Tusiata Avia, 'I Go to my Sister-Artists and We Talk', *The Fusebox: Essays on Writing from Victoria University's International Institute of Modern Letters*, ed. by Emily Perkins and Chris Price (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017), pp. 196-203, (pp. 199-200).

¹⁶³ Tusiata Avia, 'I Go to my Sister-Artists and We Talk', p. 200.

¹⁶⁴ Tusiata Avia, 'I Go to my Sister-Artists and We Talk', p. 199.

In verse biography, poets explore the stories of those peoples and places from which they might otherwise be distanced. The dual modes of historical research and autobiography, fact and imagining provide a fertile space for reclamation.

Avia's account here offers a generous and invaluable insight into the processes of self-reflexivity in which many contemporary New Zealand verse biographers take part. This presence of living descendants and relatives is true of most, if not all, subjects of verse biography. While all biographical subjects arrive to their poets with their own canon of stories and existing interpretations, biographical subjects who were both living people, and are important mythic figures, carry unique ethical questions. This is something which many verse biographers grapple with, and many respond by foregrounding their relationship to their biographical subject, acknowledging their positionality from the very opening pages. As we explored in the opening of this thesis, there is an abundance of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography written about poet's ancestors, emphasizing the importance of these life stories even to the poet's very own existence.

For many Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers, their project is one of reclamation and restoration, as they look to restore forgotten or excluded figures, or offer an alternative or expanding account of their subject's life. Beautrais's poem 'History books' addresses this explicitly, first listing many of the historical texts in which Roberts does not appear, and the one in which he does, echoing with ambiguity: 'You are in *Te Ara*, | under Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism. (Unspecified: which.)'¹⁶⁵ She draws attention to the ways in which indexing and framing shapes our understanding of biographical subjects. Next, Beautrais quotes from Ryan Bodman's article 'Neil Roberts and the Maintenance of Silence: Social Regression in Muldoon's New Zealand', which is directly related to verse biography's investment in revision:

Admitting Roberts into our histories, argues Bodman,

'highlights the complexities of the past. . . .

By making room for his story,

a different image of the past is presented.'

¹⁶⁵ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 43.

Room is made in the present.

The past is just left traces; paper, newsprint, film, tape, silicon.¹⁶⁶

Verse biographies including *Dear Neil Roberts* create new space for previously neglected stories, and their poetic forms admit complexity and contradiction. This is especially essential for subjects such as Roberts, whose life story was shaped by sensational media coverage. Verse biographers work to explore the contexts of lives with the benefit of historical hindsight, and so offer new contexts to their biographical subjects. These contexts and emphases are shaped by the poet's poetics, their own interests, concerns, and beliefs, and bear the mark of their own historical moments.

Verse biographers also draw their lives into conversation with the lives of their biographical subjects, by foregrounding the processes of researching and writing their verse biographies. Some verse biographers employ the first-person voice to speak from within the collection with a voice that is intimately close to their own. The title of Airini Beautrais's *Dear Neil Roberts* hearkens to the epistolary intimacy which threads through this collection, as the poet attempts to address the dead. The first poem of the collection, 'Introduction', opens by addressing her subject:

Neil, you were six weeks dead
when I was born, the last hours
of 1982. Almost thirty years
have gone by since then.¹⁶⁷

Immediately, Beautrais draws their two lives together, and the collection unravels, simultaneously exploring the poet's process of writing the verse biography, and gathering her sons, to whom the book is dedicated, into the frame of the text too.¹⁶⁸ Beautrais puts these lives into close bodily contact, and emphasises their shared geography:

¹⁶⁶ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 43.

¹⁶⁷ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

¹⁶⁸ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 5

The map in my mind is a map of the past,

probably never accurate to begin with.

The river has this kink in it, difficult

to align to. I often drive around that bend,

the place you left off from,

and I squirm in my seat, making room.

My second son will be born soon.

Therefore future. Therefore past,

all our skins and skins.¹⁶⁹

Beautrais offers her readers an insight into her research processes, including driving through the same streets of Whanganui in which Roberts lived, and in which the poet grew up.¹⁷⁰ She foregrounds her positionality, the fallibility of her memory, her sense of subtle but disorienting temporal displacement, and her interest in Roberts's life and his departure from it, at a time where she is poised to introduce a new life to the map. Here, the repetition of the word 'skin' evokes a sense of layered selfhood, and too highlights the sonic presence of the word 'kin'. Beautrais foregrounds her experiences as a young protestor involved with anarchists and punks, and her own experiences of suicidality.¹⁷¹ Other verse biographers make use of framing structures to foreground and literalise the relationship between the poet and their subject, and imagine their subjects to have an awareness of them, and often the opportunity to speak back, where this would be, in reality, impossible. Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* opens with a poem titled '[...] (*In which the author interviews a dead man*)' which puts the two into contact and, at the same time, marks the actual

¹⁶⁹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

¹⁷⁰ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

¹⁷¹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 14-15, p. 48.

impossibility of this dialogue.¹⁷² Nina Powles's chapbook *(Auto)biography of a Ghost*, both in its title and throughout, positions Powles's life in contact with the afterlife of her school's ghost.¹⁷³ At the close of 'An Abominable Temper', Curnow positions himself as the inheritor of his ancestor's bible.¹⁷⁴ Karen Zelas appears as a key witness in defence of Minnie Dean in an imagined modern-day courtroom retrial of her case.¹⁷⁵ The lives of the biographer and their subject are drawn close together and at times clearly visually differentiated, as in Claire Orchard's poem 'Voyages', where eighteen sections each speak from the first person, however Darwin's words are aligned on the left margin, and the poet's appear on the right hand margin.¹⁷⁶

Verse biographers at times make use of the pliable poetic page margin to mark these interactions and subjective shifts in formal terms, and evoke a sort of paper stage on which voices speak at times in collective chorus, and at other times in solo soliloquy or duelling duet. Other times, these shifts are fluid and unmarked, creating ambiguity and echo. Readers are encouraged to consider not only what is being said, but who is saying it, and from where. The reader is an important co-creator of meaning within verse biography, and their contemporary context informs their engagement with the text. Cultural understandings particular to the subject's immediate context can be misconstrued or lost, as social expectations and concerns shift, and new cultural understandings can create new readings of old texts. Part of the verse biographer's job is to restore some of the context of their subject's life, to avoid essentialising or caricaturing them. For all of the need to compress, and the potential of reimagination and revision, the poet must resist the urge to remove their subject entirely from the historical context and material conditions of their life. There must be evidence, including sources from the subject's contemporary moment. Verse biography is a genre rooted in research, and in the revision of durable aspects of the life story. One key aspect of verse biography is its exploration of culturally significant settings, and its examination of and experimentation with the kinds of stories that unfold in Aotearoa New Zealand.

¹⁷² Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 1. Italics in original.

¹⁷³ Powles, *(Auto)biography of a Ghost* in *Luminescent*. Italics in original.

¹⁷⁴ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 35.

¹⁷⁵ Zelas, pp. 160-79.

¹⁷⁶ Orchard, pp. 34-51.

Setting

This thesis localises existing work on verse biography, and focuses on work published in Aotearoa New Zealand, which significantly features this place. Drawing on the work done by Philip Fisher and Alex Calder on setting and the culturally significant site, I identify the settings which commonly feature in these texts, and explore the cultural stories which unfold in them. By analysing the settings which appear and reappear in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, we might explore what key themes capture our poets' attentions. It is this thematic common ground that I identify and analyse in the second section of this thesis. This section identifies and explores four of the shared settings key to the emerging canon of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography: the beach, the home, the police station, and the beyond.

Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography is rich with specific locations, including named mountains, rivers, roads, battlegrounds, towns, and historical sites. It would be an interesting exercise to map the specific places named in the genre. Waitangi, Wellington and Cape Reinga might emerge as frequent stops. Places where shocking, seemingly singular events unfolded, like Winton, or Haining Street, Wellington, might appear only once. It is important to note that these landscapes are material, that is, concrete and tangible, with specific histories and archives associated with them.

However, in addition to these actual locations of history, there are a range of culturally significant sites, which are as much imagined and culturally mythical as they are actual. Through storytelling and cultural memory-making, they have been transformed into idealized settings, freighted with cultural knowledge and assumptions. Waitangi conjures a nexus of ideas around encounter, partnership and nationhood. Wellington is imbued with ideas of politics and culture. Cape Reinga conjures an awareness of the spiritual realm. While each setting of course bears personal associations, they serve too as cultural 'shortcuts', and can serve as metonymy for wider ideas. I could say that a restaurant feels very 'Auckland' and New Zealanders would likely know what I am inferring. Likewise, other settings whose real-world correlative is offshore, maintain cultural currency in Aotearoa New Zealand. I could describe this thesis as a Mount Everest.

Setting is a useful concept for us to carry throughout this thesis, as it allows us to consider how literature encodes place and space with meaning, and through the work of Philip Fisher and Alex Calder, allows us to dig for those deeper stories beneath the surface of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography. Philip Fisher offers us useful insight here:

Every history has, in addition to its actual sites, a small list of privileged settings. These are not at all the places where key events have taken place. Instead, they are ideal and simplified vanishing points [...] Whatever actually appears within a society can be interpreted as some variant, some anticipation or displacement or ruin, of one of these privileged settings.¹

When we talk about setting, we are calling to mind idealised spaces where culturally significant stories commonly unfold. In their literary treatment, they constitute symbols of shared narratives. Fisher suggests that every society has its own set of privileged settings, which stand in for its cultural aspirations and narratives for self-understanding. The nodal settings of a society's self-storying allow us insight into its values and concerns. Alex Calder draws on and extends Fisher's work in his book *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand*, writing:

Settings are idealised versions of many actual places. They are locations that enable certain stories to be told and around which various aspirations and values take shape, are challenged and modified. Settings also have a complex relationship to what Philip Fisher calls the "hard facts" of history. Some settings wear out and lose their magic; others are remarkably durable, revealing deeper continuities beneath our perceptions of change [...] Settings, in other words, are highly conventional and highly suggestive places.²

Settings are profoundly idealised, made of metaphor and story. They are imagined places around which a culture's aspirations and concerns hum. The most durable settings become recognisably coded with key themes and understandings, and are culturally distinct. A bach in New Zealand is not the same as a holiday home in Los Angeles. New Zealand's historic homes are haunted by younger ghosts than those which haunt the castles of Europe. The

¹ Philip Fisher, 'Introduction', in *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 3-21, (p. 9).

² Alex Calder, *The Settler's Plot: How Stories Take Place in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2011), pp. vii-viii.

stories which unfold in the New Zealand bush are different to the fables which emerged from the Black Forest of Germany. Settings are culturally specific and evoke common stories and meanings, which in turn offer a window into what ideas are troubling the writers of literary texts. If, as Calder asserts, the analysis of setting can allow us access to a culture's particular stories, and thus aspirations and values, then it could also allow us access to a genre's questions and cultural concerns.

Setting is an especially potent feature of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography. The verse biographer's use of poetic techniques including fragmentation and compression finds a fitting formal home within setting, where condensation, complexity, fracture and multiplicity of stories are already a feature of the landscape. Verse biographers highlight the compression of cultural stories and the work of intensification, and indeed idealisation, at work in these spaces. We are invited to consider the way that these settings are transformed into cultural metaphors, and to reconsider the stories we tell about and around them.

Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers often sustain a focus on key settings throughout their works, even where discontinuity and surreal shifts in worlds occur. Key settings provide a recurring metaphor against which the poet's discoveries can be tracked, and poets return to the same settings throughout their works, tracing the way they shift and change. They provide a sense of continuity which allows the poet to travel freely, and revel in fragmentation. Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers also emphasise the ways in which many key biographic sites and historical moments echo in the present, and the ways in which their poetic practice takes place in a powerfully storied place. The examination of setting is a powerful tool for self-reflexive and decolonial research and writing practice.

The genre is marked by an awareness of the affordances that poetry brings to this exploration: the ability to create a non-linear life story, to use rhythm, subtext, metaphor and associative links: to hold space for the unknown at the unknowable, the erased and excised, or to gesture to knowledge that belongs in oral tradition, or only with those selected to inherit it. Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers consistently seek to restore complexity, and admit multiple and at times contradictory voices and accounts. They draw attention to the missing facts, and the interests vested in existing narratives. Poets refuse to let actual history slip away. Poets bring sensory detail to their explorations, and so resist the idealisation or flattening of the textures of the particularities, places and people of the past. Verse

biographers bring the enlivening poetic techniques of the genre to their exploration of the past and its settings, in order to challenge power, and assert ownership and belonging.

Verse biographers draw from a collection of recurring settings in which to explore shared concerns. By analysing the settings which appear in New Zealand verse biography, we might understand what historical and contemporary issues capture the attention of poets from this place. While there is an array of possible settings operating within verse biography, I have chosen four settings with distinctly Aotearoa New Zealand inflections: the beach, the home, the police station and courthouse, and the beyond. I am interested in the way that verse biographers use poetic imagination to engage with and often disrupt the stories which swirl around idealised settings and bring the ‘hard facts’ of history into close sensory contact with readers.

The Beach

Crossings and Encounters

Those living in New Zealand are never far from the beach. For many, it is a place of fond memories, summer-lit with warmth. Families living in landlocked cities come to think of nearby beaches as important stages in their family stories, and pay regular homage, packing picnics, loading cars, and setting off. Carl Walrond promises us that '[a]ll roads lead to the coast. Indeed, there is no location in New Zealand that is more than 130 km from the sea.'¹ Drive far enough, and you will find it. Sophie Bell and Jeremy Gibb, writing for the Department of Conservation, remind us that 'as island dwellers [...] the edge of the sea is our only boundary', and state that this coastline boundary is approximately 15,000km in total.² The beach is an idealised setting, imagined as a tangible line which contains our shared history of encounter and notions of nation. But if the beach is a boundary line, it is a very unstable one. It changes with each outgoing and incoming tide. New drift and litter scatter our beaches with each passing hour. Coastal erosion sees New Zealand's outline crumble and shrink. New salt and sand dusts our feet with every step.

In New Zealand verse biography, as in New Zealand literature more broadly, the beach is depicted as an encounter zone characterised by instability. It is a place of push and pull, of change; it is a place of landing, a place which is crossed, where our footing can be uncertain on shifting sands. The beach encodes a cultural awareness of the space between the past and the present, and historical categories of 'here', and 'not here', by making visible the provisional geographical and cultural borders of this place and revisiting the moments and relationships which shape these. Among many other things, this allows verse biographers to interrogate the outline of a singular and static nationhood and expose the limitations of these ideas. Poets visit the beach to re-examine key moments of cross-cultural encounter, and reclaim encounter as a process which is ongoing and multidirectional, and which leaves traces. New Zealand verse biographers examine the ways in which the beach is imagined as a

¹ Carl Walrond, 'Natural environment - Coasts', *Te Ara* (2005) <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/natural-environment/page-2>> [accessed 25 February 2021].

² Sophie Bell and Jeremy G Gibb, *Public Access to the New Zealand Coast: Guidelines for Determining Legal and Physical Constraints* (Wellington: Department of Conservation, 1996) <<https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/science-and-technical/docts10.pdf>> [accessed 15 May 2021].

fixed boundary, emphasizing instead its liminality, and in doing so position New Zealand as a place in relationship with a wider global network of cultures and peoples.

Poet and scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville explores the multiplicity of approaches possible in the writing of New Zealand's history, and names a number of encounters which could be deployed as possible starting points:

There was never a single beginning point for the history of this place. It wasn't Cook on a beach, it wasn't the confiscation of land and storming of Parihaka, it wasn't Gallipoli, it wasn't the pushing apart of primordial parents, it wasn't goldfields, it wasn't the arrival of waka, it wasn't a lover's tiff between mountains, it wasn't a boat full of influenza docking in Samoa, it wasn't the Treaty, it wasn't (certain) women getting the vote, it wasn't a fished-up fish. It was all of these. It was all of these and more besides.³

A number of these possible starting-points for New Zealand history involve beach crossings: Gallipoli, the arrival of waka, disease arriving by boat, and Cook's arrival. In Fisher's terms, they are settings which through their storying are mythic as much as they are actual. We can understand these cross-cultural encounters as formative nodes or moments in national history, encounters which create change. To cross the beach, then, is to make history.

Encounter is a key concern in New Zealand verse biography, and it often plays out on the beach. The beach, as a poetic setting, encodes an awareness of the processes of arrival, colonisation and cross-cultural encounter which shape Aotearoa New Zealand. Enabled by their historical research, and enlivened by poetic imagination and perspective, poets trace and often adopt the perspectives of their subjects as they cross the beach, and explore the cultural and historical luggage that they carry with them. They work to explore the ongoing legacies of these beach crossings, and emphasise the multidirectional nature of these cross-cultural encounters. Verse biographers often work to explore the perspectives of those beach-crossers who have been lost to the crush and hush of history.

Poets frequently work to reclaim the voices of those with whom they share whakapapa and cultural identity. Elsewhere, they revise the stories of historical figures, reclaiming and rewriting national narratives. Among other things, this allows the beach as a

³ Alice Te Punga Somerville, *Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay about Captain Cook* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020).

setting to represent and so interrogate notions of national belonging, and ongoing processes of cultural exchange. The physical crossing of the beach is an important motif in New Zealand Aotearoa verse biography: as bodies cross the beach, they do not do so empty-handed. These crossings leave traces which outlast the tide, and verse biographies track these objects and stories using listing, and shifting and unmarked point of view. Verse biographers also juxtapose diverse voices and ways of speaking and make use of shifting poetic registers and forms. Each verse biographer evokes a sense of polyphony, and creates a choral history in verse. Furthermore, this choir at time includes the voices of the mythic and the imagined, and allows its biographical subject to speak with an awareness of the knowledges of the now.

This chapter looks at the ways in which the beach is explored in the works of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers Robert Sullivan, Nina Powles, Ian Wedde, Allen Curnow, Chris Tse, and Gregory Kan. The priority of Māori and their traditions of voyaging throughout the Pacific is emphasised in Robert Sullivan's collection *Captain Cook in the Underworld* and the poems in *Whale Fall*, Nina Powles's chapbook within her *Luminescent* folio. Sullivan and Powles depict the beach as a setting where the costs of colonisation are explored in disturbing sensory detail. The beach is a space marked with blood, punctuated by the bodies stilled in the physical processes of colonisation. Historically in New Zealand, these early beach crossings led to ongoing processes of colonisation and settlement. In Ian Wedde's 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley' and Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper', the beach is a space of familial immigration which bears witness to colonial arrival and cross-cultural encounter, and ongoing processes of negotiation between Pākehā and Tangata Whenua.⁴ Curnow and Wedde emphasise the material and ideological cargo that Pākehā carried across the beaches of Aotearoa New Zealand in order to examine the cultural processes of colonial life and their ongoing legacies. These processes of arrival of tauwiwi by no means ended with the close of the twentieth century. Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* explores the experiences of Chinese migrants who cross Aotearoa's beaches and remind us that encounter is an ongoing process, which echoes even in the contemporary moment.

Finally, in Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, the beach is a setting upon

⁴ Wedde, 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley'; Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper' in *An Abominable Temper and Other Poems*.

and around which death and the beyond laps.⁵ It is in these haunting and haunted depictions of the beach as a liminal space that verse biographers remind us of the encounters between the living and the dead that empower and distinguish Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography.

The bloodied beach is a powerful image in Aotearoa New Zealand poetry, and it speaks to the cross-cultural encounters which shape our contemporary moment. Allen Curnow's famous poem 'The Unhistoric Story' tracks the interaction between Pākehā and Māori off the shore of Aotearoa, with Abel Tasman's arrival in the waters of Mohua/Golden Bay:

Morning in Murderers' Bay,

Blood drifted away.

It was something different, something

Nobody counted on.⁶

This moment of bloody encounter is emphasised again in Curnow's 'Landfall in Unknown Seas', which closes with the line: 'The stain of blood that writes an island story.'⁷ It is this island story, with its bloodied beaches, which Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers revisit.

Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld* explores Captain James Cook's passage through the Pacific in pursuit of the transit of Venus, and traces the effects of his crossing of the beach in Aotearoa. Sullivan works toward a sense of wholeness in his exploration of Cook's voyages in Te Moana-nui-a-kiwa, recontextualising them through the Pacific worldviews so inextricable from the beaches that Cook steps onto.

One of the most recognised biographical subjects who has crossed our beaches is Captain James Cook. He has captured the interest of many biographers, historians, and poets, and is a frequent subject of popular imagining. Credited as the first European to physically

⁵ This connection between death and the beach is a theme which is explored in greater depth in a later chapter of this exegesis: 'The Beyond'.

⁶ Allen Curnow: *Collected Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Caffin and Terry Sturm (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2017), p. 56.

⁷ Allen Curnow: *Collected Poems*, p. 98.

cross the beach in Aotearoa, Cook's name has long been synonymous with encounter and empire, and he has been celebrated as a skilful navigator and explorer.⁸ Increasingly, critical and public attention has turned to the legacies of Cook's journeys to the beaches of Aotearoa.⁹ The work of scholars such as Gananath Obeyesekere, Marshall Sahlins, and Anne Salmond, revisits Cook's journeys in the Pacific, and seeks to reinstate indigenous voices.¹⁰ Indigenous poets and scholars have worked to revise depictions of Cook, and Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld* participates in this movement to revisit and revise Cook, and reframe his beach crossing in light of the priority of Māori and their traditions of voyaging throughout the Pacific.¹¹ On the first page of the book, Sullivan reminds his reader that the beach upon which Cook lands is already inhabited, and already named. His claim to Aotearoa is immediately disproven:

while he thought he discovered
these islands already discovered by lovers
Kupe and his wife Kuramarotini.
He didn't know to presume discovery

was a lie¹²

⁸ David Mackay, 'Cook, James', *Te Ara* (2007) <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/1c25/cook-james>> [accessed 25 February 2021].

⁹ Sunanda Creagh, 'An honest reckoning with Captain Cook's legacy won't heal things overnight. But it's a start' *The Conversation* (2020) <<https://theconversation.com/an-honest-reckoning-with-captain-cooks-legacy-wont-heal-things-overnight-but-its-a-start-130389>> [accessed 12 March 2021]; Stephen Gapps, 'Make no mistake: Cook's voyages were part of a military mission to conquer and expand' *The Conversation* (2020) <<https://theconversation.com/make-no-mistake-cooks-voyages-were-part-of-a-military-mission-to-conquer-and-expand-134404>> [accessed 12 March 2021]; 'Tuia 250: Captain Cook, hero or villain?', *Stuff* <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/116154477/tuia-250-captain-cook-hero-or-villain>> [accessed 12 March 2021]; Rowan Light 'OPINION: Captain Cook "First Encounter" celebrations a "difficult step towards a truly shared story"' *Stuff* <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/opinion/104561606/opinion-captain-cook-first-encounter-celebrations-a-difficult-step-towards-a-truly-shared-story>> [accessed 12 March 2021].

¹⁰ Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); Marshall David Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1995); Anne Salmond, *The Trial of the Cannibal Dog: Captain Cook in the South Seas* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

¹¹ Robert Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002); other recent works including Alice Te Punga Somerville's *Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay About Captain Cook*, and Tusiata Avia's *The Savage Coloniser* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2021), turn their attention to him in order to highlight the ongoing processes and consequences of colonial encounter, and revise many of the myths which afford him prestige.

¹² Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. i.

With this recontextualization, Sullivan debunks the colonial doctrine of discovery which so centres imperial exploration and legitimated and empowered Cook's voyage to Aotearoa. *Captain Cook in the Underworld* begins with an important fact: he is by no means the first to cross this beach.

This sense of being a late arrival is emphasised. Sullivan creates a sense of prescient or otherworldly warning, and draws upon the verse biographer's tools of imagination, evoking the personified voice of Venus within a dream. Venus is transformed from a constellation by which Cook physically navigates the beaches of the Pacific, and is personified by the poet to become a voice of moral guidance. Sullivan draws on classical Roman myth to serve as an intermediary reference point to connect Cook with this 'new world'. She directly addresses Cook:

*I am Venus, the morning star,
placed to guide you through the shades [...]
Aotearoa of white alps
and deep harbours, a land you'll be proud
to call your own.*¹³

In this section, Sullivan evokes Cook as synecdoche for the British Empire, and emphasises his contemporary role as a representative for the Crown. This suggestion of ownership, that Cook, and by extension, the Crown, could feasibly call this place their 'own' by means of 'discovery', is immediately unsettled in the very next page, as Venus warns him, with the echo of historical hindsight that is both the poet's and the readers'

*James, be harmonious with these people: [...]
the Pacific peoples
are patient to a fault, they have followed me, like pilgrims,
across the heavens for thousands of years –
but remember you are the new ones here.*¹⁴

¹³ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 13. Italics in original.

¹⁴ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 14. Italics in original.

While recognising Cook as participant within a wider colonial process, Sullivan uses Venus to speak directly to Cook, and so ensure a focus and emphasis on his individual role. Venus emphasises that the beach is already populated ahead of Cook's arrival. We are further reminded of the fragility of the idea of British discovery as a means of ownership. Sullivan emphasises the priority of indigenous knowledges of the stars, and so offers another way of mapping the Pacific. This emphasis is powerful, as it reminds us that people of Te Moananui-a-kiwa were expert navigators and undertook prolific and extensive voyages long before European arrival in the Pacific.¹⁵ Sullivan foregrounds this fact. Beaches constitute neither the solid, demarcating outline of this place, nor are they encounter zones which are crossed solely in colonial terms. The Pacific Ocean is in no way an untouched or uncharted blue space awaiting colonial arrival. Its beaches have long been churned by crossings and encounter. Greg Denning encourages us to imagine the ocean not as 'a natural vastness', but as 'a tracked on space', in which these imaginary lines of crossing are not random, but 'directed in some way by systems of knowledge—of stars, of time, of distance—and of purpose, of trade, of empire, of science, of way-finding.'¹⁶ Colonial boundaries of nation and state have little claim against vast indigenous exploration and inhabitation. Epeli Hau'ofa urges his reader to invert European views of the Pacific as constituted by 'islands in a far sea', and instead think of the Pacific as 'a sea of islands'.¹⁷ This understanding displaces Europe as a geographic and political centre point.¹⁸ Venus's appeal to Cook, to recognise that he and his crew are 'the new ones here', similarly serves to unsettle Cook's contemporary British notions of discovery, as it calls to mind notions of the Southern Pacific as another 'New World' to be chartered. Venus speaks back to Cook, and in doing so, speaks back against these colonial paradigms. With Venus's warning, this binary of old and new is inverted, as we understand Cook and his crew arrive not on new sands, but a beach that has been crossed often in the course of Pacific migration.

This dream section ends with a warning rich in dramatic irony, as the verse biography builds to Cook's landing on the beach of Aotearoa. Venus appeals to Cook, and plays on her

¹⁵ Alice Te Punga Somerville, *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Epeli Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Greg Denning, 'Encompassing Oceania: Some Beach Crossings' in *Australian Association for Maritime History*, 24.1 (2002), 3-13 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41563098>> [accessed 10 December 2021] (p.4).

¹⁷ Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6.1 (1994), 148-161 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23701593>> [accessed 6 January 2021] (p. 153).

¹⁸ Hau'ofa, 'Our Sea of Islands', pp. 152-8.

position as the classical goddess of love: ‘*Take my warning to heart, and not to muskets: there!*’.¹⁹ With the sharp sounds of the word ‘musket’, we are reminded of the fact that no one crosses the beach empty-handed; Cook and his crew sail with powerful cargo. There is plenty more on the ship than the astronomical equipment he carries in order to navigate. Sullivan uses poetic listing to imagine Cook taking stock of the tools afforded to him for the purposes of colonisation: men, the ability to record a privileged account, and gunpower:

our argosy

our leprous cargo of VD

stashed with lower and higher men, quills

spilling ink, guns for the kill²⁰

The assonance which connects these four words draws into focus the connection between the colonial process of discovery and writing, ‘quills spilling ink’, and colonial fighting ‘for the kill’. Furthermore, Sullivan’s list highlights the connections between Cook’s pursuit of Venus, and the spread of disease, thus connecting colonial conquest with sexual harm and infection. This connection is emphasised by the presence of ‘venus’ in the text, and the etymological echo connecting Cook’s guiding star and the venereal consequences of his voyage. This idea is further emphasised with the phallic image of ‘quills | spilling ink’. As well as emphasizing the violent violation of colonial conquest, Sullivan’s poetic stocktake of the HMS *Endeavour* foreshadows the blood which is soon to mark the beaches of this book. These lines thrum with sensory language and rhythmic impact, echoing the spray of bullets. Cook is prepared to defend his endeavour. He is prepared to kill. With these words, Cook’s arrival in Aotearoa is Sullivan’s pending poetic plot point: Chekhov’s loaded gun; the crown’s ready musket. The moment of Cook’s landing on the sands of this place is signalled with the spoken words:

We solemnly stake Great Britain’s claim

¹⁹ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 14. Italics in original.

²⁰ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 28.

to sovereignty over this domain

which shall be known as New Zealand.²¹

This colonial attempt to definitively name and claim this place is marked quickly by violence and confusion, as the following pages move between unmarked shifts in point of view. This poetic technique registers the sea of perspectives that swirl around Cook and his journey, and gives voice to the ‘supporting characters’ in this collection and on Cook’s ship. Again, Sullivan ensures that Cook is not the sole speaker, and is decentred, as a collective voice seems to speak from the perspective of the Tahitian people, rapping with contemporary discourse:

Bang! Britain’s the talk in town,

let’s make Cook a deity. Hail Da King!

The biggest kill machine

with a crew to match [...]

We the peoples of this island

assure you, Cook God, we are frightened

and beg you to stop killing

our people. Your men find it thrilling

to kill us²²

The collective voice here emphasises the communities harmed in Cook’s crossing. Sullivan emphasises that Cook’s crossing of the beach is one which comes with a body count. Sullivan imagines Cook’s possible orders while in Hawai’i:

²¹ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 19.

²² Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, pp. 20-21.

I want bodies on the beaches,
just like in New Zealand –
nine dead in the first couple of days, a sad affray,

they challenged us and we responded, again
and again we wandered the coasts²³

The ambiguity of the state of these ‘bodies on the beaches’, throws Cook’s orders and intentions into question. It is unclear as to whether Sullivan intends to imply Cook’s desire for active colonial bodies on Aotearoa’s and Hawai’i’s beaches, or if the poet intends to foreshadow the dead bodies of Māori and Hawai’ians left in Cook’s wake. In light of this indeterminacy, Cook and his men are here depicted as wandering marauders, and his concession that it is ‘sad’ reads, at best, as inadequate, at worst, as insincere or mocking. Regardless of his intentions, Cook’s arrival shapes the beaches of the places he encounters, and his voyages displace and harm those living there.

Sullivan’s work is a striking example of verse biography’s ability to conjure the dead. Late in the collection, Cook is faced in the afterlife with his killing of an unnamed ‘chief | of the coastal middle east | of the North Island’, who confronts him:

My people

suffered your diseases.

My people, mutilated, murdered, by your wormy crew.²⁴

The use of the word ‘wormy’ conjures imagery of decay and death. This imagery suggests that the crew appear on the beaches of Aotearoa as uncanny harbingers of the death that

²³ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 25.

²⁴ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 43.

crosses the beach in their wake. They appear as uncanny, corpse-like invaders from another space rife with disease and death and carry these with them to the chief's people. The word 'wormy' too perhaps recalls the resonances of sexual disease depicted earlier in the collection. Through this metaphor, and embodying of the dead, Sullivan emphasises the human cost of Cook's beach crossing.

Cook's final worldly beach crossing takes place in Hawai'i and culminates in his death. In seeking revenge for the theft of his longboat, Cook and his crew enter into a confrontation with Hawai'ians at Kealakekua Bay. Cook himself narrates the moment of his defeat: 'then I myself | am felled – I'm felled –'.²⁵ This repetition conveys Cook's shock, and his last living thoughts alight on the sea: 'I am lying face down in the water . . . bleeding | the sea red around me . . . I am part of the sea!'²⁶ As Cook's blood mingles with the Pacific Ocean, Cook registers the connection of his life and death with the Pacific and its people. Sullivan evokes metaphor to convey a sense of Cook's absorption into the Pacific:

The sea closes around Cook like a mother,
takes him in as another
drop in the ocean, speck in the sea,
a bit of flotsam floating free

in the wreck of a dissolving dream . . .²⁷

This embrace of the sea, evoked through foamy alliterative f sounds, opens the section of the book which explores Cook's tumultuous journey in the Māori 'underworld', Rarohenga. The beach is now rendered as another metaphor for liminality, a threshold over which Cook passes, on, to the afterlife, and into history. Sullivan's absorption of Cook as a 'speck in the sea' represents Cook's integration into Pacific stories and histories. Sullivan references the ways in which Cook's story belongs to Pacific people, and is theirs to tell on their own terms, and in their own ways. By reconfiguring Cook as just one part of Pacific History, Sullivan again prioritises Pacific worldviews.

²⁵ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 34.

²⁶ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 34.

²⁷ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 34.

Another New Zealand verse biography finds the beach marked with blood, as it charts part of the ongoing legacy of colonial arrival in Aotearoa, and its role as a colonial outpost.²⁸ Nina Powles's chapbook *Whale Fall* is one of five chapbooks within the folder collectively titled *Luminescent*. *Whale Fall* focuses on the life of Betty Guard, a 19th-century Australian immigrant to Aotearoa, and her husband, Jacky Guard, who 'set up the first shore-whaling station in the Marlborough Sounds in the 1820s'.²⁹ Whaling was an essential industry which connected New Zealand to Britain and the wider world, and was key in providing oil for the growing colony.³⁰ Powles imagines Betty not as directly involved but implicated nonetheless, watching the beach from her kitchen window. Powles imagines the beach in light of the death that occurs there: 'there might have been | pink blood foaming in rock pools'.³¹ This use of the word 'pink' echoes with Sullivan's use of this same word in *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, where the poet describes Cook's voyages as 'parades | painting the world map pink'.³² While Britain's claimed territories often appear in pink on world maps, Sullivan's choice of the word 'pink' simultaneously evokes imagery of blood diluted to pink in the saltwater wash of the beach. In the line following Powles's description of the bloodied rockpools, the poet describes 'white sun-glare cutting shadows into sand.'³³ This hardening of the intangible shadow into a force which can 'cut' into the sand as if it were skin, further reinforces this imagery of blood and death. These are encounters which leave their mark in the beach setting. These marks are lasting, and create a sense of haunting in the biographical subjects. Guard cannot look away from the whale's death, and Powles emphasises her unrelenting need using repetition at the start of each new line:

she [...] can't stand it anymore.

She must have the truth of it.

²⁸ Nina Powles, *Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017).

²⁹ Nina Powles, *Whale Fall* in *Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017), p. 20.

³⁰ Kate Stevens and Angela Wanhalla, 'Intimate Relations: Kinship and the Economics of Shore Whaling in Southern New Zealand 1820-1860', *The Journal of Pacific History*, 52. 2 (2017), 135-155; Brian Easton, *Not in Narrow Seas: The Economic History of Aotearoa New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2020), p. 105.

³¹ Powles, *Whale Fall* in *Luminescent*, p. 10.

³² Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 23-24.

³³ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 10.

She must know if the blowhole spurts blood.³⁴

She asks her husband for the disturbing truth, and he replies simply: '*It does.*'³⁵ The bloody realities of the colonial beach disturb the domestic peace in the Guard home, and Betty's new knowledge takes root in her body. In Powles's book, colonization and its processes of settlement continue to mark the beaches and bodies of Aotearoa in blood.

Processes of colonial settlement are also traced in the beaches of Ian Wedde's verse biography 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley', and Allen Curnow's long poem 'An Abominable Temper'.³⁶ These poems trace the arrival of European immigrants in Aotearoa, and the cross-cultural encounters between Pākehā and Tangata Whenua that occurred in the course of these beach crossings. Both poets use poetic listing to emphasise the material and ideological cargo that Pākehā carried in this crossing. These objects, when carried over the beaches of Aotearoa, are transformed into metaphors, which speak to wider themes of colonial settlement and inheritance.

Ian Wedde's 1990 verse biography sequence: 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley: for the Heberley Family Reunion, Pipitea Marae, Easter 1990' tells the story of the English whaler James 'Worser' Heberley, who arrived in the Bay of Islands in 1827.³⁷ Heberley's life remains written on the shore of New Zealand, with Worser Bay in Wellington still bearing his nickname.³⁸ Wedde's poem takes the form of a ballad arranged in an ABCB pattern, and the poem inherits the traditions of the form of the ballad as a form of poetic storytelling associated strongly with seafaring. Wedde is alert to these inheritances, and the poem itself is rich in imagery associated with the crossing of sea and sand.

³⁴ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 16.

³⁵ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 16.

³⁶ Ian Wedde, 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley', *The Drummer* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993); Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper' in *Allen Curnow: An Abominable Temper & Other Poems* (Wellington: The Catspaw Press, 1973).

³⁷ Ian Wedde, 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley', *The Drummer* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993), pp. 25-30; Roger Neich, 'Jacob William Heberley of Wellington : a Maori carver in a changed world', in *Records of the Auckland Institute and Museum*, 20 Dec 1991; (28) : p.69-146, Wellington City Libraries <<https://www.wcl.govt.nz/maori/wellington/bio-heberleys.html>> [accessed 18 February 2022].

³⁸ 'The Oldest Of Old Settlers', *Otago Daily Times* 11 October 1899, in Papers Past <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT18991011.2.8>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

‘A Ballad for Worser Heberley’ opens with a framing scene, featuring the speaker and his father in a boat, fishing near tidal mudflats.³⁹ This metatextual device establishes the poet as the first speaker of the poem, and is a frame that the poet returns to in the close of the poem. Wedde describes the beach in striking sensory detail:

I remember the pohutukawas’ summer crimson
and the smell of two-stroke fuel
and the sandflies above the Waikawa mudflats
whose bites as a kid I found cruel.⁴⁰

These torturing sandflies reappear a further two times in this first section, their repetition imitating the young speaker’s preoccupation with their niggling interruption. Wedde reminds us of the interruptions of the archive that plague all verse biographers, those moments where historical attention is diverted to other focuses. We are reminded also of the role of the poet as researcher, and in this case, in the poet’s own memory as a source. The context of his remembering, and his bodily associations shape his account. Ultimately however, the sandflies are not enough to break the spell of these childhood memories, as the poet recalls fishing with his ‘old man’ Chick Wedde at night, ‘where the Whekenui tides do flow’.⁴¹ This intertidal beach space is a site of familial connection, and these memories are the platform from which he reaches for another family’s history. Wedde mobilises the metaphor of fishing to represent the way that in this poem, Heberley’s life is pulled up into the light:

The line of time bends round, my friends,
it bends the warp we’re in
and where the daylight meets the deep
a whaler’s yarns begin.

I feel a weight upon my line

³⁹ Wedde, ‘A Ballad for Worser Heberley’, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Wedde, ‘Ballad for Worser Heberley’, p. 25.

⁴¹ Wedde, ‘Ballad for Worser Heberley’, p. 25.

no hapuku is here
but a weight of history swimming up
into the summer air.

Oil about the outboard motor
bedazzles the water's skin
and through the surge of the inward tide
James Heberley's story does begin.⁴²

The beach is here a space where Wedde can cast out for Heberley, it is a space where history is a fish ready for the catching. The oil shimmers on the water like a cinematic dissolve transition, and the reader is plunged into the past. With this introduction, the poem shifts into the first-person voice of James.

The second section of the poem describes Heberley's early life, and his beach crossing from England to New Zealand. He is an orphan, and travels to New Zealand in search of a home:

Seaspray blew over the seaward bluffs

the black rocks ate the foam
my father and my mother were both dead
and I was looking for home⁴³

The beach is a place which is not immediately welcoming, and the personification of the rocks eating the foam creates a sense of sharpness, and threatening hunger. The beach is further characterised as 'saltburned slopes', haunted by the ghosts of Heberley's past: the family he lost, and the cruelty of his previous employer, Samuel Chilton.⁴⁴ However, like the

⁴² Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', pp. 25-26.

⁴³ Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', p. 26.

⁴⁴ Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', p. 26.

Guards of Powles's collection, Heberley finds good fortune on the beaches of this new land, and success as a whaler:

But I was even luckier, as they say,
those who tell my tale:
they tell how my tale was spliced and bent
about the right whale's tail.⁴⁵

Here, we might recall Powles's description of beaches marked with the mingling of blood and sand. Indeed, Heberley, builds his new life from the beaches and boneyards of the Marlborough Sounds, settling at Jacky Guard's shore whaling station.⁴⁶ Another kind of cross-cultural encounter takes place on Wedde's beach, as Heberley marries a Māori woman, 'Te Wai (also known as Māta Te Naihi), of the Puketapu people of Te Āti Awa.'⁴⁷ It is with this connection that Heberley finds home. He is given a new name, the name which appears in the poem's title:

In autumn I came ashore at Te Awaiti
on Arapaoa Island.
'Tangata Whata' the Maori called me —
now 'Worser' Heberley I stand.

'Ai! Tangata whata, haeremai,
haeremai mou te kai!
Food they gave me, and a name,
in the paataka up high.

⁴⁵ Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', pp. 27-28.

⁴⁶ Roger Neich, 'Heberley, Jacob William' *Te Ara* (2015) <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2h26/heberley-jacob-william>> [accessed 16 March 2021].

⁴⁷ Roger Neich, 'Heberley, Jacob William'.

My name and my life I owe that place
which soon I made my home.
From that time, when Worser Heberley went forth,
I didn't go alone.⁴⁸

Wedde emphasises the connection between Heberley and the people of Te Āti Awa, and the way in which his gifted name 'Tangata whata', connected to concepts of prominence and elevation, speak to the high regard in which local Māori held Heberley.⁴⁹ Some accounts of Heberley trace the name "Worser" as an Europeanisation of 'Tangata whata', while others claim that he came to be known as 'Worser' due to his frequent comments that the weather was bound to worsen.⁵⁰ This nickname speaks to a sense of intimacy and affection, and perhaps captures something of his voice. However, these renamings are by no means definitive, and Wedde lives under multiple names, and in multiple contexts. Wedde elsewhere reflects on the complexity of Heberley's understanding of his identity and belonging in New Zealand. He does not simply leave his European ideological cargo behind in the shallows:

In Heberley's account [...] we find a triangulation of power relations: James Heberley's own ownership and property rights as he perceived them, and which he defended stoutly as all beach Pākehā without seeing the need for much consideration of Māori concepts such as *utu*; 'Worser' (his Pākehā Māori name) Heberley's rights as the Pākehā beholden to and enmeshed in the customary *iwi* and *hapū* rights of his adoptive whanau, which he clearly came to understand well; and 'Captain' [...] James Heberley's rights to be included in whatever benefits might come from organised settlement and the protection of a settler government of some kind.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', pp. 27-8.

⁴⁹ John C., Moorfield, *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*
<<https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=&histLoanWords=&keywords=whata>> [accessed 18 February 2022] s.v. *whata*.

⁵⁰ Makereti, Tina, 'An Englishman, an Irishman, and a Welshman Walk into a Pā' in *Sport* 40 (2012), 5-20 (pp. 10-11).

⁵¹ Wedde, *Making Ends Meet*, p. 263.

Wedde's use of the phrase 'beach Pākehā' is a useful one for considering the identities of European immigrants in the early nineteenth century, and emphasises the crossing of the beach as that which sets these 'Pākehā' apart from their kin in Europe. It is this reconfiguring and description of Europeans as the 'other' that reminds us, as in Sullivan, that the beach is a setting which is watched and crossed from both directions. It is on the beach that Heberley's liminality is emphasised, and Wedde's poem demonstrates verse biography's ability to evoke the complexity of identity, and in some cases, the multiple aliases of its biographical figures. As with Iris Wilkinson/Robin Hyde/I. in Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, Heberley is a figure with multiple names throughout his life, depending on the cultural contexts that surround him. These different contexts can be radically complex and contradictory: he is at times of his life colonial Captain, and at others, Worser Heberley, bearing an affectionate nickname derived from the gift of his name by iwi.

The poem acknowledges this complexity of Heberley's position as a 'beach Pākehā', including his continued involvement in the systematic colonisation of Aotearoa, as a pilot for Colonel William Wakefield and the New Zealand Company. Heberley travels with Dick Barrett onboard the *Tory*, to cross the beach in Taranaki, a region of Aotearoa with 'a history made bitter once | in the bloody musket wars'.⁵² Likely in accordance with the poem's occasion—a family reunion—this involvement with the New Zealand Company is treated by the poet in general terms, and is represented as a pragmatic choice, in line with the overarching depiction of Heberley as, above all things, a survivor:

Worser Heberley was never a fool,
else I'd not have lived that long:
I could see the Colonel meant to do business,
I could hear the gist of his song [...]

and I, James Heberley, stayed close
to see what I could learn.⁵³

James's involvement is depicted as one which is borne out of necessity. He pilots the ship but is not depicted on the shores of colonial landgrab and indigenous displacement and division.

⁵² Matthew Tonks, 'William Wakefield', *Te Ara* (2014) <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/people/william-wakefield>> [accessed 15 March 2021]; Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', p. 28.

⁵³ Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', pp. 28-29.

In light of the poem's occasion, Heberley's involvement in the New Zealand Company is minimized, and the poet instead focuses on the legacy that he has left, in the form of the family and community gathered at Pipitea Marae. In the closing frame of the poem, Wedde again places himself within the poem as the first-person narrator, and simultaneously acknowledges the harm of Wakefield, while also acknowledging the ongoing familial survival afforded by Heberley's involvement:

and though old Worser Heberley was right
to fear Colonel Wakefield's song,
he didn't have to worry about the family
which multiplies and grows strong.⁵⁴

It is also worth noting that Wedde's poem is shaped by an awareness of the place in which the poem will be read to its primary audience. The family reunion was held on a marae, and the rhythm and rhyme in Wedde's words speak to the oral tradition of storytelling and waiata so central to Māori tikanga. Its form as a ballad conjures too a history of European seafaring, and is a tradition which nods to the sea travels which shape the family's cultural heritage. The familial audience is present too in Wedde's care to address the colonial project that Heberley was implicated in, while also maintaining a sense of the complexity of encounter which occurred between Heberley and Māori. After all, it was the descendants of both James and his wife, Te Wai of Te Ati Awa, who gathered to hear the poem first and foremost.⁵⁵ We are reminded that these beach crossings bear ongoing and complex encounters, and echo through the whakapapa of still-living people.

Other verse biographies acknowledge familial inheritance and colonial legacies, and foreground the relationship between the verse biographer and their subject. Allen Curnow's long poem 'An Abominable Temper' traces the beach crossing of his great-great grandfather, Peter Monro, from Britain to New Zealand in 1835.⁵⁶ Curnow's depiction of Monro's life is filtered through many familial layers, and is 'based on a letter about him written by his son,

⁵⁴ Wedde, 'Ballad for Worser Heberley', p. 29.

⁵⁵ Wellington City Libraries, 'Te Wai Heberley' *Wellington City Libraries*
<<https://www.wcl.govt.nz/maori/wellington/bio-heberleys.html>> [accessed 2 June 2021].

⁵⁶ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', pp. 21-35; Terry Sturm 'Curnow, Thomas Allen Monro' *Te Ara*
<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6c1/curnow-thomas-allen-monro>> [accessed 6 September 2021].

Judge H.A.H. Monro, to his own daughter Ada (a sister of Curnow's grandmother, Alice Augusta).⁵⁷ This letter was given to Curnow 'in the mid-1960s', and the poem draws on the 'documentary material', including 'direct quotations and lists.'⁵⁸ It is these objects which Curnow tracks as they cross the beaches of New Zealand.

The Hokianga beach where Monro arrives is described in visceral, largely negative terms. In the striking opening lines of the fifth section, the ship is almost consumed by the beach:

A MOUTH made mountainous with mere sand

if ever dung yellow dunes were mountains

opened that morning to suck our ship in.⁵⁹

As in Wedde, this bodily image establishes the idea of the beach as a hungry and threatening setting. Curnow's description of the beach as 'dung yellow' adds to the sense of repulsion that the speaker expresses, a sense which is only reinforced with the description of the inlets around the shore filled with 'root-breathers | [...] expelling pungent air'.⁶⁰ But if the beach is a site of unwelcome smells and sights, then the arrivals are soon made alike to it, as: 'mucus of a strange mother smeared us over | from head to foot.'⁶¹ With this encounter, Monro and his companions are marked and enveloped by the beach, in imagery that conjures the idea of a new birth. However, this new birth is accompanied by a sense of the uncanny, and a distinct unhomeliness. The assertion of the speaker, that 'We were not visitors there | but visceral as hydatid worm to host', too complicates our sense of his understanding of his position.⁶² With this metaphor, which echoes with Sullivan's evocation of Cook's 'wormy crew', Curnow's speaker conjures the idea of the British arrivals as tapeworms, or parasites, whose presence is known to its host. Perhaps the personified and off-putting appearance of the beach figures then as a defensive mechanism against the colonial arrivals.

⁵⁷ Terry Sturm, *Simply by Sailing in a New Direction* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2017), p. 472.

⁵⁸ Sturm, *Simply by Sailing*, p. 472.

⁵⁹ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 29.

⁶⁰ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 29.

⁶¹ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 29.

⁶² Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 29.

Monro carries both ideological and literal cargo with him across the beach, and this idea of luggage recurs in the poem through a series of lists. The speaker, H.A.H. Monro, refers to himself and his family as belongings of his father:

My father chartered a ship, the barque *Bolina*,

to carry us all, with his other belongings,

including the hundred cattle, south to Auckland.⁶³

In these lines, the word ‘other’ demands close attention. We get the sense that Peter Monro perhaps views even his family as belongings to be simply packed up and transported across the beach. Peter Monro’s eponymous ‘Abominable Temper’ rings with an even more concerning note when we consider this family relegated to the realm of luggage, passive items subject to the physical and emotional tides onboard the ship. As in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, in the wash of immigration people are at times dehumanised and reduced to the status of objects by those who hold power.

Curnow acknowledges the nineteenth-century colonial paradigms of race and class which operated in his ancestor’s lifetime, and which Monro carried across the beach to New Zealand as ideological luggage. Monro’s arrival in Russell, known contemporaneously as the ‘hell-hole of the Pacific’ due to the conduct of Pākehā whalers on the waterfront, is contrasted with his interaction with the local Māori at Hokianga.⁶⁴

Hell upon earth he found

at the Bay of Islands.

Hokianga, on the contrary,

agreeably surprised him,

⁶³ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 32.

⁶⁴ Richard Wolfe, *Hell-hole of the Pacific* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2005); Russell Business Association, ‘A Hell Hole’ *Russell* <<https://russellnz.co.nz/old-history/a-hell-hole/>> [accessed 25 May 2021].

the Maori a better class⁶⁵

This comparison challenges the idea that Pākehā arrivals in New Zealand were a wholly “civilising” force, and emphasises the culture of drinking and disorder which flourished on the beach with the arrival and shore leave of British and American whalers.⁶⁶

Of course, this ideological encounter on the beaches of Aotearoa is also a physical one, and Monro and his family cross the beach with the limited luggage with which they build their new lives. These items appear as an indented list:

We lugged our worldly goods ashore,

item tables and chairs

item window sashes and doors (2)

item bricks for the chimneys

item one ton of flour

item a team of four bullocks (£100)

item a cart

item a plough

item harrows⁶⁷

These goods are, importantly, goods with which to build a home, literal bricks, doors and windows which are used to build their domestic boundaries in this new land. They are also

⁶⁵ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 26.

⁶⁶ James Belich, *Making Peoples* (Auckland: Penguin Press, 1996), p. 127.

⁶⁷ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 29.

goods intended to shape the land, including a cart, plough and harrows to help with securing their livelihoods. The word ‘harrows’ is the last item on the list, and conjures too the verb and adjectival forms of ‘harrowing’, and in the context of the poem’s title ‘abominable temper’, we perhaps understand that fear is something that is both carried across the beach and integral to the creation of the new home. Their home is not one which is lasting, and is burnt down soon after it is built, in an apparent accident.⁶⁸ Local Māori respond with manaakitanga, providing the family a home and the essentials of life:

(till more supplies could be obtained from Hobart)

roughed it in a hut the Maoris built for us,

one room, provided with

item one frying-pan

item four halves of coconut shell for cups

item mussel shells stuck on reeds for spoons⁶⁹

While Monro emphasises the roughness of this survival, the reader understands that the Māori people are essential to his continued survival on these shores. As in Wedde, Curnow admits the complexities of settlement. The beach is a space on which negotiations and amicable exchange between Māori and Pākehā take place.

These lists, and the wider poem itself, comprise a kind of inventory through which the speaker tries to understand his father and his motivations, and through which the poet tries to understand his great-great grandfather. The list becomes a tool for time-travel. Indeed, the word ‘temper’ from the poem’s title shares an etymological root with the word ‘tempus’, meaning time or season.⁷⁰ Hugh Roberts writes: ‘This is a poem obsessed with time and the violence of time, obsessed too, with legacy: what we receive from the past, what we transmit

⁶⁸ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 30.

⁶⁹ Curnow, ‘An Abominable Temper’, p. 30. Stanza break and indentation approximated from original.

⁷⁰ T.F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/view/10.1093/acref/9780192830982.001.0001/acref-9780192830982-e-15369?rskey=tQ2vAm&result=1>> [accessed 2 June 2021] s.v. simile.

to the future, and what is lost irretrievably in that chancy chain of transmissions'.⁷¹ The lists within this collection constitute relics of the past—inherited records of the everyday lives, and indeed, the tempus—of the speaker's paternal ancestors. This idea of legacy is made explicit in the final list in the poem, as the speaker searches the luggage that Monro carried across the beach from Britain to New Zealand in search of clues:

What in the name of God and Robbie Burns

and the nine merry Muses was he doing

at Hokianga, not caring half a fig

of tobacco while the timber was profitable,

he with his gentlemanly tastes,

and the better class he never quarrelled with,

cherishing besides

item one pair brass-barrelled black-nippled

spring-daggered percussion duelling

pistols

item one Poems of Robert Burns,

Edinburgh, 1812

item one Holy Bible?⁷²

These objects can be understood as metaphors, transformed in their passage across the beach and into this poem. We might understand the objects in this poetic list as symbols for the life

⁷¹ Hugh Roberts, 'Curnow: Unsettler Poet', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 37.2 (2019) 128-40
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26816994>> [accessed 19 February 2022] (pp. 133-4).

⁷² Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', pp. 33-34. Stanza break and indentations approximated from original.

that Monro expects and prepares for in his new life in Aotearoa. The duelling pistols perhaps foreshadow the colonial conflict that is yet to unfold in Aotearoa, the bible representing the religious beliefs that Monro and other Pākehā carry across the seas. The collection of Burns's poetry perhaps represents the literary traditions that Monro also brings with him, and too the link between him and his descendant Allen Curnow forged in this poem.

Verse biographers trace beach crossings well into the 20th century and beyond, and maintain an eye on ongoing processes of colonialism and racism in Aotearoa New Zealand. These explorations again, often connect the verse biographer with their subject, and explore shared inheritances and understandings of belonging and unbelonging in Aotearoa New Zealand. Chris Tse explores the experiences of Chinese migrants and immigrants who cross Aotearoa's beaches and remind us that encounter is an ongoing process. For Tse, the crossing of the beach by Chinese tauwiwi is shaped by legacies of discrimination and white supremacy which were enshrined in New Zealand law during the lifetime of his biographical subject, Joe Kum Yung.

How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes explores the life of the Cantonese gold prospector Joe Kum Yung, and his experience of crossing the beach to New Zealand in the late nineteenth century. Yung's experience is markedly different from the experience of European arrivals in New Zealand, and his encounter with New Zealand is one indelibly marked by prejudice and ultimately deadly racism.

At the start of the book, New Zealand appears as a place of potential where Yung can make a living and a home. Upon his arrival to New Zealand in 1871, Yung looks upon the country and experiences a brief moment of hope in 'New Gold Mountain/ and its promises of good money'.⁷³ However, this hope is tempered by the sense of New Zealand as a place harbouring an underlying threat:

1871: first impressions – there is something
unsettling about this country, how its generosity
of space is inflicted upon bright eyes.⁷⁴

⁷³ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 3.

⁷⁴ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 3. Stanza break and white space approximated from original.

This mood of threat is closely tied to Yung's first views of the coast of New Zealand. The beach is a setting where the truth of the racism and hardship that awaits Yung crashes through the idealised vision of New Zealand as an egalitarian nation.

Earth shifts and those first sparks

are short-lived before a veil of regret

sickens the view⁷⁵

By the time Yung arrives on New Zealand's beach, his hopes are dashed, and the white gap in Tse's line marks the moment of this destruction: 'By the break upon sand it was all a lie.'⁷⁶

How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes examines the anti-Asian sentiment which has historically thrived here, and the way that it shaped New Zealand law. The beach is a setting marked and bounded by racist law. The poem '(Good law)' reproduces fragments from the 1999 New Zealand Law Reports in order to emphasise how, in Yung's lifetime, the shoreline of New Zealand was one which could only be crossed by Chinese people in accordance with fundamentally racist legislation.⁷⁷ The singling out of Chinese immigration is evident in the opening stanza of the poem which quotes from the 1919 New Zealand Law Reports:

The whole object of the

statute was to prevent people of the Chinese race from coming into the

*Dominion and engaging in industrial pursuits.*⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 42.

⁷⁷ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 4.

⁷⁸ *Lum v Attorney-General* 1919 NZLR 741 (SC) at 746, as quoted in Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 4. Italics in original.

This fragment carries a specifically economic inflection in its prejudice. Chinese immigrants were perceived as a threat to the New Zealand economy and workers.⁷⁹ The poem too draws attention to the anti-Chinese prejudice expressed in the restriction of Chinese immigration to a rate of one person for ‘every one hundred tons of cargo’ per ship.⁸⁰ Tse’s explanation of ‘this arbitrary ratio’ highlights the way in which the passage of Chinese immigrants was reduced to the import of material goods.

Tse emphasises the connection between racism and the economic sanctions inflicted upon Chinese immigrants:

A supposition of invaders

A taxing concern—It was the sea—The faster the waves,
the harder the crush.⁸¹

Tse evokes the sound of the waves with the rushing ‘sh’ sound, and brings the beach of arrival to sensory life. Tse’s imagery also evokes the propaganda of groups such as the Anti-Chinese Association and the Anti-Asiatic League.⁸² One key image in this hateful propaganda was the sinophobic depiction of ‘waves’ of immigrants arriving with force on the beaches of New Zealand. With this imagery, the beach is harnessed as a liminal space where fears of ‘the other’ thrive. It is a physical border rendered as a space of nationalistic boundary and exclusion. The beach that Yung steps onto is one which is regulated by racism enshrined in law.

Throughout *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, Tse explores the complexities of Aotearoa New Zealand’s beach crossings. While immigration is strictly policed under

⁷⁹ New Zealand History ‘Anti-Chinese hysteria in Dunedin:

7 May 1888’, *New Zealand History* <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/anti-chinese-hysteria-dunedin>>

[accessed 6 September 2021]; New Zealand History, ‘Anti-Chinese hysteria in Dunedin:

7 May 1888’, *New Zealand History* <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/poll-tax-imposed-on-chinese>> [accessed 6 September 2021]; Paul Spoonley, the ‘Asianisation of of Aotearoa: Immigration Impacts’, in *A Land of Milk and Honey?: Making Sense of Aotearoa New Zealand*, ed. by Avril Bell, Vivienne Elizabeth, Tracey McIntosh and Matt Wynyard (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2017).

⁸⁰ Tse, p. 4; For more information about this, and the changing rates, see Ministry for Culture and Heritage, ‘Poll tax on Chinese immigrants abolished’, *NZ History* (2020) <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/poll-tax-on-chinese-immigrants-abolished>> [accessed 2 February 2021].

⁸¹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 30. Underlining from original.

⁸² New Zealand History, ‘Anti-Chinese Hysteria in Dunedin’, *New Zealand History* (2020) <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/anti-chinese-hysteria-dunedin>> [accessed 12 March 2021]; A.H. McLintock, *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* 1966, hosted on *Te Ara* <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/1966/national-groups/page-13>> [accessed 9 March 2021].

colonial law, the beaches of New Zealand are settings where Māori extend manaakitanga to Chinese immigrants. The poem ‘(SS Ventnor)’ explores the sinking of the ship in 1902, ten miles off the coast of Hokianga, and the loss of the bodies of 499 Chinese miners who were to be repatriated to China.⁸³ In this poem, the dead who return to Aotearoa’s beaches are welcomed by Tangata Whenua and afforded traditional Māori burial as a sign of respect. The poem is structured into three stanzas, subtitled with kupu which refer to tangihanga traditions. The first, ‘*kawe mate*’ refers to the Māori traditions around death, especially the presentation of a photograph to those who are unable to attend the tangihanga in person.⁸⁴ The sharing of this tradition, while of course unable to replace traditional Chinese burial practices, works to connect the shores of New Zealand and the homelands of these men. In this stanza, Tse emphasises the way that Māori carried these dead, and prevented these men from being forgotten, lost to the sea:

The departed cargo

thought doomed

to forgetful waters

instead finds its way

to open shores

rescued by the people of the land.⁸⁵

⁸³ Tse, *How to be Dead*, pp. 9-10, italics in original; New Zealand Geographic, ‘The Lost Voyage of 499’ *New Zealand Geographic* <<https://www.nzgeo.com/video/the-lost-voyage-of-499/>> [accessed 30 January 2021]; New Zealand Geographic, ‘Ghost Ship of the Hokianga’ <<https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/ghost-ship-of-the-hokianga/>> [accessed December 2021].

⁸⁴ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9.

⁸⁵ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9. Stanza breaks approximated from the original.

Tse's use of the word 'cargo' here once again calls to mind the equation of these people with luggage in colonial law, but Tse highlights the different terms in which Māori 'rescue' these bodies. Tse's use of the words 'open shores' is striking here, as it works to dissolve the colonial laws and attitudes which seek to close the shores of New Zealand elsewhere in this book. In this poem, Tse reminds the reader of the position of Māori as tangata whenua, the people of the land, and the kaitiaki of the shorelines. The second stanza title, '*te rerenga wairua*' names the headland where Māori believe souls cross the beach in order to join the underworld.⁸⁶ Again, Tse's poem does not suppose that Māori beliefs about death and the afterlife should replace Chinese beliefs and practices, but instead suggests that 'Death is the common ground | when acknowledged with respect'.⁸⁷ This cross-cultural encounter is one carried out with care. The third stanza, titled '*karakia*', closes this movement of the collection, and emphasises the kinship and belonging extended to the men:

And so the once-lost are salvaged

and laid to rest

among spiritual kin and tender ancestors⁸⁸

As Māori honour these men with sacred death rituals, Tse reminds us that cultural encounter is multiple and ongoing, even into the afterlife. The beaches of China and Aotearoa are spiritually linked with the story of these men. However, as in *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, these men are, nevertheless, subject to the rules of a beyond which, while shared with them, is not wholly theirs. They remain displaced from their homeland, destined:

to be ghosts who only speak

when spoken to

with no choice in the path they are set upon.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9.

⁸⁷ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9.

⁸⁸ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 10. White space and stanza breaks approximated from original.

Tse revisits the beach in order to listen for the voices of these Chinese miners, and call their stories forward from the rolling hush of history. Tse reminds us of one of verse biography's most potent affordances: to speak to the dead and create space for their voices in the current moment.

Verse biographers salvage voices from the past and find many of them suspended between life and death, in the liminal space of the beach. In Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, the Aotearoa beach is a setting upon and around which death laps. The beach is a setting upon which ideas of first and ongoing crossings are explored. It makes sense, then, that many of New Zealand verse biography's final crossings also take place on and around our poetic beaches. The beach is a liminal space between life and death. Cook's soul is left dangling from the sacred Pohutukawa at Cape Reinga, suspended between this life and the next. The bodies aboard the SS *Ventnor*, 'thought doomed to forgetful waters', are returned to the beach, where their souls too wait.⁹⁰ In Kan's *This Paper Boat* the beach is a space where souls are suspended between the world of the living and the beyond.

Kan draws on the setting and language of the beach in his portrayal of the writer Iris Wilkinson (pen-name Robin Hyde). In the opening section of the book, the beach appears as a place from which Kan communes with Hyde across time. It is a place of connection, lit by the moon, a place which Kan explores and is inspired by. Later in the book, the sea is transformed into a place of desperation and near-death. Kan depicts Wilkinson's 1933 attempt to end her life at the Auckland harbour:

I. waited until two boys had left the wharf.
The heaviness of her body was a sweet
heaviness. She let her hair swim out, was
still and let the world flow around and into
her. [...]
She breathed in water.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9.

⁹¹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 54.

With Wilkinson's breathing-in of water, the beach and her lungs too become interstitial spaces, as she drifts between life and death. Kan explores parallel moments of liminality, including the time spent in utero. Kan depicts Wilkinson's birth and death in close parallel in this section:

'The black and healing silence of original possibility. [...] It is essential that amniotic fluid be breathed into the lungs in order for them to develop normally'.⁹²

As in Curnow, the image of birth here serves as a metaphor with multiple resonances. Wilkinson's intention to die is here blurred with her desire to live, and Kan examines the confusion of motivations that she is experiencing:

All she understood was that when she was in pain it wasn't confined to any particular place, but spread in great waves until it occupied every silver part of her.⁹³

This image of her body as one consumed by waves is echoed again in a section which explores her relationship with sedatives. This scene is expressed in tidal terms which further connect the harbour with beach imagery :

I. didn't mind. It'd make her go to sleep. She wanted to go to sleep. The syringe jabbed down.

Dull gold waves spreading all over the body.

⁹² Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 54.

⁹³ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 54.

Full tide, quiet tide. A vast surf rushing up the
sand with swirling driftwood and tiny shrimp in
its throat, lemon leaves and sunlight dropping
into it like tarnished coins.⁹⁴

This scene, swirling with surreal imagery and a descent into sleep, works to evoke a sense of her final overdose. With this imagery, Kan signals the connection between this beach moment and Wilkinson's final crossing into the beyond. In Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, the beach is a place of liminality and encounter. It is a setting upon which verse biographers unsettle notions of static division, and easy or single crossings. These concerns echo too in the ways that verse biographers approach the setting of the beyond, and the beach and the beyond are intricately connected.

In Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, Nina Powles's *Whale Fall*, Ian Wedde's 'A Ballad for Worser Heberley', Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper', Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, the beach is a shifting and liminal setting which is crossed in complex and contradictory ways. It is a space which, for all its changing tides, nevertheless remains marked with blood. Another key setting where verse biographers count the cost of encounter, is the home. In the hands of Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographers, the home is a setting which, like the beach, bears witness to change and collision. It is a setting where verse biographers trace the blood that is tracked in from the beaches of colonial encounter, and the bloodying that bubbles behind the carefully curated walls of societal norms. If the beach is a threshold across which baggage is carried, then the home is the place where its contents are unleashed.

⁹⁴ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 57.

The Home

Sheltering/(Hidden Harm)

The home is a setting which is powerfully idealised. We might often imagine home as a positive space, and it appears in our collective imagining soaked in connotations of nostalgia and shelter. We sample the idea of home in embroidered cliché: Home is where the heart is. Dorothy shuts her eyes and wishes for safety and return.¹ Her refrain ‘there’s no place like home’ is perhaps at times ours too. The childhood home is an especially potent image. For many, it is a place which can be recalled and remapped years and even decades after it was last visited. It is a place which is key in the formation of our identities, and it is a place to which we return to make sense of our wider lives. It is key to our sense of identity. The home is a building where we can ‘dwell’. Iris Marion Young posits:

We can dwell only in a place. Edifices enclose areas with walls and link areas by planes, thus creating locations. Walls, roofs, columns, stairs, fences, bridges, towers, roads, and squares found the human world by making place. [...] People inhabit the world by erecting material supports for their routines and rituals and then see the specificity of their lives reflected in the environment, the materiality of things gathered together with historical meaning.²

In short, Young explains, ‘The home is an extension of and mirror for the living body in its everyday activity.’³ It is arranged around the needs and rituals of our bodies.⁴ It is a place we come to know ‘as well as we know the back of our hands’ and is shaped by these same hands. We memorise somatic maps of our homes, and position ourselves intimately within, and with relation to their walls. We can often find our way around them in the dark, knowing exactly how many paces to take, precisely where the nearest light switch is, or exactly where the home creaks or dips. They are in this sense, key biographical sites.

¹ *The Wizard of Oz*, dir. by Victor Fleming (Loew's Inc, 1939) [on Amazon Prime].

² Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 126.

³ Young, p. 140.

⁴ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 120.

The home is often depicted in contemporary popular culture as a safe haven, providing shelter from outside threat. It is often conceived of as a lit and locked sanctuary from the dark. We can easily find ourselves singing out for a nostalgic homecoming. In January 2021, the Radio New Zealand show ‘Afternoons with Jesse Mulligan’ invited submissions of songs on the theme ‘Home’ and were inundated with requests.⁵ Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘Homeward Bound’, ‘Our House’ by Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, and ‘Home’ by Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros sound here alongside many other songs which idealise and celebrate the comfort of the home.

However, not all homes are sweet, and this idea of the home as a wholly positive space is one which New Zealand writers have long sought to unsettle. Jennifer Lawn writes of the gothic potential of the home:

“Home” is a dangerous sign, in part because mythologies of security, safety, and fulfilment continually work overtime to obscure their own fragility: intimate relationships both sustain us and strip us bare; a thin border separates safe enclosure from entrapment.⁶

There are strong social imperatives and systems which work to preserve the idealised image of the home as a safe space. It is a setting which is constructed in part to publicly signal the state of the private lives which unfold within it. It is a space which can either safely shelter or harm and entrap its occupants. The home is one setting where verse biographers explore the lines between the private and public lives of their biographical subjects, and between what can be recovered of their life, and what lies beyond poetic resurrection. New Zealand verse biographers are especially invested in restoring those voices and stories which speak to the hidden griefs and harms which unfold in the homes of their subjects.

The idea of the home as a space of shelter and safety pulses through New Zealand verse biographies, and poets explore and ironize these settings. They emphasise the plight of women and children in the homes of New Zealand history and participate in a wider process of feminist reclamation. The home, in the hands of these poets, is at times, a setting warmed

⁵ Jesse Mulligan, ‘Songs about Home: Afternoons with Jesse Mulligan’, *RNZ* (2021) <<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/afternoons/audio/2018781025/songs-about-home>> [accessed 15 April 2021].

⁶ Jennifer Lawn, ‘Warping the Familiar’ in *Gothic NZ: The Darker Side of Kiwi Culture* ed. by Misha Kavka, Jennifer Lawn and Mary Paul (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006), p. 15.

by familial love and nostalgia, however even these largely happy homes are subject to change and loss. In Nina Powles's *Whale Fall* and *Sunflowers*, and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, the home is a place where biographical subjects find shelter, belonging and warmth. These collections each feature fast-shifting subjectivities which evoke the ambiguity of memory and the limitations of the lifespan. They are illuminated by the golden and silver lights of imagination and memory, and each contain images of fire and kindling which contain both warmth and threat. All three collections centre traditions of memorialising and, ultimately, register the impossibility of stasis and total resurrection.

Other homes in New Zealand verse biography are marked by their lack of safety and are characterised by fragility and unsettlement. These are homes which kindle violence and harm. The garden is similarly a space which registers loss, and it is a space where the institutionalised ideals of the home give way to seasons of change and external witness. The gardens of Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper' and Karen Zelas's *The Trials of Minnie Dean* both contain and expose domestic violence, child abuse and death. Curnow and Zelas interrogate the boundaries of the home in order to expose the relationship between public reputation and private violence, and render the garden as an important liminal zone in which what is planted must grow.

Powles's *Whale Fall* centres on the setting of the home of Betty Guard. Powles depicts the home in luminous sensory detail, and it serves as reminder of the bloody economy of the beach which enabled and shaped colonial settlement. With Powles's focus on light, the home is a setting which serves as sentry and memorial. The poem 'Beacon' describes how Guard transforms her home into a kind of makeshift lighthouse:

She keeps rooms lit up,
sets lamps down on windowsills each night.

Her house in this cove
is the brightest in the Sounds—

ships can spot it even in a fog,
when the glow spilling

out from the windows
seeps into the vapour,

wide gold beam
streaming low over the coast.⁷

The Guard home is one which radiates light, which provides safety against the threat of the night, and which illuminates the liminal space between the sea and land. The light of their home enables safe landfall. However, this light also poses a possible fire risk, and the poem continues:

Her husband took all the curtains down
for fear of fire but mainly

so she could have her repository of sunlight—
she told him she liked best waking up

as soon as light hits the room,
night setting itself alight again.⁸

The lack of curtains ensures that the home is one which Guard keeps constantly open to the outside view of the beach. The eyes of these windows remain open day and night. This detail is further emphasised in another poem, where a scene of domestic comfort and connection is punctured by Betty's curiosity about the processes of whaling she can only partially observe from the kitchen window:

She sits next to him in the firelight
talking about fruit trees, birdsong, cargo,
types of clouds, types of tides.

⁷ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 14. Stanza breaks approximated from original.

⁸ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 14.

It is like this every night.
She is sewing a small pattern of waves
in sky blue running along the edge

of his pillowcase—she pricks her finger
and can't stand it anymore.

She must have the truth of it.⁹

The home is a place where Betty is separated from the violence of the colonial economy which stains the beach outside her home, but she is unable to escape her imaginings of it. They slip through the walls. They get under her skin. They draw blood. The domestic rhythms of discussing natural phenomena and taxonomies are pierced by Betty's needle, and by her questions about the processes of whaling which happen just out of the reach of her window-view: 'She must know'. The bloodying of the beach has its echo in the bloodying of her embroidery.

Powles imagines Betty haunted by the whales, waking in the night, illuminated again with Powles's silver light, this time emanating from the moon:

She goes to the window
and stands in a square of silver light. She sees
that the beach is alive with shadows—but
they can't be shadows. They are catching the light.
They are sprawled along the sandbank swallowing
the lip of the tide. They are moving and alive,
flung onto their sides, fins quivering. She knows
it will take hours but she cannot look away.
She will wait for the thin sound of them trying to breathe
to slow to a stillness. And in the morning she will
watch the men flense them, boil their blubber into oil.

⁹ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 16. Stanza breaks approximated from original.

She thinks of all the lamps she will place on every sill,
enough, perhaps, to eclipse the moon.¹⁰

We understand Betty as a kind of waking sentry, bearing witness to the beaching and death of these animals. Betty builds a home in view of death initiated by colonial primary industry. Hers is a view of haunting harm, and she does not shutter herself away from it. Her light is not one which lights up comfortable colonial myths of domesticity, and her lack of curtains eschews privacy, and refuses the denial of the trade which enables her survival here. Her home is a powerful image of what a well-lit colonial home boundary and its safety costs. She lights up the home as a kind of vigil, a dedication to the lives lost to light her home. Powles leaves us to decide how these whales come to be on the shore—whether they have been hunted and left to die slowly, or if they have become beached on their own accord, failed by their inbuilt homing systems. The final lines of the poem speak perhaps to Betty filling the home with light as a corrective to the lunar forces which govern the tides and mobilise the whales. However, this act is also marked by an irony, as whale blubber was used to create the oil required for indoor lighting in nineteenth century New Zealand. There is contradiction here, as her sympathy for the whales is placed in stark juxtaposition with the material realities of survival in the young colony. She cannot light or sustain her home without the deaths she marks.

Like Betty Guard's home in Powles's *Whale Fall*, many of the other homes in New Zealand verse biography are bloodied by hidden harm. They are settings marked by fragility, violence, and death. In Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper' and Karen Zelas's *The Trials of Minnie Dean: A Verse Biography* the home is a place of threat posed by those who are positioned as caregivers. The home is a space where women and children especially meet violence and death. Both Curnow and Zelas use short listing lines to catalogue the components of homes in their collection. Curnow utilises repetition to trace the rhythms of the abominable temper which pulses in H.A.H. Monro's biography; Zelas draws on documentary evidence including statistics and quotes in order to trace the chronology of Minnie Dean's life. Both Curnow and Zelas largely use the first-person point of view to create a space of imaginary exploration, where they question and speculate on the gaps left by historical records, and seek to explore the perspectives of those voices omitted from the past.

¹⁰ Powles, *Whale Fall*, p. 17.

The homes in Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper' are unstable spaces which contain troubling secrets. The home is not a place of family closeness and belonging, and when the speaker's family first arrive in New Zealand, they live separately, with the speaker first living with his mother and two sisters 'in the house of a settler', while his father builds their new house.¹¹ The fifth section of the poem describes the loss of this new house to fire:

No sooner built than burned to the ground,
all our possessions with it. An accident,

at least I never heard anyone blamed for it.¹²

This fire is marked by ambiguity, the cause not confirmed by the speaker, but rather gleaned from what has not been said. This aspect of unclear and hidden destruction pervades the entire poem, and is emphasised in the speaker's description of his father:

Burned to the ground, a smouldering heap
heaves into memory, he and his household goods,
cold ashes now. This charred fag-end of me

pokes here and there. All fires are accidents,
if one happens to be ninety years of age,
most accidents have done, as we say they will.¹³

In this passage, Curnow uses the imagery of ashes to conjure biblical understandings of the father's death, his return to ashes. The phrase 'he and his household goods' is worth noting: these are not recorded as the family's possessions, but as solely the father's. The father's preoccupation with worldly objects is noted elsewhere in the poem and is at times positioned alongside a corresponding lack of concern for his family, carried across the beach 'with his

¹¹ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', pp. 29-30.

¹² Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 30.

¹³ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 30.

other belongings'.¹⁴ These ashes are cold, and while the fire has long gone out, the speaker still bears its marks. The metaphor of the speaker as a charred cigarette end raises more questions, and connotations. Perhaps the fire was initiated by the speaker, the igniting spark, or a cigarette butt dropped by the father in his later life. In any case, the homes in this collection, like the homes in Kan's and Powles's collections, harbour incendiary potential. The home remains an unstable setting throughout the poem.

Following the fire, the family remains separated across two different dwellings, with the speaker's mother and sisters remaining in the house of the settler, while the men of the family 'roughed it' in a 'hut' provided to them by local Māori. This dwelling is, importantly, not a home for the speaker, and is a hut, filled not with the warmth or whole family, but instead the bare tools of survival:

item one frying-pan

item four halves of coconut shell for cups

item mussel shells stuck on reeds for spoons¹⁵

This poetic list catalogues domestic 'items' which are largely created from beach objects. Curnow emphasises the role of Māori in providing manaakitanga to these beach Pākehā, and the dwelling and objects which enabled their sustenance and survival. This 'rough' simplicity is placed in direct contrast with the house that Peter Monro builds next:

RE-SUPPLIED from Hobart, my father had built
a large weatherboard house, outhouses, boatshed.
He enclosed several acres and made a garden.

Like the Garden of Eden, I am tempted to say.
If it had been less like—indeed, dear Ada,
you know your Bible, I hope, as well as I do.¹⁶

This house is large and sprawling, a well-to-do symbol of wealth. It is a space built by the speaker's father and appears, at least outwardly, as a carefully considered sanctuary.

¹⁴ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 32.

¹⁵ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 30.

¹⁶ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 31.

However, it is not a home, and even here, the family is without lasting security. The unsettling element of the poem's titular 'Abominable Temper' echoes through the poet's cataloguing list of the house and its surrounds. For all of its amenities and material comforts, it is a house, and not a home. The vast garden is an enclosed space, an apparent haven. However, in light of the poem's title, we understand that the structure and surrounds home something 'abominable'. With the comparison to the Garden of Eden, Curnow summons a nexus of metaphor and cultural understandings. The Monro garden is one which is set to fall. The sins of the speaker's father are left largely outside the frame of the poem, and are hidden in this home, the crackling kindling beneath the otherwise pleasant plenty of life in this space:

Yes, it was a pleasant life at Hokianga,
only for my father's abominable temper
we could have been very happy[...]

My father kept
his bad temper entirely for home consumption,

outside his family he never quarrelled with anyone.¹⁷

The house is constructed by the father ostensibly to shelter his family, but it becomes the very space in which his cruelty is unleashed. The word 'consumption' here is worth examining too, conjuring both the 'feeding' of anger to the family in a subverted image of parental nourishment, and perhaps evoking the 'consumption' of the home by this same anger, the phrasing echoing the fire which destroyed the first home. The weatherboard walls hide his behaviour from the outside world, and the stately home is a façade with which he reinforces his positive reputation to others outside of the home. Unlike the home in Powles's *Whale Fall*, we might imagine the curtains of this house pulled tight against the neighbours' view.

The fragility of this home is reinforced further through the depiction of the garden, lost to economic ruin. In lines which again echo biblical imagery earlier in the poem, the speaker recounts:

¹⁷ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 31.

The bad times came, the garden went
the way of all gardens from the first, I suppose.¹⁸

For all of the father's efforts, the vast garden is lost to economic pressures, a not-uncommon circumstance for colonial settlers, and one played out too in Karen Zelas's *The Trials of Minnie Dean*. The harm hidden within the house again bears an economic inflection, described as the loss of the well-to-do, exterior, socially visible space. While this harm is not explored in graphic detail, it nonetheless shapes the entire poem.

The extent of the speaker's father's abominable temper pulses throughout the poem, and the speaker traces it to his parents' bedroom. One section is marked by a troubling ambiguity, and its questioning tone creates space for simultaneous imagination and denial:

VII

DID he love nobody?
Nobody him? Dear Ada,
I do not imagine my father
got me in a fit of temper,
whatever the connexion was.
Such things, if possible at all,
one prefers to think unlikely.¹⁹

In this section, the speaker suggests that he may have been conceived in an act of rape, during his father's 'fit of temper'. This is perhaps the moment of 'Abominable Temper' to which the title of the poem refers, and why the speaker returns again and again to the figure of his father throughout the poem. Again, the speaker stops short of describing the wider context of his questions or giving specific details. This is a scene which happens offstage. The speaker does not provide facts nor clues. While the speaker asserts that this is not something that he 'imagines' happened, its very presence within the poem admits it as a possibility. The speaker instead centres his preference to imagine otherwise. However, the next section of the poem returns to this question of sexual violence as the speaker interrogates his ancestor, and seeks to fill the historical space: 'Was it smelly between the sheets?'²⁰ This question must remain

¹⁸ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 31.

¹⁹ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 32.

²⁰ Curnow, 'An Abominable Temper', p. 33.

rhetorical in nature: it is not a question which the speaker of the poem has an answer to, but it is one which the poet must still ask. The evocation of a sense of smell leads us to conclude that there is something rotten in this bed, and the reader joins the speaker in recoiling in disgust. We once again understand that this home is not a place of unassaulted safety and shelter for the women and children of this poem.

The home is also a setting which bears witness to destructive fire and kindling violence in Karen Zelas's *The Trials of Minnie Dean*. It is a space where public and private harm combine for deadly effect, and where women and children are subject to domestic trials. It is not a homely space of belonging or safety. The houses and gardens in this collection are marked with struggle, illness, and death.

The key biographical subject of Karen Zelas's book, Minnie Dean, was notorious for the secrets that unfolded in and around her house. She was a so-called 'baby farmer', someone who adopted unwanted children in exchange for payment.²¹ The motivations of baby farmers were often attributed to a financial greed. Furthermore, until the introduction of the Infant Life Protection Act in 1893, baby farmers and their wards were unregistered.²² Without legal supervision, fear spread that caregivers like Dean might kill their charges in order to pocket payments for themselves. The very language used to describe the practice of 'baby farming' invoked and then inverted contemporary notions of the colonial farm and ideas of good work. In the mid-to-late 19th century, colonial farmers understood themselves as hard workers 'taming' New Zealand's rugged landscape, profiting from the labour involved with the boom of sheep farming especially in the South Island.²³ This farming was an act which was sanctioned as part of the wider colonial project, transforming the landscape to represent Britain, and replicating European methods of farming and food production.²⁴ In contrast, the phrase 'baby farming' was used in a derogatory way, to conjure ideas of ill-gotten profit and

²¹ Lynley Hood, *Minnie Dean: Her Life & Crimes* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 46.

²² Zelas, *The Trials of Minnie Dean*, p. 104; NZLII/ *Parliamentary Counsel* Office, Infant Life Protection Act 1893 (57 VICT 1893 No 35) <http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/ilpa189357v1893n35309/> [accessed 3 May 2020].

²³ Robert Peden, 'Early Farming and the Great Pastoral Era', in *Te Ara* (2008) <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/farming-in-the-economy/page-1>> [accessed 3 May 2020].

²⁴ For more on this, see: Robert Peden and Peter Holland, 'Settlers transforming the open country' in *Making a New Land: Environmental histories of New Zealand*, ed. by Eric Pawson & Tom Brooking (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2013) pp. 89-105.

neglect.²⁵ Where colonial agriculture brought life and wealth, baby farming wrought suffering and death.

The practice of private childcare and adoption existed in tension with Victorian society, as it exposed the failure of people to adhere to strict sexual rules. Victorian gendered expectations of women and “right sexuality” persisted in New Zealand. Charlotte Macdonald reminds us that in the mid nineteenth century, men and women were understood to be fundamentally different in nature, with women ‘endowed with a special moral responsibility and sensibility’.²⁶ While the motherland may have been many miles away, the expectation for colonial women to ‘mother’ extended even to the idea of raising this new society. Macdonald emphasises the significance of this role: ‘For their part, settler women in the early phase of colonialization were burdened not only with involvement in various forms of agrarian and household production [...] but also with the breeding and ideological tasks of reproducing ‘the nation’.’²⁷ Colonial women were tasked with reproduction, both in terms of bearing and raising children, and with the reproduction of Britain’s moral expectations and right society. This reproduction took place largely within the domestic sphere of the home, a private space dedicated to family and moral education. The practice of adopting unwanted children challenged narrow traditional notions of family and made visible the reality that sex was not in reality reserved for marriage. The practice also laid bare the consequences of harsh societal judgment, and the lack of an adequate system to support single mothers and their children. There is no safe home for illegitimate children or their mothers. In *This Paper Boat*, Iris Wilkinson faces judgement for conceiving an “illegitimate” child, and this judgement sees her shunned by the owner of the house she stays in while pregnant:

I. stayed on D’Urville Island in the Marlborough
Sounds until her pregnancy, the second, began

According to Sophie Davis, ‘The term “babyfarming” was first used in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) in 1867 in a report detailing how a woman’s four children died in the care of the same hired foster mother’, Sophie Davis ‘Hung out to dry? Questioning the legality of Minnie Dean’s 1895 trial and execution’, *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review*, 46.1, (2015), p. 117. Debra Powell also highlights how it was at the time a term that was: ‘deliberately pejorative as it emphasised the economic connotations of the arrangement’, Debra Powell ‘The Ogress, the Innocent and the Madman: Narrative and Gender in Child Homicide Trials in New Zealand, 1870 – 1925’ (PhD Thesis, University of Waikato, 2013), p. 279.

²⁶ Charlotte Macdonald, ‘Temperance and other Feminisms, 1885-1905’, in *The Vote, the Pill and the Demon Drink: A History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand, 1869-1993*, pp. 32-67 (p. 35).

²⁷ Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval, ‘Introduction: Beyond Dichotomies - Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class in Settler Societies’, in *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1995) pp. 1-38 (pp. 14-15).

to show.[...]

I won't know

another safe day till you're out of the house,

Mrs Snape said to her.²⁸

Wilkinson sends her son Derek to live with another woman, a paid private child-minder like Dean:

Unable to support him financially I. boarded
Derek with an old Irish woman, Mrs Rattan, in
Palmerston North. As Mrs Rattan rocked Derek
in her arms and flashed her broken white teeth,
I. was convinced of her kindness, and would
pay Mrs Rattan £1 once a week for Derek's
board.²⁹

Kan highlights the economic forces which led to Wilkinson sending Derek to live in another home. At the time, Wilkinson has just found employment after a period of unemployment, with the Auckland weekly newspaper, the *Observer*. Her income was £4 a week.³⁰ It is worth noting here too that both Dean and Rattan are identified as immigrants, separated from the homes of their countries of birth. The description of Dean's and Rattan's homes, as well as homes for unwed mothers, is loaded with an ironic force here, as they operated outside of the cultural expectations of domesticity and sanctioned family, as places where 'outcast[s]' were homed.³¹ A further example of this can be seen in the story of Dean's charge, Esther, who comes to her care after she is cast out by her family. Zelas imagines Dean's account of Esther's background:

they saw her as an outcast
treated her so sent her

²⁸ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 41; 'Mrs Snape' was in fact Mrs Hope, fictionalised in Hyde's novel *A Home in This World*; Rawlinson, Gloria and Derek Challis, *The Book of Iris: A Life of Robin Hyde* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002), p. 159.

²⁹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 43; *The Book of Iris*, p. 173-4.

³⁰ *The Book of Iris*, p. 173-4.

³¹ Zelas, p. 80.

house sees her besmirched by social judgment and legal consequences. The home is by no means a setting which guarantees shelter from wider outside forces.

Economic forces shape the home in distinct, bodily ways. Far from domestic havens, homes in this collection are places where overcrowding and poverty are focused through close bodily detail. The poem, 'There's nothing like the closeness' focuses on overcrowding within the walls of Dean's own childhood home. The family sleeps in extreme proximity,

bodies stacked like soup spoons
in each other's laps the beat
of heart through cotton 'gainst
my back the sigh of breathing shared³⁴

This crowding is emphasised through the poet's close attention to bodily detail, rendered in an intimate first person voice. With the poet's line break, which cuts through each sentence and creates a sense of impingement and disjunction, we are invited to share in the breathing of this cramped home. The family's bedroom is a full one, and Dean's sister, Christina, sleeps in her parents' bed. The speaker describes the experience of listening to her parents have sex in the next bed, again emphasizing her close proximity to them: 'I could reach out & touch them if I tried'.³⁵ Zelas's exploration of this moment centres issues of gender, as the speaker describes how her mother stays 'so very still as not to wake' her father, but he

wants to try & make
another bairn maybe a boy
this time³⁶

With these lines, Zelas centres sex as an act primarily for reproduction and admits a sense of the woman as a reluctant reproductive partner. The image of the speaker's mother lying 'very still' is laced too with the contemporary expectation that women should tolerate sex, when initiated by their husbands, and 'suffer and be still'.³⁷ The father's desire for sex is attributed to a reproductive desire, to further the family name by way of producing a son. The importance of this is emphasised in the following lines when the speaker imparts her belief

³⁴ Zelas, p. 42.

³⁵ Zelas, p. 42.

³⁶ Zelas, p. 42

³⁷ Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Florence: Routledge, 1972), p. x.

that her father hoped that she would be a boy.³⁸ We are reminded that women and men have different roles in the reproduction of empire: it is the men who embody power and value, and it is the women's job to serve them. However, this desire for a son is not without major challenges, and the speaker tells us of how the family have so far lost three children:

there were
two more bairns before I come
who clung not tight enough
to life & then one more who took
a single gasp of this world's stink
& turned from us to be with god³⁹

The syntax and interrupted rhythm of these short lines evokes a sense of breathlessness, and the description of death as a 'turning' away from the family disrupts the early image of the family stacked together as soup spoons. It also perhaps echoes Dean's imagined account of the death of Eva Hornsby, 'reeling over' and falling to the ground. These two lost children loom large in this family's small, shared room, and foreshadow the loss of the many other children within Dean's life.

Homes in this collection are not places of belonging or security, but are precarious, administered and controlled by external forces. The poem 'A falling reputation' catalogues key moments in Dean's financial trials.⁴⁰ A stark list of pivotal dates and events cascades from the top left corner of the page to the bottom right.⁴¹ 1884 stands out as an especially important year, as she becomes a 'bankrupt's wife', and she is 'attacked by dunlea at etal creek'.⁴² This attack is another moment where Dean and her husband are made homeless, excluded from shelter by their landlord. The poem 'My husband Charles is bankrupt' describes how Dean and her husband wake to 'charles' largest debtor', Dunlea, attacking them both with a hammer and evicting them into the night.⁴³ Debt destabilises the family's settlement and shatters the shelter of the home. Throughout the collection, Dean refers to her

³⁸ Zelas, p. 42.

³⁹ Zelas, p. 42.

⁴⁰ Zelas, p. 70.

⁴¹ Zelas, p. 70.

⁴² Zelas, p. 70.

⁴³ Zelas, p. 61.

husband as unlucky, ‘exhibit[ing] an unfailing flair | for bad timing’.⁴⁴ Macdonald assures Zelas’s reader that Dean was not alone in her choice of husband:

Colonial life threw up many circumstances in which the ideal of the home-nurturing, dutiful, financially dependent wife was thrown into conflict with day-to-day reality [...] For women, this meant earning a living, supporting children and running a household single-handed, or with only the erratic assistance of an unlucky, improvident or mobile spouse.⁴⁵

Dean is herself forced to take out a loan in 1887 and purchases ‘a 2-storeyed 7-roomed house | & garden’.⁴⁶ This home represents potential recovery for Dean and her family, as Zelas lists aspects of the property across two lines, separating each detail with airy white space:

22 acres a 2-storeyed 7-roomed house
& garden flowers vegetables orchard.⁴⁷

The white space of these lines provide a visual contrast to the cramped and congested spaces of Dean’s childhood home. It is spacious, and provides food as well as shelter, and while it may be ‘all overgrown’, Zelas imagines Dean’s pragmatic voice speaking from the page:

I don’t shirk hard work
planted 115 fruiting trees
bought 13 cows⁴⁸

However, in spite of the abundance which Zelas catalogues in these lists, Dean’s hope for economic recovery is dashed when the house burns down the following year. In a few lines, Dean’s progress is lost, as the text is marked by white space, a collapse of syntax echoing the disintegration of the timbers of the house:

absent one day charles
maggie & I future &

⁴⁴ Zelas, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Charlotte Macdonald, ‘Early awakenings, 1850s–1870s’, in *The Vote, the Pill and the Demon Drink: A History of Feminist Writing in New Zealand, 1869-1993*, pp. 13-31 (p.16).

⁴⁶ Zelas, p. 63.

⁴⁷ Zelas, p. 63. White space approximated from original.

⁴⁸ Zelas, p. 63.

present went up in smoke
smouldering ruins on our return.⁴⁹

The family is left to live in a ‘shack’ built from ‘salvaged timbers’.⁵⁰ This ‘shack’ is, again, not a home, but an insufficient shelter, which provides an outward symbol of their poverty. As in Curnow’s ‘An Abominable Temper’, it is unclear what began this housefire, and the father figure is positioned as the person unable to uphold the integrity of the home. A bracketed section in the margin of the page notes:

[charles dean died in another
house fire in 1908. whisky may
have been involved]⁵¹

Zelas uses primary sources to offer historical context, and uses the margin of the poetic page as a way to connect Dean’s voice with an event that occurred more than a decade after her death. Whatever the cause of the fire, Zelas turns her attention once again to Minnie Dean, who finds herself living in poverty, packed once more into an overcrowded home made of scraps.

Another key home in this collection serves as a parallel to Dean’s crowded home as a ‘baby farm’ and conjures and subverts notions of ‘home’. The poem ‘The home for fallen women’ positions institutionalised care as an alternative to home-based adoption.⁵² Here, the word ‘home’ too carries with it not a sense of sanctuary, but a sense of imprisonment and control. The poem uses repetition and rhyme to create a lilting rhythm reminiscent of a nursery rhyme. However, this sing-song rhythm belies the brutal reality for the women who stay in the home. It is depicted as a place of imprisonment:

a house in dunedin fair
where miss-conceptions bloom
there’s many a fear & many a tear
in the home for fallen women
girls come for miles from city & town

⁴⁹ Zelas, p. 63.

⁵⁰ Zelas, p. 63.

⁵¹ Zelas, p. 63.

⁵² Zelas, p. 32.

& every place between
they come in shame to hide & stay
in the home for fallen women⁵³

Zelas's visual play with the extra 's' and hyphen which disrupts the word 'misconception' conjures a nexus of meanings. These are relations which 'miss' the mark of sanctioned sexuality, and which embody what is perhaps conceived of as a misunderstanding of morality. The conception is one that befalls unmarried misses, not the nearly homophonic, but radically more acceptable wedded mrs' of this time. There is too a 'tearing' of expectation here, whose consequence is pain and grief. 'The home for unwedded women' is a place of sadness and suffering. This home is also a place where women lose their freedom:

here they're confined for many a day
confined more ways than one
they tripped & fell to a passing hell
in the home for fallen women⁵⁴

Again, Zelas harnesses the associative power of poetic language, playing on the connection between the contemporary euphemism of pregnancy as 'confinement', and the confinement of the prison-like home for unwed mothers. The pun speaks also to the multiplicities required of language where social and moral expectations prevent candour, and obscure meaning. The home acts as an analogue to the wider world. While these women may not be legally sentenced, nor confined to literal prisons, the social consequences of unsanctioned sexuality are harsh condemnation and exclusion. It is too, importantly, a space designed exclusively for women, and the shame which is solely theirs to bear. This shame is personified in the figures of their new-born children, who are placed in homes which are the inverse of those they might otherwise inhabit:

at last their shame takes human form
it's whisked away it's done⁵⁵

⁵³ Zelas, p. 32.

⁵⁴ Zelas. P. 32.

⁵⁵ Zelas, p. 32.

This phrasing echoes the earlier description of ‘human waste’ cast out of the family home.⁵⁶ That which does not serve traditional notions of the family unit is expelled by society. The poem alludes to how this institutional removal both relieves and harms these mothers:

here the nightmare ends/begins
in the home for fallen women⁵⁷

Dean’s home is another setting which enacts a troubling of Victorian social expectations and blurs the line between public moral standards and private intimacies and their consequences. It is a threshold which is crossed, and in its crossing, challenges her contemporary society’s understandings of itself. The death of children in Dean’s care sealed her reputation throughout New Zealand. Labelled ‘MRS DEAN, THE MURDERESS’, she was held up as a monster of the worst kind, a woman who acted against her supposed inner nature.⁵⁸ In the young colony, this crime is twofold, and violates the role of women as guardians of European ideals of family and home, and the reproductive imperative so essential to reproducing a ‘Better Britain’ in Aotearoa. Through her alleged crimes, Dean is a woman who betrayed the most crucial expectations of women in Victorian New Zealand as mothers and nurturers. Dean is held up as a symbol of the maternal made monstrous.

If her home is the setting of this violation, then the border of the garden, which separates the supposedly cultivated and domesticated nature from the untamed outside world, represents another line between private and public spaces. One particularly potent home setting in this collection is Dean’s garden, a space which Minnie commanded, and was ‘a local showpiece’.⁵⁹ It first appears in this collection as a place of beauty and wealth, but is transformed by the end of the book to become the site of hidden harm and death. The garden is the place where Dean’s final fate is sealed.

At the start of the book, the garden represents Dean’s ability to nurture and nourish life. Zelas draws clear parallels between the health of the plants and the health of Dean’s young charges. Tending to these young ‘sprouts’ is a passion that appears as a natural calling for Dean in the poem ‘I have a passion for fecundity’:

⁵⁶ Zelas, p. 44.

⁵⁷ Zelas, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Zelas, p. 147.

⁵⁹ Ken Catran, *Hanlon: A Casebook* (Auckland: BCNZ Enterprises, 1985), p. 30.

a passion to propagate
& sow & reap
reward from labours

though now the womb be barren
still green fingers coax
life to god's delights

a newborn bairn or lamb
it matters not a cabbage or a clump
or rhubarb a sunflower turning

open-faced to follow
my garden sprouts
youngsters

with straight bare legs
like stalks faces pretty as any
daisy eyes bright as pollen⁶⁰

The poem speaks from Dean's perspective of her ability to 'coax | life'. Even as she is no longer able to bear her own children, her 'labour' is one of ongoing care; her life-giving 'green fingers' ensure that the children blossom. The children are described in peak health, with straight legs and bright eyes. Yet, like other homes and gardens in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, Dean's garden is soon transformed into a space of hidden harm. It is a space that is turned over and its meaning is radically and tragically subverted. It is the place where Dean leaves the bodies of babies Dorothy and Edith overnight in a hatbox:

*this hat box is too heavy full of bulbs
– the only lie I could invent –
mr dean won't like the mess
we'll leave it in the rushes here*

⁶⁰ Zelas, p. 100.

till morning (he later asks
where is the hat box?)

I look him in the eye & say
it's in the garden full of bulbs
from mrs cameron)

next morning send
esther
to retrieve it⁶¹

The use of the word 'rushes' calls to mind another cultural story about a hidden child. The biblical story of the baby Moses hidden in the tall rushes invites us to consider again the many reasons children are sent away from home, and so reinforces the sense of desperation that Dean experiences in this crucial turning-point of the collection. Dean's lie to her husband transforms the garden into a place of secrecy. It becomes the place where Dean attempts to literally bury the evidence of these young lives and deaths. This act is itself shot through with ambiguity. Zelas imagines Dean's account of the burial in a sympathetic light. In a poem titled 'Planting is my pleasure', Dean buries the bodies gently, as if she is simply tucking them into a bed of dirt:

the soft-
frosted earth turns easily breathes in

autumn
cushions holds young plants &
bodies it's

easy work I grip

⁶¹ Zelas, pp. 124-125.

my lower lip until
the taste of metal floods

dorothy edith in a shroud
of oil cloth eva hornsby
bare in soil

companion planting
a blanket
of rich
quick earth

carnations marguerites
bells & roses
bend above
I hope they take⁶²

As in *This Paper Boat*, the garden is again a place which enables shrouding and secrecy. However, this shrouding is not one of protection or preservation—or if it is, it is in service of forgetting and forsaking. It is a thoroughly blooded space, as Dean too holds her mouth shut so tightly that her lip bleeds. This moment, and its evocation of closed and blooded lips, echoes the earlier scene of Dean's mother stilled and silenced in her marital bed, as Dean's father sought to plant babies within the cramped space of the home, and her mother's body. This planting is perhaps a parallel scene, which emphasises the comparably large space of the garden, and the care afforded to the children after their death. The use of the phrase 'companion planting' is especially powerful, and implies that Dean takes cold comfort in the fact that while the babies may be dead, they are at least not alone.⁶³ Zelas evokes Dean's planting of flowers on the grave as an ambiguous, symbolic act. During Dean's trial, her defence lawyer Alfred Hanlon's emphasised that there were many more opportune places to dispose of the bodies.⁶⁴ Zelas's question then echoes Hanlon's contemporary defense of

⁶² Zelas, p. 126.

⁶³ Zelas, p. 126.

⁶⁴ Catran, p. 44.

Dean. What then was Dean's motivation for keeping the bodies close, and burying them in the publicly visible space of her garden? Perhaps she hopes the garden and its bulbs will 'take' so that the grave does not appear freshly-dug and rouse suspicion. However, she has already told her husband and daughter of her apparent acquisition of new bulbs, so perhaps this is an act of commemoration, rather than an attempt to conceal. This ambiguity is explored in the final long poem 'Excerpts & experts: from the Virtual Intertemporal Appeal Tribunal', where the poet, signalled as the speaker 'kz' muses:

perhaps the flowers on their grave
were memorial
rather than
camouflage⁶⁵

Whatever the case, the babies are found and uncovered in the subterranean space of the garden, and Dean is hung for their deaths.

Dean became infamous in large part due to the narrative which surrounded her, and which was embellished and popularised through the contemporary media. She has been denounced as a symbol of monstrous motherhood, and the details of the children found concealed in the garden remain a lasting symbol of the harms that continue to unfold in our very own backyard. Throughout New Zealand, her legacy remains closely tied to the garden space, something that Zelas explores in a series of rumour-fragments which break up a page early in the collection:

she used to bury babies along the roadsides
and plant clumps of that little orange lily on top
that's why it grows wild all over southland⁶⁶

Her life is transformed into myth which grows deep roots and spreads as fast as wild lilies. The plant is so strongly associated with her that Dean's name becomes a shorthand for it, and it is met with horror: 'grandma used to say pull it out! pull it out! that's a minnie dean!'⁶⁷ In these popular imaginings, the flower symbolises the fear of Dean's nature as a wild and

⁶⁵ Zelas, p. 179.

⁶⁶ Zelas, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Zelas, p. 10.

widespread threat. Her garden will forever be remembered as one soiled with suffering and death.

Another verse biography offers an insight into the plight of unwed mothers and explores the home as a space of both safety and enclosure. Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat* traces the life story of the New Zealand writer Iris Wilkinson, who published under the name Robin Hyde. The collection simultaneously charts Kan's own life story, as well as those of his family, including his parents and grandparents. These concurrent biographical strands work to pull the collection's people and places into close contact, and key settings such as the home and the beach echo in each of these figure's lives. Kan's adoption of the shortened 'I.' for 'Iris' creates moments where the fragments of Wilkinson's life, while largely presented in dense stanzas with a reportorial third person voice, are transformed by the fleeting implication of a first-person perspective. These are moments in which the poet seems to almost slip into the subject's skin. In a further play, the collection experiments with ideas surrounding sight and the eye, exploring what can and cannot be seen, and examining what can and cannot be known about the lives of others.

In *This Paper Boat*, Kan returns to Wilkinson's early life, in part to make sense of the unknowable final moments of her life, which ended with her suicide. Homes are central settings in this collection, and are familial spaces where characters find shelter, connection, and belonging. However, they are not places of complete simplicity or stasis, and they are also places which witness aging and changing life-seasons. In the opening pages of the book, Kan establishes Wilkinson's childhood home as a place which almost seems named for its warm memories:

The name of the house was a Samoan word,
Laloma, meaning 'The Abode of Love'. Iris
Wilkinson, the poet and scholar of the family,
occupied the top room, which looked out on
to hills kindled with gorse.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 2. Italics in original.

Kan traces the meaning of one word, ‘Laloma’, employing translation to explore the linguistic and ideological foundations of Wilkinson’s home and formative years. This translation, while speaking to early influences in Wilkinson’s life, also draws to mind her later role as a writer. Just as Kan serves as a translator here, Wilkinson serves as a translator between inside and outside worlds in her writing, and indeed draws on this early landscape in her later writing. The Wilkinson home is one in which Iris is recognised in her talent, and afforded the choice ‘top room’. The use of the word ‘top’ here emphasises the prime nature of it as an ideal Woolfian room of one’s own for the young poet. It is a room which both enables and enacts an outward ‘looking’, a searching into the outside world. Kan draws attention to Wilkinson’s view, and his use of the word ‘kindled’ does double duty, containing the word ‘kin’, harkening to familial belonging, and setting the landscape ablaze in the same way that Wilkinson does in Chapter 7 of her autobiographical novel *The Godwits Fly*, also titled ‘Laloma’: ‘Most of the view glowed and kindled with gorse’.⁶⁹ The home is surrounded by hills which are lit with warmth, but which are, all the same, aflame. Even in this idyllic scene, we are reminded of flames which can threaten the home and its inhabitants. This idea of the home as a violable space persists throughout the collection, and speaks also to Wilkinson’s own work, drawing the work of Kan and Wilkinson into conversation, and foregrounding the relationship between the verse biographer and his subject.

Throughout the book, the home and its garden encode notions of enclosure and safety, and the poet critically analyses this idea, through his examination of the language which surrounds it. A section early in the collection opens with the historical lineage of the word ‘garden’.⁷⁰ The fragment traces this etymology through to a related word, ‘Old High German *gart* – an | enclosure.’⁷¹ Kan explores synonymous nouns for the garden setting: ‘The words *yard*, *court* and Latin | *hortus* all refer to an enclosed space.’ With these lines, the garden is depicted as a place that is historically situated, inheriting meanings of safety in enclosure. From here, Kan writes associatively of Wilkinson’s affair with Harry Sweetman, again drawing from a scene in *The Godwits Fly*, where the character ‘Timothy’ squeezes through a hole in the fence like a fleeing tom cat:

Love has

⁶⁹ Robin Hyde *The Godwits Fly* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013), p.76.

⁷⁰ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 4.

⁷¹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 4.

to be kept away from the world. After meeting
him for the first time, I. watched Harry leave
the garden through a hole in the back fence,
under the ngaio tree.⁷²

The garden is here a setting which speaks to a need to contain the passionate but volatile relationship within a hidden space. It is a space which admits nature and its urges into the domestic realm and serves as the setting in which this socially unsanctioned tryst can occur. Kan uses the setting of the garden to evoke a sense of secrecy and almost sacred reverence. It is a space which protects the precious young love from the outside forces of the world.⁷³ However, as with other famous protective gardens, and as with all gardens, this season of safety and enclosure is imperfect, and finite. The sanctuary is temporary, limited by the hole in the fence, and Harry's desire to use it; and Kan's description of Harry's first departure foreshadows his eventual abandonment of Wilkinson. This section, and the entirety of the book, is marked by an awareness of and attention to the passing of time and the changes that occur in every life. With Harry's penetration of the garden wall, Wilkinson's life is set to change.

Throughout the book, Kan uses the home as a setting to mark the passage of the seasons, and the difficulties of aging. The home imagines Wilkinson's memories of her mother. She is depicted as a woman who is dedicated to her children, and perseveres even as her sight deteriorates:

I. remembered her
mother below, at her old sewing machine,
which broke the thread so often it taxed her
patience. Her children's frocks were always the
prettiest, though her sight had begun to blur

⁷² Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 4; Hyde, *The Godwits Fly*, pp. 121-122

⁷³ Robin Hyde *The Godwits Fly*, p 126.

behind her spectacles.⁷⁴

While the mother persists with the breaking of her literal thread, Kan too threads a line from his family to Wilkinson's. Kan traces the loss of Wilkinson's mother's vision, a sign of aging which marks his depiction of his own father later in the collection. This blurring effect of time, and its effects on the memory and the body, is resisted with the preservation of the memory of the domestic space and its objects within the collection. The second half of the poem returns to the imagery of gorse in order to reflect on themes of kinship and intergenerational relationship:

Young seedlings grow up
through the adult gorse, cutting out its light
and eventually replacing it. Most methods of
destroying adult gorse plants have been found
to create the ideal conditions for gorse seeds to
germinate.⁷⁵

This section juxtaposes the loss of the adult gorse's light with Wilkinson's mother's fading eyesight, and celebrates the tenacity of the adult gorse, and thus, her mother. Even as the adult gorse plant is destroyed, it creates life. This metaphor emphasises the processes of regeneration possible in death, and the need for 'young seedlings' to leave the shelter of the adult gorse. Furthermore, this image of germination, separated on its own line, perhaps speaks to the many movements and migrations of Wilkinson's life, and her own tenacity in the face of illness. The garden is a transitory space which provides the fertile ground for the metaphors or growth and movement which shape Kan's collection.

⁷⁴ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 2.

This theme of leaving home, and of returning, is another key motif in *This Paper Boat*. The speaker of the collection travels widely but returns to his parents' home as a site of family history and reconnection. The speaker grapples with the complex dynamics of returning, as an adult child, to his parents' home. It is a space which, while largely unchanged, holds his expanded self differently. The dining table is singled out as an important space for the speaker:

At the dining table my mother speaks
readily but I wish she would trust
her recollections more.

As she talks, she looks off
to the right, where her Bible study notes have
amassed like leaves against the roots of a tree.

There are details I know she has hidden
from me. It is difficult to see my time
as removed or separate from that of my

parents' I draw the boughs
downwards in the thickets
behind her eyes.⁷⁶

The dining table is a place of oral storytelling and memory recollection. It is a place of maternal connection but is marked too by a sense of reticence and withholding, represented as a barrier of 'thickets | behind' the mother's eyes. With this image, and the simile comparing her study notes with the leaves of a tree, we are reminded again of the foliage of the garden space which can both protect and conceal. The speaker emphasises the intimate connection between his life and the lives of his parents, and so seeks to lower some of these barriers, and recover hidden details. Nevertheless, the home remains a place of secrets and excised detail throughout the collection. The speaker too has his own secrets:

⁷⁶ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 7.

I want very much to smoke but I know my mother
thinks I've given up. I put the kettle on and I tell her I am going
downstairs.⁷⁷

The break at the end of the first line here almost removes the need for the rest of this line. 'I know my mother' speaks to the intimate knowing that comes about in familial homes. Though the sound of the kettle might provide a sonic barrier against his mother hearing the door click, or the flint wheel flinch, he can hear her disapproval. It speaks to a lifetime of interaction. The speaker and his parents communicate in unspoken ways, in small gestures and long-established traditions. The home is mapped by these:

Minutes later I return upstairs
to find she has made the cup of tea for me.
My parents are not used to seeing me for such long periods

in the house. My father comes into the living room
and turns on the television.

This means he wants to listen to us, or at least

wants to be near us when we talk.⁷⁸

The father's presence in the living room speaks to a quiet intimacy: what matters here is the speaker's knowledge of his intentions. While he may not join his father in explicit conversation, there is a moving tenderness in this description of the father's desire to be close, to listen, to just be near his son, to share this domestic space. The home is the place where this intimate knowledge of paternal relationship and quiet love is understood and accommodated.

This relationship between the speaker and his parents is marked by anticipatory grief, as the poet catalogues moments of aging and illness. Kan's verse biography is, in a sense, a

⁷⁷ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 22.

⁷⁸ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 22.

collection of moments gathered to shore against loss. Later in the collection, the home becomes a place of fear and entrapment for the speaker's father:

He loves New
Zealand, but says he finds it hard to elude the
growing sense of his own uselessness. He is
terrified of becoming a burden, unable to fuck,
walk or even speak. At home in Auckland he is
always at his computer. Every email he writes
is copied to every friend he has.⁷⁹

The first line of this excerpt demands our attention, with its line break emphasizing the naming of the nation state of 'New Zealand', and its assertion of its 'New'ness. Here, this enjambment is striking, and is placed under further examination with its juxtaposition with the images of the father's difficulties in ageing. New Zealand is another kind of 'home' which is at once empowering and entrapping for the father. The speaker of Kan's poem emphasises his father's fear of entrapment within his home, and within his own body. The walls of the home and the self are feared as barriers to connection and self-expression. The computer is a tool used constantly for connection, and the father's written word allows his voice to speak from beyond the walls of the home. Writing is a tool which the speaker's father seizes against the limitations of his lifetime. We are reminded here too of Kan's parallel use of the written word to reach out to his reader. We are cc'd into Kan's poetic processing. This description is immediately followed by a scene which recounts the father's youthful movement and freedom:

As a child he
would climb the Flame of the Forest in his
backyard. On the roof of the house, talking
at strangers passing along the dirt road below,
safe from dogs. I like to imagine him being
mistaken for a chimney.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 27.

⁸⁰ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 27.

The contrast here emphasises the freedom that the father has lost, as the speaker comforts himself with memories of his youth. The image of the Flame of the Forest hearkens to the gorse-lit hills of Wilkinson's childhood. There is a spark here of something set to burn. The poet's line break—"I like to imagine him being"—evokes a sense of the speaker taking solace in remembering his father's physical freedom. This ability to imagine back to a time beyond the poet's actual lived experience is a demonstration of the potential of verse biography to afford us access to emotionally resonant impossibilities. What matters here is not that the poet was not present—a fact that he foregrounds—but that through imagination, he can draw his father closer, and understand his current state within the context of the longer arc of his life, within the context of what he once had, and has now lost. By drawing the younger version of his father into his imagination, he can relate to his father more strongly in the present. The verse biographer is able to leap between times. We might trace the present-tense verb earlier in the poem, as a kind of imaginative time travel: In spite of the speaker's grief, and the father's fear: he writes, he loves.

Change and illness are key themes of the book, and scenes exploring the loss and recollection of memory unfold in various homes. The speaker describes his great-aunt's experience of Alzheimer's. Her journey sees her move from her home with Vivian, into a rest home:

She woke often
in the middle of the night, screaming
for the staff to wash her. Before being admitted

to the rest home, my great-aunt stayed with my aunt Vivian, who
was the sixth of nine. Vivian found her, one night, washing
dishes in the toilet.

She fell twice in one night. Not knowing what else
to do, my aunt and uncle considered
tying her to the bed.⁸¹

⁸¹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 15.

As the speaker's great-aunt becomes unwell, themes of restraint and entrapment again ring through this section. While the use of restraints are clearly considered in service of her safety, the overarching sense in this section is one of fear and confusion. Her fears follow her between homes, and the nights remain difficult. However she finds comfort at the rest home too, as the speaker writes that even once she lost 'most of her memory [...] [s]he would ask my mother to walk her around the garden.'⁸² The garden becomes a safe place of autonomy and agency, where the great-aunt can connect with her family. It is an idealised setting which can be translated into new sites, overlaid in this new 'home'. The garden also bears witness to Vivian's earlier experiences with Alzheimer's:

Three years after we moved
to New Zealand, Vivian was diagnosed with
Alzheimer's disease.

Bob takes care of her full-time now. She cannot
wash herself. She still enjoys caring for
the simple plants around her house.⁸³

In the context of the earlier image of Wilkinson's garden, Vivian is here the adult gorse who even in her illness still brings forth life. The poem continues:

In Vivian's garden, the trees refuse
to stay fallen. There, to her,
the wind doesn't move

on to another place. She is
still there, hiding behind the heliconias, her face
beautiful as torn silk. Simply afraid,

⁸² Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 14.

⁸³ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 37.

she is already changed.⁸⁴

The garden is here a place frozen in time. It is a place of impossible preservation, where Vivian wills even the wind to still. The heliconias are symbolic, named for the Greek Helicon Mountain, associated with lasting youth. However, the speaker reveals that even here, change is inevitable. Vivian cares for other living things, and she is herself cared for, but there is fear here, and something torn. In this garden change is inevitable. It is guaranteed.

A similar sense of the haunting of change and loss shape another garden in this collection. The speaker describes his mother's childhood garden and its dangerous seasonal currents:

There was a
drain that ran across her garden, emptying itself
eventually into a large canal. She heard reports
of children swept away in periods of heavy
rainfall. She doesn't know where the canal led.
Drifting trees and dead dogs when water levels
were high.⁸⁵

The garden is intersected by seasonal threat. Destruction and death float through this garden and sweep away children just like her. The inclusion that she does not know the terminal point of the canal is itself haunting. We do not know where the children end up, they are simply swept 'away'. 'Away' is a word which, in its ambiguity, is impossible to find your way back from. 'Away' here means: permanently not home.

The poem ends with a warm scene of sisterhood, which is nevertheless haunted by this threat of loss:

She remembers talking with her sisters for hours,
with their feet pushed against

⁸⁴ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 37.

⁸⁵ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 9.

one bank of the drain and their backs against
the other. They sometimes crawled through
the drains to reach the other side of the road, below
the increasingly heavy and unsteady traffic.⁸⁶

The girls claim the garden's drain as their own to occupy and explore. It is a hidden space, a subterranean place for sibling connection and voice, one that they almost seem to hold open with their bodies, but it is still marked with danger. The image of 'increasingly heavy and unsteady traffic' is unsettling, as we are invited to imagine the threatening load just above the girls' heads. As the traffic intensifies, so too does our sense that there is a change in store for these girls. They crawl away from their home, towards a changing outside world. In Kan's collection, the home and its gardens are settings which must, eventually, be left behind.

Another verse biography visits the gardens of its writerly subject in order to explore themes of belonging and memory. In Nina Powles's *Sunflowers*, the garden of Katherine Mansfield's childhood is a place of nostalgia and memorial.⁸⁷ However, it is marked too by a sense of change and loss. The poem is inspired by 'a dream Mansfield recorded in detail in her journal soon after her brother Leslie's death in 1915', in World War One.⁸⁸ In Powles's poetry, the garden radiates light:

In the garden
beneath the pear tree,

her brother hands her a yellow pear
and she bites into it.

It tastes like jam sandwiches
and sunshine on her mother's hair.

⁸⁶ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 9.

⁸⁷ Powles, 'Silver Dream', *Sunflowers in Luminescent* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2017), p. 9.

⁸⁸ Powles, *Sunflowers*, p. 20; *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by John Middleton Murray (London: Constable & Co, 1927), p. 32-5.

It tastes like the warmth
of his hand in hers,

like the light that falls
in dream places,

where everything is silver
and he is alive again.⁸⁹

The silver dream-light both enables this imagining, and signals its fragility. The garden is a space of childhood memory, rich in sensory taste, brotherly kindness, and maternal warmth. Powles evokes the pear as a talisman, a fruit of the garden which reconnects Mansfield and her brother through the synaesthetic evocation of taste and warmth. This symbol is one that the poet samples from Mansfield's journal. The journal entry that Powles draws inspiration from features a moment where Mansfield speaks to her brother, 'Chummie', of the beyond, and connects the fruit to their childhood garden: 'We shall go back there one day — when it's all over [...] I feel it's as certain as this pear.'⁹⁰ The sensory beauty of the pear and the idyll of their childhood holds the promise of an afterlife where the two will once more be together. However, in the journal entry, the pear is itself made imperfect by the elements, 'trodden in the grass', and with 'little teeth marks in' it.⁹¹ Change and decay is at work even in Mansfield's dreams, and in the nostalgic childhood of her youth. Powles's garden is accordingly a dreamscape which enables Leslie's imagined resurrection, even as it is marked by the 'silver' knowledge of its impossibility. We are perhaps reminded too of an echo of silver in Kan's description of 'silver' spreading over Wilkinson's in-pain body in *This Paper Boat*.⁹² In both Powles's and Kan's poetry, the silver light is simultaneously the light of remembering, and death. This silver light is one in which each verse biographer writes.

Verse biographers test out the walls of home settings and find them unable to hold up cultural clichés of absolute safety and shelter. Homes in New Zealand verse biographies are

⁸⁹ Powles, 'Silver dream', *Sunflowers in Luminescent*, p. 9.

⁹⁰ *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by John Middleton Murray, pp. 34-35.

⁹¹ *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by John Middleton Murray, pp. 33, 34.

⁹² Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 54.

spaces which are shaken by change, harm and grief.⁹³ Allen Curnow's 'An Abominable Temper', Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, Nina Powles's *Sunflowers* and *Whale Fall*, and Karen Zelas's *The Trials of Minnie Dean* work to restore the lives of women and children to the homes of our history, and in doing so, bear witness to experiences and accounts which destabilise idealised understandings of the home as an idyllic space. Power imbalances and the forces of colonisation and patriarchy penetrate these settings. The garden is an especially punctured space, a transitional zone upon which the outside world, and the passage of time, encroaches. It is a threshold between innocence and youth, and loss and grief in *This Paper Boat*, and between private harm and public judgement in 'An Abominable Temper' and *The Trials of Minnie Dean*. It is a zone which death and decay indelibly mark.

Poets continue to interrogate social expectations and paradigms of class and gender in the police stations and courtrooms of New Zealand verse biography and trace the influence of private discussions and domestic lives on the procedures that unfold in these settings. Just as in the homes of New Zealand verse biography, poets gather toolboxes and clipboards, and set about to rigorously test the social and ideological foundations of the law.

⁹³ Please note a file error/corruption has appeared in the final stage of manuscript preparation which created a white space, and was resolved only by adding this footnote.

The Police Station

Social and Historical Trials

Police stations and courtrooms are thoroughly storied and idealised settings, where ideas about power and justice are explored. They are places where the law is tested and enforced. They are so vividly imagined in our stories that their tropes are familiar even to those who have not physically visited them. They appear on our televisions and in our movie theatres so often that we can paint a clear picture with only a few choice details. Whether detective story, legal procedural, prison narrative or even police-comedy, some tropes are familiar due to their frequent iteration. The police centre is a dimly lit hive of activity. The dregs of bracing black coffee languish on every horizontal surface. Police computers flicker, their keyboards rattling with the touch typing of a promising rookie or a forensic researcher. The courtroom is perched high on imposing stone steps, with ornate double doors. The courtroom has echoing trial rooms, harried courtroom typists, theatrical lawyers. Ruling judges come in a few familiar temperaments: wise and sympathetic, vengeful or unjust, or little more than an eyerolling foil to courtroom theatrics. The fate of the accused is punctuated by the final thud of the gavel.

These stories of crime and punishment are often difficult, sobering correctives to idealised imaginings of New Zealand as a wholly safe and idyllic land. This place is no safe haven untouched by crime, and major moments of harm have shaped the present moment. Towns and cities like Aramoana and Winton remain marked by the deaths that pierced their homes. It is hard to think of Christchurch now without thinking also of the 2019 terror attacks. Criminal trials lay bare the social ills of domestic violence, child abuse, misogyny and violent racism which often unfold and build in private spheres. Like the garden spaces of New Zealand verse biography, the police station and the courthouse are settings where private harm and public scrutiny come into contact. Crime shows us something of the lived experiences of struggle and harm which unfold here, and the carrying out of court trials and their ensuing publicity reveals the moral and legal priorities of contemporary society. These processes unfold both in cultural spaces, and in legal settings.

In New Zealand verse biography, we are shown that legal settings are not neutral spaces. Furthermore, the law protected within these spaces is not neutral either. Karen Zelas

revisits the life story of Minnie Dean in order to examine the social and legal trials and judgements that she experienced, and the patriarchal power which shaped the police stations and courtrooms that she walked in. With her collection, Zelas creates an alternative, imagined courtroom in which to offer Dean a retrial. These collections explore the political debates around police power, surveillance, patriarchy, child harm, and the question of justice. Airini Beautrais's *Dear Neil Roberts* focuses on the life and death of anarchist Neil Roberts in 1982.¹ Beautrais examines the politics of police surveillance and public protest and traces these threads through Roberts's life. In each of these collections, police centres and courtrooms are spaces where the social and cultural paradigms which inform law and enforcement are critically examined and re-evaluated. As we have already examined in Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, the law, as a mechanism created and enforced by the Crown, can protect colonial ideology and express racial prejudice. Furthermore, it can be shaped by powerful economic imperatives. Where there is power, we must search for prejudice. Social and cultural mechanisms of power play out within the walls of police centres and courtrooms.

Verse biographers work to examine legal power by exploring historic police and crown action and introduce contemporary evidence and analysis. They draw on epistolary forms to write back to the past and ask questions which might never be answered, but which have value in their positing. Verse biographers rework historical moments, making poetic space for imaginary retrials. They introduce themselves as witnesses in the defence of their often-infamous biographical subjects. Poets draw disjointed snippets of primary sources including oral tradition and news articles in order to place these texts in conversation with the contemporary moment of their poetry collections. The police station setting in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography encompasses auxiliary spaces including the courthouse, the police computer centre and the prison. These are spaces where the private lives of subjects and the laws which governed them are subject to interrogation and judgment, where contemporary morality is explored, and where the reader is invited to participate in the retrial of the past. In contrast to detective genre fiction, the courtroom dramas within verse biography are not those that offer a final judgment, but instead leave questions circulating. In history, verse biographers remind us, the past is never a closed case.

¹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014).

Airini Beautrais's verse biography *Dear Neil Roberts* explores the life of the anarchist Neil Roberts, and the complex and contested cultural understandings of his death in 1982. In this collection, Beautrais traces Roberts's activation of a home-made bomb outside of the Whanganui Police Computer Centre, purpose-built in 1974 to house the 'UNIVAC 1110', a 'Universal Automatic Computer', a database which allowed police to maintain a centralised record of information about the public. The collection explores the setting of the police centre as an emblem of troubling police surveillance. The Computer Centre at the heart of this collection then constitutes the site of Roberts's death, and the ideological ground on which modes of police power and control are contested. Beautrais traces primary sources and objects into the present, and in contrast to police surveillance, in which the observer is rendered invisible, the poet foregrounds her research methods, creating poems which speak with a first-person voice of the research process. Beautrais undertakes place-based poetic research, and revisits this place in the modern day, in order to connect with Roberts's final act. In her use of the epistolary form, the poet foregrounds her relationship to this complex biographical figure and affords herself a space to imaginatively address Roberts.

The first poem of the collection 'Here are the numbers' appears as a sort of foreword, positioned before the collection opens again with the half title page.² We are placed immediately outside of the Police Computer Centre in Whanganui, the site of Roberts's death. His death is placed centre-page, and we are invited to engage with the shock of the event, as Beautrais traces the detonation with journalistic precision: 'There is a flash and a terrific explosion.'³ While nobody else is harmed, the impact of the bomb displaces security guards inside the building and shakes the neighbourhood around the Police Computer Centre, with '[b]uildings [...] rocked 400 metres away'.⁴ This moment of unsettling is revisited again later in the collection: 'At his home one kilometre away, CIB chief | Detective Senior Sergeant Rob Butler hears the explosion'.⁵ Neil's actions literally disturb police, puncturing the quiet at their homes before they have even been called to attend to the incident. The building itself is also badly damaged, and the façade is compromised, now reinforced with a sheet of plastic: 'A tarp is pinned over the smashed foyer.'⁶ The interior skeleton of the building is exposed: 'Massive steel beams have been ripped and bent, | there are loose cables

² Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 9-10.

³ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 9.

⁴ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 9.

⁵ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 29.

⁶ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 30.

everywhere.’⁷ While Neil’s bomb does not affect the Police Computer at all, Beautrais’s attention to the damage done to the sign on the front of the building affords us an insight into Neil’s motivations: ‘The letter A has been dislodged from Wairere.’⁸ While these observations are based on primary sources, and thus accessible in other contexts, the heightened awareness of language and attention to the selection of detail that we bring to poetry and verse biography encourages us to consider the significance of this detail. Beautrais evokes a metaphor with this naming. The Māori word ‘Wairere’ speaks to a waterfall or a stream of water. In the context of this collection, we might imagine this stream in parallel with the flood of information which flows within the Computer Centre. We can understand the challenge to the physical name of the building as a challenge to the ‘name’ of what happens within the building, and an interruption to what Neil perhaps perceived as the unhindered flow of police surveillance. Beautrais places metaphors of streams and fishing throughout the collection, both in relation to Roberts’s life and the process of writing it. This selection of key metaphors as organising features of the text, and the space that they open for exploring the creative process, are another way in which Beautrais foregrounds her intervention as a verse biographer.

Elsewhere in the collection, the Computer Centre is described in largely negative and personified terms. It is, to the contemporary speaker’s eyes, a ‘concrete monolith’, stony and imposing.⁹ Elsewhere in the collection, it ‘hulks’.¹⁰ In the poem ‘Machine’, Beautrais draws on newspaper reports from the time of the introduction of the ‘UNIVAC 1110’.¹¹ It is described from a number of different perspectives, and the aims of the police are contrasted with the suspicion and fear it elicited.¹² It is described as a ‘[g]iant’ and ‘[m]agic brain’, a personification which evokes an uncomfortable liminal space between machines and humans.¹³ Elsewhere in the collection, the machine is compared with a ‘demented nest [...] the brain that held names, | birthdates, gave people the creeps.’¹⁴ It elicits an affective response. We might imagine it in accordance with the pervasive trope of the rogue-robot, a threatening living entity capable of learning and developing, and a powerful weapon in the wrong hands. There is a sense of unsettling mirroring here too, as the poet notes the Computer’s collection

⁷ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 30.

⁸ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 30.

⁹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 31.

¹¹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 20-21.

¹² Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 20-21.

¹³ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 20.

¹⁴ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 52.

of birthdates and names, and we are reminded that the year of Roberts's bombing is the same year that the poet herself was born. Its looming size and complexity is emphasised: 'UNIVAC 1110 is housed | in its three-storeyed building, its spotless room.'¹⁵ This imposing building was purpose-built to house the Computer Centre, and the spotless room belongs to it, and is maintained solely for its survival. The computer nested in this police centre is elsewhere described using technological jargon:

It has enhanced multi-processing support:

sixteen-way memory access,

up to six Command Arithmetic Units,

four Input Output Access Units.

And extended memory cabinets

in a daisy-chain arrangement.¹⁶

This jargon is, like the machine itself, outside of the language and understanding of the general public, and so unable to be assessed or gauged.

The poem 'Place' sees the speaker examine the coverage that the building received at the time of Roberts's death. She again references a contemporary news article:

An editorial blamed the building.

Its 'ugly lines and blank façade

made it easy to see it in a sinister light'.¹⁷

With this reference, Beutrais evokes another contemporary voice, demonstrating that Roberts was not the only one of his time to consider the building with disdain. Beutrais's description of the architecture and the quotation of the term 'façade' echoes the faceless mechanics of the data-gathering enshrined within. The building appears as a solid, unyielding box. It is imposing and impersonal, and its lack of colour, many windows, or natural light

¹⁵ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 21.

¹⁶ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 20-21.

¹⁷ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 25.

only contribute to the sense that what happens inside of the building could be unsavoury. The poet visits it in the modern day, where it continues to evoke a strong reaction from her which echoes the voices of the past:

The vast walls are white;[...]
Murals were considered, at one stage,
which the *Chronicle* editor of 1982 thought
would serve not only an aesthetic purpose,
but would contribute to security by removing
much of the building's air of brooding menace.

But maybe brooding menace was the look they were after.¹⁸

The personification of the building as having 'brooding menace' strengthens our sense of the building as one which is inflammatory and provocative. The windows which only punctuate the top third of the building too resemble a darkened visor, useful only for looking out, and offering no glimpses of what happens inside. We are invited to consider the building through Neil's eyes, and identify with his assessment of the building as a threatening entity. It is a building unable to meet his gaze. Beautrais's description of the police computer centre also conjures a connection with Michel Foucault's work on the panopticon, a structure which functions not necessarily because it allows total surveillance, but in large part because its view is one-way. Like the panopticon, part of the computer's power is in the way in which the surveilled public internalizes its power, and conceives of its possible presence and legal consequences in their everyday lives.¹⁹ In a sense, Roberts's final act was one in which he attempted to puncture the glass, to return the stare.

¹⁸ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁹ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Michigan: Vintage Books, 1979).

The site of the police computer centre is a place where Beautrais's and Roberts's lives intersect. In the poem 'Place', the speaker returns to Wairere House in the current day. She notes the ways in which ordinary life has carried on here. The building is alive with benign signs of life and occupation. The garden surrounding the building flourishes and grows, and its leaf-fall marks the passing seasons.

A sign at the entrance says Client Parking Only.

A Budget Waste wheelie bin sits on the kerb.

Plane trees have strewn their leaves over the road.

Around the main doors is a garden

gradually obscuring the building.

Mixed conifers, a leucodendron, a young kauri,

a variegated pōhutukawa.²⁰

With the poet's attention to imagery, the threatening aura of the building is at least partially offset by the beauty of life continuing in the poet's present moment. We might return for a moment to the idea of the garden as a space where the workings of an interior space are made visible to those outside it. In this case, the building which once housed the police computer is marked by signs of 'business as usual': economic infrastructure in the form of designated parking spots and regular waste disposal. The organic properties of place persevere and grow even in the shadow of the computer and Roberts's death, and there is a sense here of the natural world slowly enveloping the building. While it may not have occurred in the ways that Roberts hoped, change has shaped this site.

Elsewhere in the collection, Beautrais foregrounds her personal connection to Roberts, and the ways in which his life has had an effect on hers. Beautrais is haunted both in her dreams and in the verse biography with the task of preserving and recreating something

²⁰ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 26.

of Roberts's life prior to his self-destruction. Throughout the collection, Beautrais seeks to gather the scattered remains of Roberts's life, in order to reassemble a portrait of the young man, examining his motivations, and the ways in which we remember complex historical figures. Beautrais writes with the knowledge that Roberts's name is inextricably linked to the history of crime and protest in New Zealand, and while this key fact is a central theme of the collection, it is not the only defining feature afforded to Roberts. Beautrais works as a literary detective, creating a poetic reconstruction of the events of Roberts's life, seeking inciting incidents or clues by way of understanding Roberts as a whole person. This desire to reconstruct is emphasised throughout the collection as Beautrais explores the radical fragmentation of Neil's life.

Beautrais foregrounds her research process, and the effects of spending time in close contact with Roberts's story. The collection's speaker is drawn to the Police Computer Centre even in her dreams. It is retained as the place of Roberts's death, but the scene is impossibly altered, rendered in uncanny detail:

I have a nightmare: you are walking
like a robot towards the Computer Centre.
You approach the doors, let off the bomb
and are blown apart, but do not die.²¹

Beautrais uses the poetic dream-space of her nightmare as a way to imagine an impossible alternative to Roberts's death. In this imagining, Beautrais draws Roberts and the computer into one body, as his final movements are compared to something operated by computer intelligence. However, even in this imagining, his survival comes at a cost, as the poet uses the second person voice to address Roberts: 'You are everywhere, and your skin | is like the skin of a fish: scaly, scattered.'²² With this affective simile, we are reminded again of the name of the building, 'Wairere', and we might imagine Roberts's death as a moment in which his life is translated into the digital stream of the computer, as a fish into water. There

²¹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 16.

²² Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 16.

is an irony here: Roberts's death and the evidence surrounding it provide more material for the police computer, and so perhaps the faceless power of the state. This imagery harkens back to the closing lines of the opening poem of this collection too, where Beutrais addresses Neil, and offers the collection to him: 'Here are some knots | in the network, some holes in the net.'²³ We are made aware of the ways in which Beutrais's verse biography endeavours to catch something of Roberts's life from the stream of police power and historical memory. This sense of Roberts being fragmented and absorbed, and so silenced, is reinforced with the next phrase: 'The police come to interview you | and all you can do is groan.'²⁴ Neil appears as a sort of living dead in this nightmare, a zombie without a voice. Roberts's death guarantees his silence.

This dream and others throughout the collection work to foreground the processes of preservation and reconstruction which so shape this work. What remains constant throughout this and other dreams in the collection is the sense of Neil's body 'scattered' and fragmented. In another dream, this 'unforming' is evoked with capitalised onomatopoeia:

BANG! The explosion sears through your head,

molecules rearranging, structures unforming.

I have a dream in which I hear the sound

of body parts landing. They make a small noise: blick.

An ambulance arrives, but it is much, much too late.²⁵

This sense of the structures of Roberts's body unforming echoes the damage done to Wairere house, and is reflected in the primary accounts that the poet takes as source material:

²³ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 13.

²⁴ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 16.

²⁵ Beutrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 28.

Identification will be difficult, say police,

as bits of the body are scattered

for up to 65 metres.²⁶

This graphic and deadly dispersal might also be understood in parallel with the disembodied networks of information present within the UNIVAC machine. Both processes result in the disintegration of the individual, and the reduction of a person to mobile parts. It is striking too, that while the story of Roberts's final act is documented and recorded within police records, and in the wider media, his physical body remains at least in parts untraceable, unrecordable.

The power of reconstruction, and the archives and information networks which allow it, is an essential theme of the book, as the collection exposes the methods of its creation. Throughout the collection, Beautrais turns to multiple archives to form the documentary core of her collection. She foregrounds her research of Roberts's life, in contrast with the faceless surveillance that Roberts so opposed in his lifetime. As well as speaking to those who moved in the same social and political circles as Roberts, Beautrais comes into possession of a 'red file box labelled "Art"' from her friend Geoff, who 'has been collecting material for a Neil Roberts movie.'²⁷ The box contains photos, graffiti, and a list of Geoff's descriptions of Neil.²⁸ Beautrais also references newspaper and media reports about his death, recreates sections of his suicide note, and physically visits the site of his death in the contemporary day. Beautrais herself calls on fragmented bodies of evidence in order to reanimate Roberts's life story. In the poem 'Clean-up', the literal fragments of Neil's body, and the scattered relics of his life are collected by police.²⁹ This attempt to catalogue and reconstruct happens in the dark, and it remains ultimately incomplete. Beautrais traces the way that Neil's body is likely spread far beyond the initial impact zone, dragged literally to the superintendent's doorstep:

²⁶ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 9.

²⁷ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 16.

²⁸ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 17.

²⁹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, pp. 29-30.

Superintendent Bryan Dean has never before
seen a body so mangled.

‘They will be finding bits of him for days.

When I got home, I took shoes off,
and left them outside the door.

I knew something must be attached to them.’³⁰

In a moment where New Zealanders voiced their concerns on the growing tracking powers of the police, Roberts’s body tracks home on the feet of the police.

Beautrais works to piece together a story from disparate documentary fragments. Beautrais traces the police investigation, and catalogues the primary sources, or remnants, of Roberts’s life:

They find your black spray can.

They find your red knapsack.

They find a pamphlet, printed in Australia,

titled *About Anarchism*.³¹

The repetition of ‘they find’ in this list speaks to a simultaneous absence, of what they could not find: his final thoughts, a full story of what exactly happened and why. We might be reminded of the lists in Curnow’s ‘An Abominable Temper’, and Sullivan’s *Captain Cook in the Underworld*. This knapsack contains objects which represent Roberts’s final remaining thoughts and ways of speaking, as he approaches a crossing into death. In any case, these

³⁰ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 29.

³¹ Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 29.

objects point to his final recorded words, rendered in spray paint at the public toilet across the road, in sight of the Computer Centre:

WE HAVE MAINTAINED A SILENCE

CLOSELY RESEMBLING STUPIDITY

It was followed by an anarchist sign

– the letter A in a circle –

and the words

ANARCHY PEACE THINKING³²

With this act, Roberts's message literally bonds with this place, soaking into the paintwork, still present in the material of this setting. Beautrais reproduces these final words, recreating them in their original letters, preserving them from the repainting of the wall and the forces of sensational media coverage which lapped at his death. This textual preservation is one which sees Beautrais replicate Roberts's message, in some ways repeating the process of writing these words on the wall of the page.

Another collection which examines the effects of police surveillance and public conjecture is Karen Zelas's 2017 collection *The Trials of Minnie Dean*. Zelas explores the life and many trials of Minnie Dean, the first and only woman to be hanged in New Zealand. Like Roberts, Dean's life and death is marked by legal forces and public conjecture. Both are key figures in the criminal history of New Zealand. However, unlike Roberts, Dean's death is at the hands of the state, and she is subject to public trial in her lifetime. Throughout the collection, Dean encounters social and legal judgement within New Zealand police stations and courtrooms. Overall, the book functions as a retrospective defence of Dean, with the poet emphasizing the limitations of Dean's original trials. *The Trials of Minnie Dean* is energised by a feminist lens and marked by an awareness of the intersection of gender and class in

³² Beautrais, *Dear Neil Roberts*, p. 10.

Dean's life. The collection's title invites us to consider the multiple domestic hardships and moral trials that play through this collection, including those we have already examined within homes. Zelas also analyses Dean's legal trials, and the patriarchal spaces of the police station and the courtroom where they unfold. Finally, through Zelas's evocation of a twenty-first century retrial of Dean, we are invited to participate as witnesses to history. We are invited to consider how verse biography might offer an imaginative space in which to reconsider the judgements we pass on people from the past.

Minnie Dean's legal trial began long before its formal commencement, and the wider cultural climate no doubt influenced her jurors. The title of this collection, and its use of the plural word 'trials' gestures to the multiplicity of Dean's trials throughout her life. It simultaneously alludes to other historical 'trials' such as the Salem witch trials, where women were tried and executed for defying their society's strict roles around gender and sexuality. In her extensive biography *Minnie Dean: Her life & Crimes*, Lynley Hood emphasises that the legends which persist regarding Dean are 'witch stories, aeons old'.³³ An untitled poem in the 'Opening' section of Karen Zelas's *The Trials of Minnie Dean* bustles with snippets of such speculation about Dean, and the myths around her life and death that have prevailed in New Zealand to this day. These rumours jostle for room on the page, overlapping and intersecting. As we read them, we depart from the left margin, and must read these lines as they fall and leap across the page, as if we are overhearing snippets of hushed and rushed conjecture. They trace the cultural impact of Dean's life and record stories that have been passed down generations.³⁴ With their inclusion in this collection, we are reminded that Dean remains on trial in the collective imagination of contemporary New Zealand. Dean appears as local Bogey(wo)man, a story used to threaten and warn children: 'you kids behave yourselves or I'll send you to minnie dean', 'minnie dean will get you! minnie dean will get you!'³⁵ The historical record is neglected in favour of shocking, sensational detail: 'she murdered babies on the train and | threw their bodies into passing streams'.³⁶ While some phrases confess their basis in hearsay, the violence of their imagery outweighs the strength of their caveats. The assertion that 'she used to kill babies by sticking a hat pin through the fontanelle', appears intersected by a note in square brackets: '[hat pins did not appear in New Zealand | until after

³³ Hood, p. 24.

³⁴ Lynley Hood, 'Myths and Monsters', in *Minnie Dean: Her Life & Crimes* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 23-30.

³⁵ Zelas, p. 10.

³⁶ Zelas, p. 10.

Minnie Dean's arrest]'.³⁷ One voice replaces Dean's hat pin with a more working-class tool, claiming she killed the children 'by stabbing them with rusty nails', 'through their eyes (my father told me)'.³⁸ These stories can be seen taking root and spreading through the New Zealand landscape, as explored in the previous chapter, where they manifest in the association of orange lilies with Dean, and are physically pulled from the earth. In this early poem made of historical rumours, Dean's trials are conjured as a cautionary tale, and the poet emphasises the ongoing social processes of judgement and rumour of Dean which persist even to this day. The police station and the courtroom are spaces which are strongly influenced by non-legal forces, and Zelas tracks the ways that the social trials of Minnie Dean indubitably shaped her experiences within the police station and courtroom.

Zelas traces the cultural climate that shaped Dean's legal trials through the inclusion of excerpts of primary sources from the nineteenth century. At the time of Dean's trial, baby farming was of national concern, and the contemporary media reported it with sensational detail.³⁹ In the poem 'Mr Nicol newsagent', Zelas includes historical notes in the margin, detailing how in November 1887 'the commissioner of police ordered a survey of | the incidence of baby farming in the colony'.⁴⁰ Another note in capital, bolded font captures a newspaper headline eight years prior to Dean's trials: 'BABY FARMING IN DUNEDIN | HORRIBLE REVELATIONS | *the press christchurch* 1887'.⁴¹ We understand that Dean lived at a time where there was a heightened anxiety about baby farming, fuelled by Victorian moral outrage, and an awareness of the connection between murder and baby farming overseas. At the time of her trial, Hood notes that the crown solicitor compares her to the infamous Australian baby farmers John and Sarah Makins, who were both found guilty of murder.⁴² In addition to these contextualising primary sources, in the body of the poem, Mr Nicol, a newsagent, watches Dean with suspicion:

I have noted a mrs dean's comings & goings
usually travelling unaccompanied to dunedin returning

³⁷ Zelas, p. 10.

³⁸ Zelas, p. 10.

³⁹ 'From childcare to baby farming', *NZ History* (2019) <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/baby-farmers/fearful-slaughter>> [accessed 4 April 2020].

⁴⁰ Zelas, p. 78.

⁴¹ Zelas, p. 78.

⁴² Hood, p. 165.

a few days later with a baby &
a much better filled purse
than on her northward journey
she is no doubt collecting infants
a baby farmer
a heartless woman who murders babies
for money
this I advise the police in good faith⁴³

The person whose job it is to distribute news among the community tracks Dean's movements with close critical attention, and speculates that she is a murderer. The police station has its surveillant agents in the form of the public including Nicol, and while there is no central database here, Dean's growing infamy ensures she is a suspect even before any crime has come to light. It is worth noting here too the economic inflection of this scene, and the money which accompanies the foreshadowing of the bloodying of these small bodies. Nicol casts Dean in the role of heartless murderess and passes this conviction on to the local authorities.

The police station is depicted as a place where the law is both applied secretly and selectively, and in a state of flux. The police within this collection carry moral judgements with them even when they are not enshrined in law. The poem 'Constable Hans Peter Rasmussen: 1' speaks from the point of voice of the policeman following his visit to interview Dean in her home, on the second of March 1893.⁴⁴ Rasmussen carries his personal views of Dean's business into his investigation of her, and confesses them here:

I hold my own

⁴³ Zelas. P. 78.

⁴⁴ Zelas, p. 77.

views about evils of baby farming

but kept them to myself.⁴⁵

While he finds ‘no evidence of flouted laws’ in the home, he notes ‘there are few to flout’, and continues to closely follow Dean.⁴⁶ The line break which emphasises the phrase ‘I hold my own’ foreshadows Rasmussen’s dogged dedication to his moral views throughout the collection. Rasmussen’s surveillance of Dean exceeds that required of him by existing law. His pursuit of Dean is personal.

Rasmussen leads the case against Dean, and judges Dean guilty long before she has broken any laws:

&
where’s the proof? though she breaks
no laws that I can tell I know
there’s something rotten festering here

& I’ll find it⁴⁷

Rasmussen tracks her movements and follows her through the landscape of her daily life. He pierces the privacy of her domestic spaces, visiting her home, ‘the larches’, secretly in the night.⁴⁸ Rasmussen makes an example of Dean, and when ‘the infant life protection act 1893’ is passed, he eagerly pursues Dean for compliance: ‘I made haste to the larches to explain | [...] the law is the law & its arm has been | strengthened’.⁴⁹ This metaphor of the ‘long arm’ of the law is powerful and speaks to imagery of physical violence. The law is personified as a formidable opponent, with reach and strength. The protective boughs of the larches are no

⁴⁵ Zelas, p. 77.

⁴⁶ Zelas, p. 77.

⁴⁷ Zelas, p. 86.

⁴⁸ Zelas, p. 96.

⁴⁹ Zelas, p. 104.

match for the law, nor its representative in Rasmussen. When Dean fails to register as required, he arrests her but is disappointed when she is charged only

a penny

one single penny

a mockery

has been made of the law.⁵⁰

The repetition and italicisation of these words elicit a tone of incredulous questioning on Rasmussen's behalf. We are reminded again of the economic inflection of the law, and the financial punishment which, while small, still exacerbates Dean's financial position. Her adoption of children, while necessitated by financial burden, costs her, both socially and financially. Rasmussen's dislike of Dean is markedly personal, as he describes her as 'the most slippery of creatures'.⁵¹ However, he reflects:

my outrage has the support of the police

force the minister for justice

has demanded an explanation⁵²

With these lines, the reader is reminded of the power that Rasmussen holds to bring Dean into disrepute, and appeal for her to be punished. Zelas again brings a feminist lens to her examination of Minnie Dean's final trial and execution, as she explores the gender dynamics and power imbalances of Dean's contemporary context. In the courthouse, as in the home for

⁵⁰ Zelas, p. 105.

⁵¹ Zelas, p. 105.

⁵² Zelas, p. 105.

fallen women, this shame sits squarely with women. While this shame is reinforced by other women, and sensationalised widely in contemporary media, Dean's death is ultimately legally enforced by men in positions of power. Here and elsewhere in the collection, Dean appears as a lone figure against the collective, male, 'force' of the law.

Dean's legal trials unfold in spaces where men alone rule. The police station and the courtroom are places where the rules of the patriarchy are enshrined in law, supported by concrete floors and steel bars, enforced with gallows.

Zelas notes that Dean did not face a true jury of her peers. In the poem 'Hanlon's summary of evidence', her lawyer Arthur Hanlon addresses the jury as 'gentlemen jurors'.⁵³ Bracketed text in the margins of the page notes: '[although women got the vote in 1893 they were not permitted to be jurors until 1942]'.⁵⁴ The poem 'We like to think' further reflects on the lack of a fair jury for Dean's trial.⁵⁵ A contemporary, retrospective speaker summarises:

so minnie faced no *women* or *maori*

no *aliens* (in a country of immigrants?)

no *convicts bankrupts* (undischarged) or

persons of bad fame.⁵⁶

The jury represents a microcosm of those in power in the wider colonial cultural landscape, and Dean is judged by a jury of well-to-do, European men. Zelas emphasises the eurocentrism at work in this space, as she highlights the exclusion of 'aliens' and begs the question as to who this might refer, given the relatively recent European origins of the chosen jurors. The reader understands that Dean is once again at the mercy of the moral code of the very group who have already passed their judgements upon her to some extent. Hood writes

⁵³ Zelas, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Zelas, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Zelas, p. 134.

⁵⁶ Zelas, p. 134; Hood, pp. 163-165.

of the extensive legal and social judgements that had been passed on Dean in the six weeks preceding her final trial:

two inquest juries comprising of the most important men in town had found Minnie Dean guilty of murder (in one case implicitly, in the other case explicitly); the local magistrate had ruled that Minnie Dean had a case to answer; a third inquest jury—also composed of important men—had heard evidence suggesting that Minnie Dean was engaged in a long-term scheme of mercenary, systematic, cold-blooded murder [...] a grand jury comprising some of the same men as had sat on the inquest juries had endorsed the magistrate's ruling.⁵⁷

We understand the way in which her guilty verdict is in many ways a foregone conclusion. The unofficial but pervasive case against Dean has been brewing for some time and informs the jury's reception of the court case. This moral outrage follows Dean into the courthouse, as one poem's eponymous 'Juror' confesses

I knew the baby farmer was guilty
before I heard a word of evidence
all the newspaper articles all
the hearings gone before & in the dock
it was writ on her face

that cold stare.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Hood, p. 165.

⁵⁸ Zelas, p. 143. White spaces approximated from original.

Dean's body itself is scrutinised as evidence, her facial expressions up for interpretation. This scrutinization is relentless, the poet's repetition of 'all' emphasizing how influential the news media was in the Winton community and beyond. Zelas makes sure to emphasise the immense social pressure to present a guilty verdict. This silence and 'cold stare' is also explored from different perspectives within the collection, including from the point of view of Dean herself. Once again, the body is a site of evidence, read through the lens of onlookers.

In the courthouse, Arthur Hanlon chooses not to call on her as a witness. Dean does not testify, or even speak.⁵⁹ This was not unusual practice at the time, and Sophie Davis has found that 'from a strict 1895 legal standpoint correct criminal procedure was generally followed' in her trial. Furthermore, contemporary accounts and later histories note the eloquence and command of the courtroom that Hanlon possessed, and the affective power of his defence of Dean.⁶⁰ In many ways, Dean's contemporary trial was a nineteenth century courtroom drama, and as in modern-day stories, the performance of the plucky young lawyer is crucial.⁶¹ The courtroom was and remains a space where the performance of the case is tantamount, and in some ways, Zelas's role as verse biographer is a bit like Hanlon's. Her hope is that of all verse biographers: to move us, to urge us to open ourselves to new evidence, and reconsider our judgements.

Nevertheless, in Zelas's verse biography, Dean's silence rings loudly against the clamour of male voices speaking against her.⁶² Zelas includes an imagined account from Dean, where she expresses her desire to speak:

oh the hardship

⁵⁹ Hood, p. 173.

⁶⁰ *Hanlon: In Defence of Minnie Dean*, dir. by Wayne Tourell (TVNZ, 1985), on *NZ On Screen* <<https://www.nzonscreen.com/title/hanlon-in-defence-of-minnie-dean-1985>> [accessed 18 February 2022]; Catran.

⁶¹ *Hanlon: In Defence of Minnie Dean*, dir. by Wayne Tourell.

⁶² For a comprehensive analysis of the legality of Dean's trial and execution, see: Sophie Davis, 'Hung out to dry? Questioning the legality of Minnie Dean's 1895 trial and execution', *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review*, 46.1, (2015), 115-136.

in keeping these lips sealed the struggle
to maintain a surface free of turmoil
were I permitted to explain I could
persuade the jury of my innocence
only mr hanlon stands 'tween
me & the gallows.⁶³

While Hanlon defends Dean well, the jurors are pressured by a male judge, who adjourns the court overnight to dampen the effect of Hanlon's stirring final address.⁶⁴ The poem 'Light rain fell' describes his actions, and quotes from an article featured in *The Otago Daily Times* 21 June 1895⁶⁵:

a reporter writes: [the judge] *summed up strongly*
against the prisoner [with] *the distinct object*
of counteracting any influence [hanlon's speech
might] *exert on the minds of the jury*
[lest they] *come to an erroneous conclusion*

his honour repeated the crown's main arguments
refuted or ignored points made

⁶³ Zelas, p. 135.

⁶⁴ Hood, p. 180; Catran., p. 45.

⁶⁵ Otago Daily Times 'Winton Child Murders: A verdict of guilty Minnie Dean sentenced to death' *Otago Daily Times*, 22 June 1895, p. 6.

in dean's defence introduced
incriminating interpretations
of his own devising a search for motive

with no chance of rebuttal.⁶⁶

The poem following this one closes with a line which quotes Judge Williams's closing statement, in which he urges the jurors to not come to a '*weak-kneed*' verdict.⁶⁷ We might read this phrase as an appeal to masculinity, to upright and rational manhood in the face of Hanlon's emotive closing address. These men are invited to carry out a masculine judgment as a corrective to the force of femininity gone bad, to conquer and expel the monstrous mother.

We are encouraged to consider *The Trials of Minnie Dean: a verse biography* as a retrial which responds to, and examines the cultural context of Dean's original trial. On the back cover of *The Trials of Minnie Dean*, Zelas is identified using a court-room metaphor, appearing 'as a psychiatrist re-examining witnesses from Minnie Dean's trial'.⁶⁸ Zelas here foregrounds the role of the poet as speaker, and the disciplinary frames of reference with which she reads Dean's life. She positions herself as both a poet and a psychiatrist, and in adopting a poetic persona, foregrounds the medical discourse that she brings to her examination of the court case and the criminal system. Zelas's poetics travel with her into this textual courtroom, and like Beautrais's foregrounding of her identification with the anarchist movement in *Dear Neil Roberts*, Zelas's frames of reference shape her verse biography and its focuses. We are encouraged to join Zelas in placing herself within this courtroom setting afforded by her poetic technique, and critically examine the historical processes which have led to the ongoing villainization of Dean, and recontextualise our own personal judgements. One of the final poems in the book, titled 'Excerpts & experts: from the Virtual Intertemporal Appeal Tribunal', presents a retrospective appeal of Dean's conviction, with Zelas calling on

⁶⁶ Zelas, pp. 141-142, (141).

⁶⁷ Zelas, p. 144.

⁶⁸ Zelas, back cover.

her own choice witnesses to ‘consider | in this 21st century | the fate of minnie dean’.⁶⁹ Dean reimagines the courthouse as one which can be inhabited by people across time and space, with access to knowledge beyond their original contexts. Like Beautrais, Zelas draws on a fragmented body of evidence in order to afford her subject a sort of retrial. Furthermore, Zelas also challenges the power of the law in light of contemporary perspectives. While Zelas has insisted in a panel discussion that she does not claim that Dean was innocent, she does appear in this poem as a defence for Dean, under the name ‘kz’.⁷⁰ Zelas suggests that today the conviction would perhaps be one of manslaughter rather than murder.⁷¹ Zelas calls upon witnesses including those not called at the time of Dean’s original trial, including ‘mrs dryden’ who saw the children appearing ‘cold’, and ‘neglected’ before they came into Dean’s care.⁷² Zelas makes use also of twenty-first century witness, including ‘dr x’, a ‘pediatric specialist’⁷³, and ‘ms m’, who has studied the evidence and concludes that ‘minnie dean was portrayed | as a multiple murderer before | her trials had even begun’.⁷⁴ Zelas calls on ‘ms m’ to answer as to whether Dean was ‘afforded | the consideration & clemency shown | to others on trials for murder around | the same time’.⁷⁵ ‘[M]s m’ responds indirectly, referencing a myriad of other similar cases around the same time, and emphasises the gender divide of those tried for infant death:

historian alison clarke identified

98 other 19th century court cases

concerning the death of a newborn all but

four of those charged were women only one

murder conviction resulted that being a father.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Zelas, pp. 160-179.

⁷⁰ *Minnie Dean: Villain or Victim?* online video recording of public panel discussion, organised by The Friends of the Turnbull Library, YouTube, 2 July 2020, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNCEpyD6Gg4>> [accessed 2 June 2021].

Zelas, pp. 160-179.

⁷¹ Zelas, p. 176.

⁷² Zelas, p. 163.

⁷³ Zelas, p. 168.

⁷⁴ Zelas, p. 171.

⁷⁵ Zelas, p. 175.

⁷⁶ Zelas, pp. 175.

Dean is the exception here, the only woman convicted of murder, while the other 94 charged women are found not guilty. Zelas builds a strong case to repeal Dean's death sentence. However, with the closing of the pages of this collection, the final judgement of Dean rests in the hands of its readers. We are the final jurors, left to consider Zelas's powerful, poetic case. While the collection does not explicitly state its position as to Dean's innocence or guilt, the book does put the historical moment on trial, bringing new twenty-first century perspectives and evidence to bear on the death of Minnie Dean.

Despite Zelas's imagined intervention, in *The Trials of Minnie Dean*, Dean is found guilty of infanticide and is sentenced to death by hanging, as she was in life. Once again, even in the imaginative space of verse biography, historical fact must win out. While Dean awaits her execution, she is incarcerated, isolated and excluded from the society she has served. We join Dean in prison in the fourth poem of this collection, on the 'the first autumn night' of her confinement. The cell is a place with 'close walls of stone & bar the chill that seeps'.⁷⁷ It reminds her of the poverty that she grew up in, as she spends her final days confined alone and in discomfort: 'a childhood memory entering bones & damp | threatening to split apart my mind wide open/closed'.⁷⁸ It is a space which recalls her childhood trauma, and the life that she has desperately avoided returning to. The knowledge of the social judgement directed towards her is described using an image of landscape and erosion: 'the drip drip-drip of rumour wears thin the crust a rivulet | a stream a gushing surge of groundless | accusation'.⁷⁹ Dean is depicted as a woman destined to drown. Zelas imagines her regret for becoming involved with baby farming, and draws on Dean's final written testament as she reflects: 'had I never troubled | with other people's children | I would not now be where I am.'⁸⁰ In Zelas's imagining of the setting, even the moon shares in her sorrow: 'high through grated slot a curl of moon | sobs a liturgy'.⁸¹ We can imagine the moon curled in a defensive position, foetal, seeking comfort. The cell is also a space where Dean desperately appeals to a higher power for help:

⁷⁷ Zelas, p. 16.

⁷⁸ Zelas, p. 16.

⁷⁹ Zelas, p. 16.

⁸⁰ Zelas, p. 16; Hood, p. 33.

⁸¹ Zelas, p. 16.

the cell (I'll not call it mine)

slashed with light an altar

knees on drab stone slab skirts

gathered round I try to pray

but words will not emerge⁸²

Once again, as in the courthouse, Dean appears voiceless, as her faith in God perhaps wavers. Indeed, she kneels again at the mercy of a patriarchal figure who holds her fate in his power, and whose statues underpin the legal system which has condemned her. However, her faith that her innocence will win out remains, and we are unable to have the same hope that Dean does when she asserts: 'I'll not be here for long they | have nothing against me | but malice'.⁸³ We read with the historic knowledge that the prison cell will be the last place that Dean sleeps before her execution. Her death looms large in the cell, and the space of the afterlife seeps through the cell door. Dean longs for comfort and the touch of a loved one and hears 'a rusted gate | swinging | in the evening' and imagines it to be her 'mother | moaning through her final fated journey'.⁸⁴ Dean's life journey now has a terminal verdict and we understand that this cell is a holding place before her death. The trial of Dean's story will persist well into the time beyond her death.

Through Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography's focus on police station, police computer centres and courtrooms we are encouraged to consider the social and legal systems of judgement within our own contemporary contexts. When we question and critique the trials of historical figures, we sharpen the tools we need to examine those beliefs and perspectives which inform our views and positions today. Verse biography creates an imaginative space in which we are reminded that the judgements we participate in today will also, one day, be subject to retrial by historical perspective. The judgement of the beyond waits for us too.

⁸² Zelas, p. 16.

⁸³ Zelas, p. 17.

⁸⁴ Zelas, p. 17.

The Beyond

Liminal Spaces of Communion

Where do we go when we die? In the most basic sense, somewhere we have never been before, somewhere 'beyond' the world of the living, somewhere beyond our ability to map or reliably purchase a return ticket. Depictions of the beyond are widely varied and reflect cultural beliefs and traditions. We might hope to find ourselves in the afterlife, The Great Beyond, Heaven, Nirvana, The Good Place, Paradise, Rarohenga. We might imagine a bearded man, pearly gates, harps, choirs of angels, Saint Peter with a clipboard and a list of names. If we are not on this list, we might end up in a holding room, Purgatory, or the River Styx or, worse, The Bad Place. Even worse, we might find ourselves in Hell, complete with pitchforks and eternal fire. Wherever we may hope or fear to end up, and indeed, even if we do not believe in a 'next place' beyond atomic redistribution, our understandings of death inevitably involve a sense of crossing from the world of the living.

We imagine the beyond as a space which is apart from, but nevertheless connected with, the world of the living. We understand death in relationship with what we know of our lives. Our stories are bustling with uncanny moments where the beyond overlaps with our experience and unsettles what we know. Ghosts travel between the beyond and the living world. In our stories, they are boundary-crossing beings. Death, it seems, is another kind of beach. We might push this metaphor further and recall the waters of the womb from which we each emerge into life. These liminal states are awash with movement.

Ghosts are also, importantly, beings who haunt place, and are startling due to their apparition in places occupied by the living. It is this overlap between lifetimes, and the unexpected sharing of place which renders an affective charge. It is no surprise then, that verse biographers are often preoccupied with hauntings and ghostly traces. Kendrick Smithyman writes of the way in which ghosts transcend boundaries of time and space: 'ghosts, which in their way are continually present are also significantly creatures of history.'¹ It is not such a stretch to understand history itself as a kind of afterlife. This

¹ Kendrick Smithyman, 'Singing to the Ancestors: Some Aspects of Present Poetry in New Zealand', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 17.1 (1982), 28-44 <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1177/002198948201700105>> (p.30).

continuing presence echoes some of the verse biographer's most pressing ambitions: to preserve something of a life for the future, to hold space for voices from the past. In this way, biography is a kind of textual beyond where the memory of the biographical subject lives on.

Verse biography is a genre which is deeply invested in the idea of the beyond. We might imagine verse biographies themselves as constituting part of a subject's textual afterlife, as the poems preserve and reanimate their life stories for readers. Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographies largely centre on the lives of those who have died and are marked by an engagement with the affordances and limitations of poetic resurrection. Poets draw from the documentary fragments of the subject's life, and at times quote directly from their mouths and written accounts. The dead are almost made to speak. Verse biographies often revel in the ambiguity between the voice of the poet and the voice of her subject, and the slippage between the imagined first-person voice and the poet-as-first-person-speaker. These ambiguities and slippages further enable a collapsing of time, and poets shift between past, present and future tenses throughout their works. In addition, verse biographers address their biographical subjects directly, invoking the second person voice, and epistolary forms. In this way, the reader is invited to occupy the position of the biographical subject, and to be privy to an intimacy of address between poet and biographical subject.

However, even the most imaginative verse biographers, and their most cooperative readers, are unable to escape the truth: that the voices of those who at times seem to speak from the pages of these collections have been stilled. Even as the poets attempt to reconstruct their subjects' lives, the ability to fully resurrect these voices lies beyond the poet's powers. So too are the subjects' final fates beyond the poets' research abilities. This, the final journey, requires a one-way ticket.

While the beyond is a concept important to the genre, it is also a key setting evoked within each of the verse biographies I examine in this chapter. Though traditional prose biography engages with the legacy of its subject, and the fate of their reputations, the beyond as a setting is a much-less turned ground. Verse biography is marked by its imaginative potential, and poets envision the spiritual afterlife of their biographical subjects. Poets imagine the beyond as a tangible space into which they can follow their subjects. Poets themselves often appear as haunting figures, retracing the earthly journey of their subjects, warming and speaking from the same places that their subjects once spoke from, conjuring the tactile textures of place.

In Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography, the beyond is an imagined setting which has close connections to the world of the living. It is a place which also spills out into the construction of the text, as poets engage with the traces, and often the ghosts, of the dead. It is a setting which casts its shadow on the beach, home, and police station settings of the genre, as the poet journeys and writes with an awareness of the death which awaits their subject.

It is a setting which is haunted by historical and contemporary concerns. It is shaped by cultural exchange, and is most often, distinctly Māori. It is a setting where lived injustices are addressed, and biographical figures are subject to trial and displacement. It is also a space where the ritual and remembrance of the living can affect the fate of the dead, and aid their journey to a final resting place. We might understand the writing and reading of verse biography as one such powerful ritual.

The beyond settings in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography are multiple and diverse. They reflect the cultural encounters and exchanges so important to Aotearoa New Zealand's stories and histories, and are thus often hybrid spaces, borrowing from the texts and traditions which inform Pacific and transnational cultures. They are settings where mythic and mortal Māori, Greek, and Asian figures meet and reckon with mortality and death and what might come next. They are spaces which are shaped by Buddhist and Taoist, Christian, Ancestral Chinese, Māori, and Classic Grecian paradigms and beliefs. They are highly varied settings, filled with allusion and intertext. Perhaps the most striking thread connecting the beyond settings in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography is the essential position of Māori beliefs and tangihanga traditions. In Robert Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*, the beyond is a setting where cultural exchange is centred, and Māori beliefs are celebrated.

The beyond is a central setting in Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld*.² It is a space powerfully shaped by Māori worldviews, and one in which Captain James Cook is subsumed within wider Pasifika stories. It is a space which is also described with reference to classic Greek religion and myth. It is a collection influenced by its origins as an occasional text, as a libretto to mark 50 years of the Orpheus choir, and also by the poet's lasting interest in the interstices of classic and Māori storytelling. As Cook begins '[t]he vast descent into

² Sullivan, *Captain Cook in the Underworld* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2002).

death’, he travels down ‘into Rarohenga, gross Hades, | deep into the underworld of souls’.³ This space is subterranean, governed harmoniously by mythic death deities, Hinenuitepō and Hades. Intercultural encounter shapes even the governing of the beyond, and leaves Cook out of his depth. Cook describes the underworld as a ‘cold hell’, and despairs at the place he is put on trial: ‘*a land of fire, | Hades, Rarohenga, sails | aflame in a dead ocean – the gods here | are foreign*’.⁴ The underworld is also evoked using oceanic metaphors, and is connected intricately with the beaches of encounter. Earlier in the collection, New Zealand is described in a parallel way, when Cook describes New Zealand as ‘the deepest shades of Hades, | truly an underworld of icy craters’.⁵ The underworld is described elsewhere as ‘the cosmos of the sea’, and Cook’s travel through this space is too contextualised as a seafaring journey, a ‘last argosy’.⁶ With these descriptions, we are encouraged to recognise the strength of place in Cook’s fate. While Cook’s legacy has shaped the Pacific in countless, far-reaching ways, his encounter with Aotearoa has a lasting effect on his soul. He is a soul still treading water; even in death he belongs to the sea. As we explored in the beach chapter, Cook is both literally and poetically absorbed into the storytelling seas of this place. Any power which Cook once sailed on is now dissolved, and it is a Māori underworld that he now steps into, and a Māori belief system to which he must appeal for his eternal peace.

We can also understand the underworld as a setting which operates as a kind of metaphor, representing the space and time in which we now read the book. We encounter Sullivan’s verse biography from a position where the story of Cook’s life and afterlife has been extensively explored and retold by Māori and indigenous writers. We exist in the storied space after Cook’s life. Here, the poet seems to place himself, thinly veiled, within the text. Throughout the collection, Orpheus, and later, Māui, operate as a kind of proxy for the poet. This selection of literary figure is rich with meaning—he is a figure who has made the journey into the underworld and is able to emerge again into the mortal realm. He is himself both a poet and a musician, and in his art lies his ability to compel and convince. He is a figure who is famous for his choice to ‘look back’.⁷ Sullivan’s art and poetic artifice is in

³ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 37.

⁴ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 45. Italics in original.

⁵ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 38.

⁶ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, pp. 36-37.

⁷ Shane Butler, ‘The Backward Glance’, *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 17.2 (2009), 59-78 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40646046>> [accessed 18 February 2022].

service of exploring very real-world concerns around empire, conquest, and indigenous reclamation.

The book functions as a sort of textual afterlife, a post-mortem trial of Cook and his journeys through the Pacific. This potential is one which Sullivan seizes on. In the opening section of the collection, titled ‘Absolution Chorus’, Sullivan references Christian imaginings of heaven and hell, and introduces the idea of eternal judgement. The unnamed chorus sets the stage:

In this quadrant of the journey
we look to redeem from burning
James, a man of his day, in hellfire –
we have twenty-first century hindsight –⁸

With this inclusive first-person address, we are invited to enter into the explorative space of the book while acknowledging our positionality as twenty-first century readers. While Sullivan invites us to recognize our hindsight, we are nevertheless invited to reassess our judgements of this contentious historical figure. The text explicitly engages with the processes of revision and retrial which often accompany verse biography. While this initial ‘Absolution Chorus’ seeks redemption for Cook, later in the collection when we join Cook in the underworld, his poet-guide maintains that he is not seeking to judge Cook. Orpheus is transformed, made to belong in this distinctly Māori afterlife, and sings now with his ‘Maui throat’.⁹ Maui insists he is not a judge: ‘Good captain, I am not here to grade this. | There are no jurists’¹⁰. However, there is an inevitable process of judgement at work here, and we as readers are a kind of jury, as we integrate Sullivan’s account with our prior knowledges of Cook.

⁸ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 1.

⁹ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 36.

¹⁰ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 36.

Bridget Orr suggests that *Captain Cook in the Underworld* echoes Māori tangihanga traditions, and the opportunity that they provide for ‘old wounds [to be] aired’.¹¹ Orpheus addresses Cook and his restlessness: ‘You’re a ghost, a roaming soul’.¹² Orr suggests that Sullivan imagines Cook as a ‘kēhua who needs to repent the wounds he has inflicted’.¹³ Cook is a spirit displaced by his harm, and he is held in the underworld of the collection until he has confronted his wrongdoings. He is caught here as a ‘zombie soul’ until he has faced the ‘wanderers’, the souls of those killed during Cook’s voyages.¹⁴ With these images, we are invited to think of this underworld as a setting filled with the undead, those caught in a liminal space between life and death. Maui urges Cook not to offer an oblation to a higher power, but rather to directly address those he harmed. Maui speaks with an imperative tone: ‘Begin your speech and remember this isn’t an oblation’.¹⁵ Cook is urged instead to ‘face justice’ by way of honestly confronting ‘the dead brought here at the hands of your men.’¹⁶ He is brought face-to-face with ‘the soul of a chief | of the coastal middle east | of the North Island.’¹⁷ This man is described in positive terms, as ‘A leader who dared | to stare your barrels down.’¹⁸ The assonance of ‘dare’ and ‘stare’ ring with defiant courage. It is important to note here that the chief is not the one on trial, and he remains unnamed, in a sort of literary witness protection. This decision is one which Sullivan explicitly connects to the wellbeing of the living:

He will share

his story nameless.

Not to enflame you, nor to leave you blameless.

He will not upset

the unending line of his descendants

¹¹ Bridget Orr, ‘Robert Sullivan’s Captain Cook: Absolving “Endeavour James”’, in *Truth and Beauty: Verse Biography in Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2016), pp. 187-207 (p. 198).

¹² Sullivan, p. 44.

¹³ Bridget Orr, ‘Robert Sullivan’s Captain Cook’, in *Truth and Beauty*, p. 198.

¹⁴ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, pp. 36-7.

¹⁵ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 40.

¹⁶ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, pp. 37-8.

¹⁷ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 42.

¹⁸ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 42.

stretching through the respected

land, Aotearoa.¹⁹

Sullivan highlights the importance of whakapapa, and the lines of inheritance which reach from the lifetime of this chief into the lifetimes of his descendants. In response, Cook confesses his wrongdoing, and claims that he understands, in his ‘head’ and in his ‘heart’, the harm he has wrought.²⁰

We are reminded of earlier in the collection when Venus urges Cook to take her appeals to maintain peace, to heart.²¹ This grasping of understanding in both his head and his heart mirrors the dual historical and affective affordances of verse biography, and is a process that Cook is only able to complete following his death. It is only once he acknowledges the human cost of his journeys, the ‘*souls of the shade, these destinies taken*’ by his ‘*shots*’ and ‘*blades*’, that Cook begins to approach freedom from the holding place of the underworld.²² Cook appeals desperately to the Māori gods, and hopes for inclusion within the Māori spiritual realm. This appeal echoes with the energy of a theatrical monologue, and with Cook’s invocation and rejection of a stage, we are reminded of the sense of his words as performance, and of the original form of this collection as an opera. We might find ourselves shuffling in our seats at Cook’s almost-begging:

I will dissolve this stage

and listen. I will listen to the ocean.

I will turn to my emotions – take a spirit’s leap from the cape

into the sky – I see him not, the crying skyfather,

and look down harder

¹⁹ Sullivan. *Captain Cook*, pp. 42-43.

²⁰ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 48.

²¹ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 14.

²² Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 48.

*into the face of the earthmother.*²³

This marks a shift in Cook's response to the underworld, as he embraces the landscape of the spirit world within Māori epistemologies. However, any relief for Cook only comes when he has finally acknowledged the inadequacy of his reckoning, in the face of the many dead left in his wake. His speech rings with the same hindsight that we hold as readers:

*But my speech is late,
too late for an explorer of fate,
[...]too late to sew up the scores
of bicentennial corpses. . .*²⁴

The colonial history of New Zealand echoes in the white spaces of these ellipses, as Sullivan gestures to the two hundred and twenty three years between Cook's death in New Zealand and the publication of this verse biography. Sullivan reminds us of the human costs of colonialism, brought to New Zealand on Cook's boats and many others since. If we are to approach Cook's biography with the aim of revision, we do so through eyes scarred with colonial harm. Cook reflects that it is

*too late to revisit, unpick, revise
our deeds . . . bandage and patch eyes,
poultice infections, scrape off the sores
from privates we took as whores. . .
I say this as a soul with little effect on history*²⁵

²³ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 47.

²⁴ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 49.

²⁵ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 49.

These last words which profess a lack of effect at first ring untrue, in contrast with this vivid and affective imagery, which while visceral in cataloguing harm, nevertheless reduces those impacted to a list of body parts and infected sites. However, Sullivan instead reminds us that the trial and judgement of Cook's eternal soul within this collection is purely imagined, and, ultimately, immaterial to the bodies of the dead. Cook's retrial is ongoing, taking place with every reading of this book. It is this colonial legacy that we continue to live with, and the bodies of the living who encounter history and its harms.

Cook begs to be freed from this liminal space, to be allowed to die. His appeal rings with desperate repetition: '*Now let me die, send this spirit out | to Hawaiki, send me out knowing this, send me now. . .*'²⁶ With this confession, Cook is released, and Maui places his soul onto the ancient pohutukawa tree at Cape Reinga. The headland at Te Rerenga Wairua is significant for Māori, as it is the place where spirits 'leap' to the beyond, descending to Reinga (the underworld), and in some traditions, onward to the ancestral homeland of Hawaiki.²⁷ Once again, Sullivan winks from behind the persona of a mythic character who is both Māori and Greek: 'So now I, Orpheus and Māui, place your breath | on the bough of the tree clinging to the breast | of Reinga. . .'²⁸ Cape Reinga is a powerful setting, one which is both literal and liminal, a physical coastal site which evokes the line between life and death. It is a space where rua (two) wai(waters), meet and converge.²⁹ This mixing of waters is powerfully charged with a connection to the beyond. These same words combine to form 'wairua', the Māori word for spirit. It is the space where spirits leap from the land into the sea, to pass on to Hawaiki, an ancestral home space. In a sense, Cook once again crosses one of Aotearoa's beaches. Freed from the holding space of the underworld, Cook is snagged on the precipice of the beyond.

The beyond is a setting which is shaped by earthly landscapes and relationships. It is a space where cultural exchange takes place, and the voices of the still-living echo. Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* explores the murder of the Cantonese gold prospector

²⁶ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 49.

²⁷ Rawinia Higgins, 'Tangihanga—death customs' *Te Ara* (2011) <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/tangihanga-death-customs/print>> [accessed 25 May 2021].

²⁸ Sullivan, *Captain Cook*, p. 50.

²⁹ Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa (the Pacific Ocean) and Te Tai-o-Rēhua (the Tasman Sea). Rāwiri Taonui, 'Tapa whenua – naming places - Events, maps and European influences', *Te Ara* <<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/tapa-whenua-naming-places/page-4>> [accessed 8 November 2021].

Joe Kum Yung and imagines his experience of the afterlife. It is a collection which is set largely in the beyond and explores the historical connections between Chinese and Māori people in Aotearoa.

In *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, the beyond is separated from the world of the living by a thin veil. The opening poem is titled with a reminder that the biographical subject at the heart of this collection belongs already to the beyond. '(In which the author interviews a dead man)' opens with Joe Kum Yung's voice, speaking 'crouch[ed], down | in the damp void', listening to the stories told about him.³⁰ The description of the beyond as a 'void' speaks to a complete emptiness which is punctured only by Yung's inhabitation of it.

Elsewhere in the collection, the beyond is described as a liminal place where Yung first must lie in wait. The speaker addresses Yung in a moment immediately following his death: 'you lie here | removed returned | waiting for the spirits | to nod.'³¹ The white space between the words 'removed' and 'returned' speaks powerfully to a sense that death is both a removal from life, and a return to the beyond. There is movement in this silence, and the word 'return' hearkens to a rehoming. While death is a new experience for Yung, his destination is familiar.

The collection is everywhere marked by this connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, and the collection teems with ghosts and haunting. Tse's Yung imagines himself as a figure marked by the beyond even during his life, and describes how 'bad luck clung to [him] like a wandering | ghost'.³² This bad luck, a product of colonial prejudice and painful separation from his wife in Canton, leaves him lost and 'unsettled'.³³ This sense of unsettlement is a key aspect of the beyond too, and it is a place where Yung joins other restless and wandering ghosts.

The speaker of the collection elsewhere addresses Yung directly, emphasizing the physical silence that accompanies the 'inky sleep' of death.

You are silent when they find you –

³⁰ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 1.

³¹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 24.

³² Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 1.

³³ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 1.

a tired soul ready to concede,
the no-luck serenade already soft
in your inky sleep.³⁴

However, if death is likened to a long sleep, then it is far from restful. Tse emphasises the interconnectedness of the worlds of the living and the dead, and the ways in which each setting affects the other. There is a power imbalance here, often in favour of the vocal living, however this power dynamic can be flipped if we allow the dead to speak: ‘When the dead are consulted, the world inverts. They are | all restless.’³⁵ The beyond is described as a place which enacts silence, and the speaker again addresses Yung, speaking in an imperative mode and future tense about the inevitable forgetting that will soon be his in death:

And you will remember nothing
even if you must
reach back
into madness
and let its unpredictable waves
pull your failing hand under.³⁶

The beyond is a setting which is likened to a sea of madness, a turbulent setting where Yung is torn from his life so far. We might understand madness, here, as a separation from a reality shared by others. In this way, the sea of the beyond can also be understood in parallel with the sea that Yung crossed in order to immigrate to New Zealand.

³⁴ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 23. White space approximated from original.

³⁵ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 18.

³⁶ Tse, *How to be Dead*, pp. 23-24.

It was a terminal crossing, one which separated him from his countrymen, and ultimately prevented him from being buried in his homeland. Yung falls overboard on his life's voyage, the seas of cultural crossing hostile and deadly. Though Yung might reach out to hold onto his life, or to signal for aid, his hand, and his heart, are failing. Again, we are reminded that the beyond is not a wholly separate place of eternal restfulness, but rather it is a setting closely connected with the world of the living, a place from which the dead can talk back to the living. However, this communication across these two settings can only occur through the use of a conduit, or the intercession of the living. Verse biography resists the silencing of the dead.

The beyond is a setting which is closely connected to Aotearoa New Zealand, and is shaped by the landscape of this place. The poem '(Thoughts of a dying man)' joins Yung in this descent into a 'Slow sleep', tracing a surreal transition into the beyond, and the separation of Yung's soul from his body.³⁷ Yung is caught between two worlds, exposed to the cycle of liminality. There is a sense too that Yung is subject to the antagonistic conditions of this landscape. Yung notes the deep-piercing cold of his body: 'This constant southern wind laughs through me. | It is cunning it is deep.'³⁸ This evocation echoes an earlier description of the night that Yung dies. The weather seems to anticipate the cooling of Yung's body in death: 'Another cold Wellington night | wind on a sharp loop'.³⁹ This sense of loop speaks to the chilling cycles of prejudice, the cruel laughter which strikes through Yung's body. Once again, Yung is denied the comfort of belonging, and remains suspended, displaced by the forces of this foreign place, and held in a circuit between life and death.

However, as in the wake of the *SS Ventnor*, there is space for Yung as a manuhiri in the Māori space of Tse's beyond. The beyond is a setting inhabited by New Zealand birds, who arrive as helpers to carry Yung onward. These are birds who, in Māori belief, originate from Hawaiki and accompany the spirits of the dead:

the kūaka pick at my hair and take hold

lift me like a swollen sack drag my stubborn weight

³⁷ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 26.

³⁸ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 26.

³⁹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 22.

towards the mouth of the gust in question.⁴⁰

The wind is again connected to the beyond, and seems to issue from an extra-earthly space, breathing air into the white space of Tse's lines. These birds accompany Yung up, into the air. 'Gravity does not tether the soul so I push up | and let the birds take me.'⁴¹ With these lines, Yung's story is separated from his mortal body, and carried to the beyond. However, this initial ascension marks only the beginning of Yung's journey into the beyond.

As in Sullivan's *Captain Cook in the Underworld*, Tse's Yung is an unsettled spirit. However, his peace in the beyond is not conditional on his own repentance, but on the remembrance and rituals of the living. The physical place the body lies in is important, and shapes the journey of the soul. The poem '(Rituals)', reflects on the spirits of those Chinese people who died far from home, who without proper ritual 'wander' their 'empty half-life with no direction'.⁴² We understand that Yung must be laid to rest in accordance with the traditions of his homeland, in order to return to peace. In an interview for RNZ Lynda Chanwai-Earle introduces the collection, and illuminates Tse's intention to highlight the importance of Yung's life, and other 'ghosts of Haining Street'.⁴³ Tse describes Chinese beliefs around death and the beyond, and emphasises the importance of the practice of 'ching ming'. These traditions must be carried out by the living, so that 'the dead don't wander, hungry and lonely'.⁴⁴ These practices are described in the collection, and are carried out within the home:

incense burning by the front door

and mirrors covered so as not

to alarm you of your passing state.

⁴⁰ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 26.

⁴¹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 27.

⁴² Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 60.

⁴³ Chris Tse, 'History: Author Interview How to be dead-Writer Chris Tse', *RNZ* (2015)

<<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/voices/audio/20165499/how-to-be-dead-writer-chris-tse>>
[accessed 17 May 2021].

⁴⁴ Chris Tse, 'History: Author Interview How to be dead-Writer Chris Tse'.

The living strip themselves of red

and leave their hair to grow.

There are the duties of the living

to guide your transition –

to prepare ghost money

and joss relics to burn.

Such necessities will secure

your comfort in the next life⁴⁵

With the inclusion of these rituals, we are reminded of the close connections between the living and the dead. These death rituals speak to the belief that the beyond is a space which is constructed in dialogue with earth, and can be navigated according to earthly knowledges. The unsettled dead rely on the remembrance of the living in order to find peace, and even to avoid ‘alarm’ at their own reflections.

However, in the absence of these rituals, the beyond is a place of unsettlement and displacement. The poem titled ‘(*Eight ghosts*)’, lists some of these unsettled souls: ‘The Hanged’, ‘The Drowned’, ‘The Depressed and Restless’, ‘The Headless’, ‘The Woman Seeking Revenge’, ‘The Kindly Old Woman’, ‘The Hungry Ghost’, and ‘The Ghost Who Wanders’.⁴⁶ A ghost is a soul which is, in some way ‘uncanny’, or ‘out of place’, existing in an overlapping space between life and death.⁴⁷ With the exception of ‘The Kindly Old Woman’, the capitalised names of these ghosts speak to stories of unsettlement and wrongful death. The final ghost, ‘The Ghost Who Wanders: *removed and homeless*’, seems to refer to Yung, and his separation from his homeland even in death. The apparition of Yung haunts

⁴⁵ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Bennett and Royle, p. 160.

this collection. These ghosts, and the others in Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography speak to a need to be recognised and remembered. They haunt in order to be heard.

Elsewhere in the collection, Tse describes the dead who are buried in New Zealand after being washed from the SS *Ventnor* as ‘ghosts who only speak | when spoken to | with no choice in the path they are set upon.’⁴⁸ Tse’s message here is clear: It is the job of the living to remember and call forth the memories which could be lost to the silencing power of death. Verse biography works to speak to the dead so that they might be permitted to speak back.

This exchange between the living and the dead is one which can be influenced by the words and actions of the living. The beyond in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes* is a space which is shaped by cultural encounter and exchange. Throughout the collection, Tse explores the relationships between Chinese and Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. The poem ‘(SS *Ventnor*)’ examines the 1902 sinking of a ship which contained the bones of 499 Chinese miners, destined for repatriation. Tse’s poem describes the ways in which Māori shared traditions with those dead Chinese miners separated from their homeland. The poem emphasises the profound respect of this cultural encounter and invokes a Māori tangihanga custom as the subtitle for each stanza. The first, ‘*kawe mate*’ refers to a ceremony where a photograph is taken to those unable to attend the tangihanga. The inclusion of this ceremony reminds the reader of the ways in which the dead and the living can be connected across time and place. This practice is another way in which the dead are remembered, and their stories preserved in the world of the living. In the second stanza, Tse references an important place in Māori spiritual belief, ‘*te rerenga wairua*’.⁴⁹ This setting is located in physical space, and also serves as a transitional space to the beyond. It is the same place where Sullivan leaves Cook’s spirit snagged on the sacred pohutukawa. Tse evokes the sense that those Māori who extended tangihanga rites to the Chinese miners also welcomed them into their paradigms of the beyond. This sense of cultural exchange and the sharing of sacred ritual is expressed in the closing lines of the stanza: ‘Death is the common ground | when acknowledged with respect/ gratitude and the offering of joss.’⁵⁰ The sharing of this ‘common ground’ of the beyond is acknowledged and reciprocated with the offering of a Chinese death ritual in kind. The final section of the poem, titled ‘*karakia*’, speaks to the sense of the beyond as a space

⁴⁸ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 9.

where different spiritual kin can come together, and where the souls of the miners might find some peace within the Māori beyond:

And so the once-lost are salvaged
and laid to rest
among spiritual kin and tender ancestors.⁵¹

Once more, the connections between the world of the living and the beyond are clear. The offerings of and exchange between these two people in the world of the living enables the connection and comfort of these men in the beyond. Furthermore, we might imagine Tse's verse biography as a kind of *karakia*, a poetic prayer and incantation with which he eases Yung's journey in the beyond, and his return home.

As in Chris Tse's verse biography, the beyond in Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat* is a setting where the connections between the living and the dead are explored, and rituals around death and grieving from New Zealand, Singapore and China, are connected and celebrated. The verse biography focuses on the life of Iris Wilkinson, and draws her biography close with the lives of Kan's family. The poet's voice rings through that of his poetic speaker, who acknowledges the limitations of historical knowledge: 'I don't know anything about the past except for what the past has left me.'⁵² Here, there is a sense of the fragmented and partial nature of historical material. Some things are, inevitably, lost to the beyond. Kan marks the incompleteness of this knowledge, and this sense of absences and gaps become a key feature of the collection. The speaker of the verse biography emphasises the way in which absolute knowledge of the spiritual beyond is, ultimately, inaccessible to the living. Even verse biography has its limitations in knowing the facts of the biographical life: 'I know nothing of death except for what the dead have left me.'⁵³ For matters both historical and spiritual, the speaker defers to the traces left behind by those who have passed. *This Paper Boat* is thus comprised of the traces left by the ghosts of the past.

⁵¹ Tse, *How to be Dead*, p. 10.

⁵² Gregory Kan, *This Paper Boat* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2016), p. 3.

⁵³ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 17.

In *This Paper Boat*, the beyond breaks through to the present earthly time and place. It is a place which traces characters and themes into worldly home spaces. The collection is teeming with ghosts, and Iris Wilkinson haunts the collection as the biographical anchor. Other lives and losses haunt this collection, and the stories of the speaker's family and friends. The speaker's aunt's experience of Alzheimer's, and the illness and ageing of his father ring with anticipatory grief, and the loss of a missing friend all gesture to the unknown nature of the beyond. In this way, the book grapples with grief and mortality, and brings the beyond into close contact with the realm of home and family. The beyond is a space which is invoked by the speaker's interaction with their familial beliefs and Singapore, and Chinese cultural traditions, and their experiences and understandings of Māori spirituality. It is a setting which is closely associated with the river and waters. Throughout *This Paper Boat* Kan explores several liquid lines which both divide and connect the living and the dead.

One moment in the collection marked by an awareness of mortality and death is a moment in which the speaker looks to his aging father. When the father experiences a fall, he is left with nerve and muscle damage, and an eye which is 'no longer | able to adequately spread | and contain its fluid.'⁵⁴ Kan imagines this physical sign of injury in the context of Māori culture, and so imbibes his father's involuntary tears with mana and meaning:

Some cultures consider crying to be
undignified. The Māori *tangi* involves the cultivation of intense
wetness around the eyes
and nose.⁵⁵

This practice of tangi is itself deeply symbolic and speaks to the connection between people. Kan places tangihanga practices alongside his inherited cultural understandings, and renders them in striking emotive detail:

In this expression of mourning, the wetness of living bodies
is invoked. Wet touch is closer and faster than dry touch. Sound travels

⁵⁴ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 25.

⁵⁵ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 25. Italics in original.

more quickly in water. So does electricity.

The air between me and my father is hung

with tiny droplets.⁵⁶

In this way, the tears serve as a connective thread between the speaker and his father, a stream which connects the waters of life within each of them. There is a foreshadowing at work here too, as the father's mortality is a theme that the speaker returns to throughout the collection. We understand that this bridge is one which will remain available to the speaker at the eventual death of his father, and his passage into the beyond. Māori paradigms of tangihanga are held with reverence by the speaker, who we understand will one day recall them in order to connect with those in the beyond.

The beyond leaks into the earthly spaces of the collection, as ghosts haunt the home. At the end of a poem reflecting on the duty and also loneliness of his great-aunt, the speaker writes of a ghost from Chinese folklore: '*Gui Po*—A ghost in the form of a kindly old woman, | who returns to help | around the house, and who was sometimes too close | to covet.'⁵⁷ Again, a sense of uncomfortable closeness echoes between the home and the beyond. Other ghosts appear throughout the collection, and speak to the themes of loss, distance, injustice, absence which haunt the book. '*Ge Hun Ye Gui* — a ghost who has died | far from her family. | She waits | for a kind person to guide her home. She never | wants to be seen, but likes the idea | of being found.'⁵⁸ '*Yuan Gui* — a ghost who has died a wrongful death. | He roams the world of the living, waiting | for his grievances to be redressed. He hasn't left | anywhere he's been.'⁵⁹ '*Wu Tou Gui* — a headless ghost who roams aimlessly, who has gone missing for himself in the way of missing something he has never known.'⁶⁰ '*Shui Gui* — a ghost of one | who drowned, and who continues | living in the water.'⁶¹ Many of the ghosts in this collection are also present in Tse's collection. We can easily associate Joe Kum Yung with Yuan Gui, and Tse's role as one seeking to redress the injustice of his death. Like the ghosts in *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*, these ghosts are present in a beyond space which overlaps with the living world. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle point to the way in which ghosts stand

⁵⁶ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 26.

⁶⁰ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 50.

⁶¹ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 77.

in for the unresolved concerns that haunt the living: ‘literature is a place of ghosts, of what’s unfinished, unhealed and even untellable.’⁶² They are roaming and lingering, ‘waiting’ to be found and acknowledged by the living. They too bear resemblance to some of the key mortal figures within the collection: Yuan Gui might represent Kan’s speaker’s lost friend, Ge Hun Ye Gui might represent Iris Wilkinson, who died far from home, in London. The last of these ghosts, Shui Gui, again references drowning, and reminds us of the connection between water and the beyond in this genre.

The final pages of *This Paper Boat* close with a depiction of ‘The Hungry Ghost Festival’, a traditional Buddhist and Taoist festival held in honour of the dead.⁶³ In this section, Kan writes of the close connection between the beyond and the world of the living. It is an event in which the living perform rituals in order to influence and ease the journeys of their beloved dead:

During the festival,
rituals are performed to appease the sufferings
of the dead. I make dinner and set the table
for an additional person.
I leave the seat empty.⁶⁴

The beyond is a setting which overlaps with the setting of the home, as there is physical space left for the dead to inhabit. The dead are invited to sit and share in the meal with the living, to gather round in a scene of sustenance and life. This ritual is accompanied by others, and all are rendered useful and necessary by the close connection between the two worlds: ‘On this day the realm of the living lies open/ to the realms of heaven and hell.’⁶⁵ There is a thinness and a closeness here which necessitates a traditional and intentional response. Symbols of earthly comfort are offered in order to provide their parallels in the beyond:

⁶² Bennett and Nicholas Royle, ‘Ghosts’, in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 4th edn (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), pp. 160-168 (p.162).

⁶³ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, pp. 76-77.

⁶⁴ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 76.

⁶⁵ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 76.

Paper representations of material items

such as money, clothes and

houses are burnt as offerings

to ensure

that the deceased are comfortable

in the afterlife [...] ⁶⁶

This belief that the actions of the living can influence the world of the beyond is a belief shared in both Kan's and Tse's collections. In this way, the writing of verse biography itself might be understood as the presentation of a paper offering, an offering of representation.

The final ritual described in *This Paper Boat* is striking, and returns us to the collection's title. In this ritual, a stream appears as an intermediary space used by ghosts to navigate between the beyond and the living world. Again, this watery liminal space is a setting which is crossed, and holds echoes of the beach setting. It is a space which the living launch paper boats into, and light with lanterns, 'to ensure | that the ghosts find their way | back.'⁶⁷ Kan places five paper boats in the stream, and we might imagine that there is one for each of the five ghosts named earlier in the book.

You gather them

downstream and somehow

send them

⁶⁶ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 77.

⁶⁷ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 77.

back to me.⁶⁸

The 'You' addressed in this section is perhaps singular, or perhaps collective. The pronoun 'you' works here in multiple ways, simultaneously addressing the lost, and placing the reader in their position. Either way, the paper boats are returned to Kan. With this closing imagery, we understand that the verse biography *This Paper Boat* is itself an offering to Hyde and to the other figures and ghosts that haunt this collection. The return of the boat is particularly interesting, and its meaning is ambiguous. Do the boats return because they are insufficient, unable to cross the boundaries between worlds? Or perhaps they return because they have done their work.

Perhaps that is the work of each verse biography, to act as the paper boat which facilitates a crossing into the beyond and helps the dead to find their way back to us. Or perhaps we travel in the paper boat of the verse biography, in order to glimpse the beyond. If this is the case, then we must emphasise that this contact with and crossing of these waters is a transformative encounter. Like the paper subject to the torrents, we are marked by this journey. We return home a little different.

⁶⁸ Kan, *This Paper Boat*, p. 77.

Calibrating

The creative practice component of this thesis, *Keepsake*, emerged at the same time as I researched and wrote my exegesis portion. Each component reflects and informs the other. Helen Vendler writes that ‘a poet meditating on a given topic often thinks serially through the topic by reframing it in poem after poem, creating an active process of thinking’.¹ My poetry collection thus embodies the processes of reflection and generative encounter that I experienced with my chosen texts and poems over the course of this thesis. My collection allowed me to better understand the relationship between setting and verse. This experiment enriched my understanding of the methods of construction that enliven my primary texts and so further informed my close reading process. I wrote in conversation with the Aotearoa New Zealand verse biographies I studied and analyse, and my creative work at times engages explicitly with these texts and their authors. After nearly four years of working closely with these texts, I remain indebted to these poets, and am continuing to learn new things from reading their lines.

Writing *Keepsake* was essential to my experience over the past four years both as a doctoral candidate and as a person. At the beginning of my thesis, I planned to write a verse biography dedicated to the life of an Aotearoa New Zealand writer, Violet May Cottrell, a largely unknown poet who fascinates me because of the wide range of her work, the historical era in which she lived, her interest in the afterlife, and the landscape we share in both having lived in the Hawkes Bay, where she witnessed the 1931 earthquake. There is a wealth of her writings and life sources accessible at the Alexander Turnbull library in Wellington, which I was able to visit on two occasions, and I remain hopeful that I might undertake this project in the future.

However, as I set out on this thesis journey in mid 2018, I did not conceive of the many unexpected circumstances which saw my course shift. With the first reports of the pandemic arriving in New Zealand in early 2020, and the ongoing uncertainties, lockdowns, and alert level shifts, travelling to the archives in Wellington posed distinct challenges, as did my plan to trace Cottrell’s life by travelling to key places on the East Coast. I started to cast

¹ Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 6.

around for biographical subjects that were closer to me, and I returned to the writing adage: write what you know. In my research I encountered many verse biographies which explored family history, including Lynn Jenner's *Dear Sweet Harry*, Marty Smith's *Horse with Hat*, and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*.² During my undergraduate studies, I majored in English and History, and I remain fascinated by and enamoured with social history and especially feminist and family history. I am interested too in the processes of oral tradition and private archiving that shape family narratives. In my family, my grandfather is our storyteller, and my grandmother the recorder of important dates and names. They have been, since my earliest memories, the guardians of our family memories and stories.

In July 2020, my paternal grandmother, Mary Helen O'Connor died suddenly. It was during a brief window between national and regional lockdowns. I was able to hold her hand as she went.

As I tried to dig out from the rubble of my grief, I was reminded of verse biographies I had read which explore loss and grief, including Vivienne Plumb's *Scarab*, Anne Carson's *Nox*, Vana Manasiadis's *The Grief Almanac* and Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*.³ Supported by my supervisors, and especially borrowing the courage of Tracey Slaughter, it became clear that the poetic component, while focused on the same questions as my critical exegesis, should be focused on a subject close to my heart. I set out to write a verse biography of my grandfather, Kevin Buxton O'Connor. This shift was profound, and radically deepened my understanding of the genre and its possibilities, while it simultaneously deepened my understanding of my grandparents, and myself.

I spent a lot of my childhood at my grandparents' dining table, or tucked up on the couch, listening to my grandparents tell stories, and I know many of them by heart. I know them deeply, poetically, their pauses, their teachings, their omissions, which key detail or

² Lynn Jenner, *Dear Sweet Harry* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2010); Marty Smith, *Horse with Hat*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2014)

³ Vivienne Plumb, *Scarab* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2005); Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010); Vana Manasiadis, *The Grief Almanac* (Wellington: Seraph Press, 2019); Gregory Kan, *This Paper Boat* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2016).

image to mention to bump my favourites to the top of the list. My love of history and literature began with my grandfather's stories, which in their small details and with his voice, excited my interest in wider cultural moments and events. The biographical details of his life served as my first compass-points for my understanding of the past and my present. I first heard of key historical moments in the context of his life: his birth in the shadow of the Second World War, his childhood during the Polio Epidemic.

As a way to focus my verse biography, and draw my work into conversation with those texts I studied in my exegesis, I used the key settings from my exegesis as a framework through which to approach Grandad's life.

I knew the beach was the place where Nana and Grandad had first met, down by the Waihi surfclub. It was also the place where they had a bach for a few years when I was young, and it is the place where some of my first memories swim up from. It is the place where I return to connect with Nana. I was aware of the history of our family as immigrants, that grandad's grandfather moved here from Ireland during the famine, and that his siblings had been imprisoned and deported from Ireland for fishing from the rivers and digging peat from Crown land. Grandad's father spoke fluent Māori and Grandad has always sparked conversations with strangers by asking them where they are from. He brings a Māori dictionary on our roadtrips and reminds us of all the stories that have unfolded in this place long before us.

I grew up with stories about the homes in my grandparents' lives, the homes that had held my father and his siblings, and the homes that my grandfather as a carpenter had helped to build. Nana and Grandad's home was built in the first year of my life, and was the one I was raised in during a pivotal period of my life, and remains my one steady postal address. It features heavily in *Keepsake*. It is a place which I am acutely aware I have idealised in my own memory, and if I write of it with a rose-tinted lens, then it is at least partly because my view was, in other homes, shattered and made bloodshot.

The police station and courtroom is a setting which was less apparent to me in the context of my grandfather's life. Until I really got thinking. When I have approached my grandad for advice, or just whinged to him about whatever social justice soapbox I was climbing at the time, he has offered something his father taught him: 'Always remember the golden rule. Them with the gold, makes the rules'. I was reminded of all the stories I had

heard of Grandad's dad, my great grandad Jim, and his complicated encounters with the law in Pukekohe in the early twentieth century; and from here I was able to recall a few more stories my grandad had told me about his own life too, while my nana had tsked from the other end of the table.

Finally, and also continually, the beyond is present in everything I wrote. It haunts my first experience of close grief with the death of Nana and the reckonings that came with it: with my long-hibernating and piecemeal faith, with mortality, with the loss of a woman who had been a mother to me in some of my most difficult times. An awareness of the ways in which there were questions I had not thought to ask her, that I can now no longer know her answer to. Whole histories gone, knowledges that were hers and which she did not deem worth recording, and others too which she did not want remembered, which were not ours to keep. I experienced an acute awareness of the way in which the beyond looms in every life, and in the verse biographies I have studied. I suddenly understood the anticipatory grief in Kan's *This Paper Boat* in a way that I had not before, and while I have tried to stave it off in favour of an appreciation for what is, it creeps into the margins anyway.

In addition to extending and complicating my understanding of these key settings and the kinds of stories that swarm around them, this creative practice deepened my understanding of the kinds of choices that verse biographers have to make around source material and selection. I could not include everything. However in writing each poem and organising it into a collection, I could revisit some key ideas and images from different angles. There are a number of homes and gardens, beaches and roads within this collection. There are hauntings of many different kinds, and electricity arcs and fails throughout the manuscript as death makes its presence felt.

Additionally, my creative practice deepened my understanding of the ideological and ethical processes of writing about the past: I was writing my hero's verse biography, and felt a strong commitment to hold him with the kind of love and respect that hears and sees and says with clarity and honesty. This kind of poetic attention demanded that I see and hear him in new ways, and additionally, the grief that we share in this season demanded many shifts in our relationship. Additionally, it demanded a constant and ongoing examination of my role as intermediary, and the deep way in which my subjectivity is inextricable from the work. In this work, this connection is crucial, and I was aware of the way in which key moments in my grandfather's life were, in a haunting *Back to the Future* kind of way, moments which have

indelibly shaped my life. Without that day at the beach in Waihi, my father might have been someone else's. Without the home I had refuge in during my childhood, I may not have made it much further. This experience, of foregrounding my subjectivity as a writer and researcher strengthened my commitment to and belief in the necessity of ongoing self-reflexivity which I believe is essential to any research, and is a distinctive feature of verse biography.

In the days, weeks and months following Nana's death, I found myself doing little more than making blunt notes in my writing journal, half scrawls and single words. It was a time of simultaneous vivid intensity and near-numbness, where my abilities to notice sensory details dimmed and my poetic eyes and ears were blurred and muffled, aside from a few sharp moments that cut through the fog. I turned to the written word, and poetry, because I knew it could hold all of this, the weight and the fragmentation of all of these feelings, and the uncanny fleeting moments where there was no feeling too. Verse biography is a form which allowed me to retain some of this sense of brokenness and absence. It allowed me to 'show my working', to confess that I still hold more questions than answers, and to acknowledge that some moments live beyond language. I knew that it could hold my grief, because I had read collections which held the grief of others. Poetry is the form of the ballad, the love letter, the funeral poem, the prayer. I found solace too in the idea of the stanza as a room, the poem as a space in which I could keep something of her alive.

I recently watched a documentary about Joan Didion, titled: *The Centre will Not Hold*.⁴ In a voiceover towards the end of the film, Didion reads from her book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, written in response to the death of her husband:

Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. We anticipate (we know) that someone close to us could die, but we do not look beyond the few days or weeks that immediately follow such an imagined death. We misconstrue the nature of even those few days or weeks. We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be oblitative, dislocating to both body and mind.⁵

This sense of dislocation is something I am familiar with now. Grief defies chronology. It breaks time. In the weeks following Nana's death, I continued to catch myself speaking of her in the present tense, telling stories as if she was still alive. Occasionally, with strangers, I

⁴ *The Centre Will Not Hold*, dir. by Griffin Dunne (Netflix, 2017) [on Netflix].

⁵ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p. 188.

let myself leave these slippages uncorrected, and played pretend. The verse biography is also a space where I could render her in the present tense, where I could suspend her death out of the frame of the poem, if only performatively. In other ways, death reinforces chronology, splitting time in two, the before and after of the loss. There is a sense of this in my collection. The home setting of my grandparents' home was a key point of reference during the writing of this thesis. In the small entryway of their home, where you take off your shoes, there is a compass rose inset in the floor, rendered in moss-green tile, pointing due North. My research in verse biography allowed me to see how this, and other key images from my grandparents', and my, life are transformed by poetic attention and the frame of the poetic life story, into metaphors of sorts, talismans that help me to make sense of, and organise our lives. I have arranged *Keepsake* in this way, led by recurring images, and the connections between them.

In writing this verse biography I also deepened my understanding of the potential that the form holds, to bridge the gaps of historical knowledge with imagination. I found myself grieving the lack of that which I never had, desperate to piece together those things beyond my understanding; I was (am) desperate for the documentary records of her life, the relics to hold close, to conjure her. I am desperate to be where she once was, to step in the same places. In my research for this collection, I searched the private primary archives of photographs, letters, envelope-lists, cookbooks and postcards from her life, as well as the lives of my Grandfather and our ancestors. I held war medals, paintings, obituaries, rosary beads, seashells and kumara leaves as I sifted for key images and textures from our shared past. I wandered and slept in the rooms of our home. I also undertook research *using Papers Past* and *Te Ara*, seeking my ancestors in public archives, and tracing the O'Connor family in histories of Pukekohe. I took road trips to visit some of the key places from Grandad's life, in Pukekohe and Auckland.

However, ultimately the tools of my history training are inadequate here. There is so much that is untraceable. Nana's new location is unknowable, unmappable. I will not find it in the archives, nor in the databases. I am struck by the gaps in the records we hold about her, the limitations on what I can now know about her in her absence. Those whole lives she lived before I occurred, the details in the days we shared, the things I missed before I knew to pay attention. Before I understood the urgency. For all the affective force of verse biography, there are no words that can bring her back, there is no way I can re-member her back to life. But my study of verse biography has shown me that there is still something in the asking.

Like the prayer of my childhood. Like the half-hearted prayers of my agnostic adulthood. Like writing letters to the dead. There is power in calling out in the dark. There is power in the ability to imagine what's next. To hope for some beyond. My collection is threaded through too with this idea of resurrection, the belief in which is a core tenet of the faith I was raised in, which my grandparents and I, along with the rest of every Sunday mass, spoke in choral creed: I believe in the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. This belief, in the potential for the dead to live on, and for life still to come, is perhaps, in less religious terms, a belief shared by verse biographers. We write to keep something of the past alive, for those who are yet to come. We write to remember, and perhaps in turn, we hope to be remembered too.

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For

My granddad, Kevin Buxton O'Connor, the greatest storyteller I know

&

My nana, Mary Helen O'Connor, who lived with great tenderness and courage

Nostalgia is not a comfortable form of reverie but the
opposite: it is a way of living with loss. It is not about an
imaginary revival of the past but about the impossibility
of return: a condition of exile.

—John Stezaker, in *Collage*

This is, always, the paradox of the posterity offered by poetry:
the miracle is in the loving,
and we might think the lines of the poetry themselves miraculous,
but they can never really preserve the miracle of the living person who was loved.

—Anna Jackson, *Actions & Travels: How Poetry Works*

You have died. And the place we
belonged to together, remains.

—Anne Michaels, *Infinite Gradation*

Keepsake

Queen Street, Pukekohe

1965

i.

The home is white
with wraparound porch
built from Kahikatea
pitsawn to make way for
the Pukekohe racecourse:

 corrugated iron roofing
 curled wooden fretwork
 shamrocks in the eaves

Luck shines down on 30
starched collars and Sunday bests
gathered to wish Brother Humphrey
safe passage with the Marist Brothers

ii.

The hydrangeas out front
pull iron from the volcanic soil
grow purple
The family
sets down roots in Pukekohe
erects a building in town with the name in concrete
relief—a drive split from *Queen Street*—
the stubborn apostrophe
carried across the seas

iii.

Jim and Rita retire
move into the township and sell
to the man with glitter in his eyes when he talks
restoration

calls the place *historic*

Six weeks later, Rita is invited

To watch the home burn to the ground

As a drill for the local volunteer brigade

(even in black and white

A fire is a

ravenous glow)

‘Setting’ was that one NCEA English question we all hated

Setting was for old dead white guys who had boners for big breasty mountains and muddy moors and that, and all the settings in the movies were like wars and stuff. And we’d be all like *this is dumb and pointless. And what’s setting anyway, Miss? It’s all like the curtains are blue and so the protagonist’s got depression* and we’d be all like *but Miss this class is depressing but the curtains are white. You could say anything means anything and you’d be right Miss. Right?*

Right?

Wairere Drive

In highway dusk the streetlights look like the ribcage of a primordial whale. A thunderstorm is boiling in the basin. The air thickens and crusts like the hull of some great tarred ark.

176 Steps

Climbing Durie Hill Memorial, after Airini Beautrais's 'Out the window' from *Dear Neil Roberts*

My hot breath and
the cold graphite of the long dead
echo in the
tight shellrock spiral.
I carry Airini's book in my backpack
dog-eared and memorised like a map I
stop to tie my laces
touch
 the curved walls (*sharpie, carpenter's pencil, crayon, canned green and yellow*)
 the stoney past (*1935, 41, 59, 7, 2011*)
 the worn steps
 scrawled graffito (*THREADGOLD, Bishop, heart & arrow*)

At the top
the sky is a crosshatched dome held
tight by lover's locks rusted shut
I peer through the metal cage and see the city bird's-eye:
Te Tai-o-Rēhua
Whanganui River
Palm trees bristling
the big white haunted house:
thin dark visor glaring back.

Phantom Pain i.

She shuffles back on the bed and rolls up
the stocking which holds
her plastic leg to the stump
she lets me stare

 just white lines and
 purple pucker
 then
 air

She explains
it happened the year before I was born
to stop an infection
coiled and climbing from her foot

I ask if it hurt and she says no
she was awake for the whole thing but
anaesthetised from the waist down
they put up a screen
so she didn't know much about it save for
the sounds and the
tugging

She tells me she gets these
phantom pains
where she gets static in her shin
or cramp in her long-lost-toes
it's fairly common and just the brain and
spine working to remap its currents

She tells me it sometimes works to itch
the thick hollow plastic of the artificial leg

or take a mirror and lay it alongside
the remaining one
and massage it
knead its soft warmth
tell your brain itsokay
itsokay
this part of you can still be reached.

Bowentown

Orcinus Orca

You've always told it like a miracle
And I can see you
fishing alone
perched on rock crag
reeling and winding
toes gripping the very
edge.

I can see the quiet crescent of
Tauranga Bay
the sand dull and unglittered
silver in the winter light

Three Orca slide in from the Pacific
Two adults and one calf
sail past you
real sedate like
you always say
and then Daddy Orca turns around
and comes up to the rocks right where I am
and remains motionless,
five metres away
staring at me
Oh crikey
I felt very vulnerable

Dear reader

We can imagine the motivations of the verse biographer in a number of ways. Perhaps she is a corrupt scientist, building a piecemeal creature from parts. Or the show(wo)man behind the curtain, pulling levers. Perhaps she is summoning spirits. Perhaps she is a graverobber, pick-pocketing the dead. 22 and tensing, trying to hold her grandparents here, trying to press their voices into the pulp.

Level 3.1—Picnics Permitted

Nov 2021

Now the government says we can picnic so long as we are
careful careful
You are more relaxed than me
(like always) and invite me over to write down more of your stories
I delay for as long as I can take it
then
mask up and drag my hand sanitizer to your garden

We agree: the language is shifting
Slow and seismic so you have to double take everything
like a blur like a fingerprint on the lens like
a catch in your throat that won't quite
go
The word *elimination* is slipping away
and there's a bucket of smoke in its place
You tell me you don't get it and
I don't either
You've done the measurements and
I've done the maths and
it doesn't quite add up.

(You've always said: measure
twice, cut once)

When I was younger you taught me that 2 metres is about the usual height of a doorway
Tall enough that most people clear it without ducking
Today we keep a gap between us
The length of your red-stained picnic table
There is a half second gap between the light of your smile under that mask and
your muffled jokes

and I can see the photo of Nana looking out from the lounge

When the wind picks up and you invite me in (it will be fine, we will keep the ranch slider open)

I choke on my no and just
shake my head all fast like a little kid

(I know the stats and you do not
see yourself in them)

I hold my journal tight so your words do not fly away.

Te Kopua

She sits in the shallows
and the sprat gather
around her fingertips like
quicksilver ghosts

She could stay here
so long
her water would flee her
she'd shrivel and pucker
a pillar of salt

She'd tilt and spill out
be carried in glittering gills
darting fast
into the moana.

Adding flesh to the facts

I hold it all

tight:

the gristle the

wizened the

marrow and joint

I dig for relics

bluelight the smile

dust for finger

print phantoms

I pick

each word

over

with care

I try to find the fibre

That will keep you here

Jim O'Connor

Conscription

Jim's called up in '44
to serve King and Country
33 cows lumber in the paddocks
2 short of 'Essential Industry'
3 kids at home
a wife
his life's work in the land and
his father's lilting emerald histories
sharp-edged and
heavy in his ears.

Nothing for it, Jim and Rita move their family
to a larger farm in Helensville,
44 beasts
they call it *Little Italy*
the boundary a rubber Redband
shaped by the banks of the Kaipara River.

The War at Home

Jim joins The Home Guard
practices war with brooms and mops
mines wash up on Muriwai beach
and Jim wades into the hiss and hush
molds gelignite to the spines
and punctures the metal lifeless.
A German family drive the O'Connors to Sunday Mass
in their shining 39 Ford V8 Saloon
Kevin, Pat, and Rosemary pack into the leather backseat
and watch the paddocks whirr past
in their Sunday Best.

3 American soldiers on leave
lean against big khaki jeeps outside the Parakai Pools
give the boys chewing gum
in little foil strips.

A flood is a rushing high and a slow sodden low

Jim teaches his sons to fish
at the edge of the Kaipara
the boys unfurl nylon
cling to strainer posts and
drag eels from
the deep

When the moon pulls closest to the earth
King Tides flood the farm,
leave the cows shivering in the paddocks,
wading
round-eyed and mournful.

Jim's sons make boats
out of rusted corrugated shed iron
plug the nail holes with clay and grass
row with shorn rafters

King Tides rot the crops to their roots.
When the water subsides
Jim picks up his shovel
and begins again.

Grog

Dad had trouble with alcohol.

It was hard on the family mentally and financially.

He would drink for a week or so and need four or five days to recover in bed.

It was probably hard on Mum though she never let on.

He would always drink alone.

Maybe it was the way they lost everything so suddenly.

The death duty on Grandad's money. (they lost 60 percent of everything)

The Depression made things even tighter.

Or the death of little James. (51 weeks)

The doctors shrugged Mum and Dad off. (it was diphtheria)

And 3 of Dad's family had died young before that.

It was hard times.

Hard work.

He drank alone.

Every now and again you could see an empty gin bottle sitting on a ledge in the shed.

I didn't touch the stuff for years couldn't when I was running.

Alcohol when you really boil it down:

It's poison.

You wouldn't put two stroke motor mower oil in a Ferrari.

Anyway we can talk about it because that's life. It's real. He wasn't the only one.

He was about the most expert drinker you could find.

And the best Dad you could hope to have.

Parachuting

The priest tells us this story, tells us it happened here in the Waikato, a few years ago, we might remember it. A guy was skydiving, and he took the leap, right, the leap of faith. Out of that metal box in the sky. And all went well, except his parachute failed, it wouldn't open and there he was, falling, falling, 800, 600, 400 metres from the ground. And the priest, he goes: You know what I'm gonna say next, right?

He landed on a sheep. He landed on a sheep, and the sheep died, but the guy survived. He *survived*.

And I laugh with everyone else, chuckling in the oak pews.

And I try to imagine it too, the moment of impact, the sheep's ribcage collapsed like jenga, like a wicker basket caught under a car tyre.

And I look around at everyone still laughing, but feeling kind of guilty now, shuffling their feet, like flattened sheep aren't really something we're sure we're allowed to laugh at.

And I catch your eye and we laugh again harder until I tear up a bit.

I take deep breaths and think.

That's a lot of sheep we're gonna need.

That's a lot of failing parachutes.

Road Triptych

River Road, June 2021

I drive back to my flat
along the bend and
the fog rolls up from the river like
dry ice like
a B grade horror film or
a community theatre production of some Shakespeare play
I drive home and feel outside of myself
like something from
a haunting

SH1

Grandad says
the road used to flood
before they raised it higher.

He remembers:

driving toward Hamilton and
having to turn back

A house down the bank with
water up to the windowsills.

Kaipara River

(2021)

We visit the river in winter,
cross the tracks
at low tide.
Roadcones and
supermarket trolleys
erupt from the mud and
small dark holes
mark the breathing of
burrowed creatures.

Castle Gregory, Flagstaff 1997

It was the most Northern house in Hamilton,
nothing but paddocks & pukekos until Auckland
A single level brick build
funded by the sale of Sussex Street

Designed and constructed by Nana & Grandad
their boys
BBQ & family
friends & Waikato Draught working bees

They named the home 'Castle Gregory' after the place
in County Kerry where
Grandad James shipped off
chose light green and gold for the curtains
the carpet a plush spearmint

It was custom built for Nana's recovery
single level & wide hallway
low-lipped doorways
3 prong power plugs at hip height
wool insulation warming the ceiling

Father Frank walked each room
sprinkled holy water into the corners
prayed over the dwelling
blessed all of us who live
& don't live
here

Carbon Dating

They say that more than half of us is

not us:

miniscule limpets

microbial hitchhikers

microscopic colonists

They say we are everyday

shedding

shredding particles

follicles cuticles

dead skin glitter

If we never vacuum

again

I might lie down on the carpet and

breathe some of her in

If the heart is muscle made electric

For M.H.O

Let me be a sparkie
just
for tonight

Let me run
a copper spool
marathon

Let me spear the satellites
Let me spire the moon
Let me hook you up
to the overhead lines
to the mains
to the National Grid

Let us flood Huntly, Aritiatia, Arapuni
Let this whole long island
flicker and dim
Let humming fill the sky

Let all the television sets blink to black
Let them tremble
Let them look to the neighbours for help
Let them clutch for the stars
and let them taste for the streetlights
Let them light matches
and listen for the sunrise

Let them whisper.

Let our grief be the loudest thing
in this bleached and
bloodless building,

Let us char.

Let us kindle.

Please

Just for tonight.

Let us solder.

Let us

arc.

Magpies

When she is ten, her grandmother tells her to be aware of the magpies out in the park, big beaked and black and white, the size of small dogs. Her grandmother says that they are fast and greedy and will strike at anything that sparkles. She tells her to close her eyes so they do not pluck them out. She imagines her eyeballs falling to the dirt like glass marbles. Her eyestalks hanging down slack like raspberry liquorice.

Pheasants

mid-April Jim would get anxious
about the pheasants roaming the farm
picking the kumara to pieces
would take Kevin out and hand him a shotgun
they'd stand opposite one another
at either end of the field
walk slow towards each other and remember to only fire
to the left of the other gun

Christmas Spuds

Grandad lends me his gumboots and passes me a blue bucket

I stumble behind him with my chin up high and he helps me up into the garden

I step around the kumara vine with leaves like lush green hearts

He puts his finger to his lips says

we have to sneak up on these potatoes, they're wild

so I nod all serious and he digs down into the soil

turns to me with big eyes

they're burrowing, quick! get the bucket! they're getting away!

and wrestles them up from the earth, and drops them into the bucket like they are hot already

Dear Joe, 2019

After Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*

We pace Haining Street for twenty minutes before we find your name. Two men in orange hi-vis kneel on the footpath and drill out a rough square. The ground cracks. Splinters. Grey blades leap, and land heavy like concrete fish. I blink through the rubble and my gut twists, tells me that we've missed you. They've taken you away, smuggled your name under their orange vests and into the sea. They take a smoko and we keep walking. We walk with our heads down. We watch our step.

Dear Joe II

After Chris Tse's *How to be Dead in a Year of Snakes*

We find

the plaque

sunk into the ground outside an office window.

It looks like a bronze

coin

dropped from the sky and

forgotten,

gone dark and dull.

It looks like it hasn't been cleaned for a long time, spattered

with dried chewing gum and green

patina.

It looks like it landed

heavier

than the earth around it.

The concrete chipped and webbed.

But mostly, it looks like all the other man hole

covers along the street.

This is it.

Saltwater hits the pavement.

The men pour wet cement into the dust.

I imagine you down there.

Up to your knees in greywater,

tapping your walking stick

under our

feet.

Daily Bread

1944

Fresh baked bread and *The Herald*
land on the doorstep
Jim and Rita clear the kitchen table and
splay the paper open to
the Roll of Honour
Stand shoulder-to-shoulder
hunched-searching for local boys

Kevin and Pat sit in the corner of the room with
the tin spinning top and
let it fly
tear the warm soft centre from the loaf
feel the humming air
rush past their skin.

Eventually we all shall go

After Bill Manhire's 'Kevin'

Their neighbour, Fred, called in on Friday evenings
—was a family friend, scoffed the jam and scones—
and one day bought a gift
squirring in a sugar bag
Fred unwound the coarse neck of the bag and
the cat
skittered and slid across the lino
climbed into the back of the radio
died in an explosion of electrics and
ticking silence.

Drury Creek

Your first memory:

The grass-fringed Drury Creek

The grey-wet mudbank

You:

wool-bundled in a

lilting dinghy

held by your mother

the wooden clank of the

oars like great soup spoons

in your father's hands.

Tracks

After *The Trials of Minnie Dean* by Karen Zelas

When/I/f/lick/the page/s/I/pul/l a/stool and let/them/drop/pulp on pulp/a train

ric/kets on/the tracks/the paper/falls/like/a heart/beat/clap/clack/clap/clack.

Frost

For Karen Zelas

It is winter and
everything in our house is rotting.
The carpet is bubbling and the walls are
paper mâché.
The rabbit foot fern is curled and crying
The maidenhair is moulting
Shedding in clumps on the dented boards.

(We can plant anything in the yard
so long as we can return
it to grass when we leave
We can hang anything we want
so long as we do not leave a mark)

I kneel in the dirt and tear out
the cherry tomatoes too green
for even the birds
The skins small and dry

The alyssum has not yet given in
to the frost and
its wooded breath
mixes with honeyed chimneysmoke

There is so much to bury here
and we are running out of space
The green tablecloths of this place
Are creased and hillocked
The sky is bruised and the fields are clotted
The spring bulbs are buried and waiting

A Posy for Dorothy and Eva

After *The Trials of Minnie Dean* by Karen Zelas

All the blooms soft porcelain cream

wrapped in white satin ribbon:

Chrysanthemums

Carnations

Gardenias

Hyacinths

Roses

Lilacs

Lilies

Silverdale Road

May 2020

The Skylines are
parked up
losing charge in the May frost

The neighbourhood is a rankling still-life
and our home is a cabin losing
pressure

Each day
we walk the same anxious hour
try to stamp wider horizons from
the rotting leaves

Today the crest is webbed with silver

arachnid silk clings to the overhead lines
and paints the whole place haunted

The paddocks at the edge of town
are spilling out onto the tarmac
and abandoned relics hide in the blades:
a V Can hollowed then accordion-crushed
a McDonald's cup peeling in the dew
a Monopoly game upturned
blue Chance Cards riddle the roadside

Page's Point

Kevin's ancestor

Michael Page emigrated from Ireland

His ticket out was

as a *fencible* for *the crown*

He never *fought* but

bought a slab of

crown land in Howick

built a sod cottage

from mud and straw

not uncommon in those days but still

[ten children dirt floors]

His wife, Mary,

hated it so much

that she burnt it to the

ground.

Archive Garden

I am rummaging in the dirt

Pulling up weeds

Velvet and red hat ribbons

Bullet casings cracked open and

dull as old skulls

Bulbs burnt out and stuffed with moths.

Betty Guard

After Nina Powles's *Luminescent*

I flinch when I hear it
The ship-wreck southerly
The beach bitter with blood
Gunpowder and fast splitting blades
The cracked tortoiseshell comb
lodged in your scalp
sharp-toothed relic of
accidental landfall

All that Glitters

A love poem for the Waihi Museum

Please, let me stay.

Let me stand on glass and peer down
at tunnels
sprawled under the city like varicose veins
riddled with glitter.

Let me stroll the miniature streets
of the 20th century
pat a sheepdog the size of a breadtag
let me stand in the doorways of factories
and howl.

Let me bob in glass jars with
the miners' severed thumbs
swollen huge and pale yellow like clover wax.
Please, let me cure.

I won't take up much space.
I'll axe the surplus parts of me for kindling and
use the compensation to build myself a
ribcage of timber.

I'll boil the kettle into the night
til the windows fog up
frost and glimmer
lit from the inside with pink candles
nicked from under
ground.

Post

If I hold her postcards to my cheek I might feel the echo of her pulse her breath on the postage stamp the warmth of her right hand the cursive angle of the blue biro I might feel my way back to her I might help to write her a better ending I might hope to pick up where she left off

Level Three 2021

On a Monday

You can sit in your silent car and
pretend you are getting ready to drive home
You can check the oil
The tyre pressure
update the insurance

On a Tuesday

if you stand under the palm trees
at the Hamilton Lake
and close your eyes
the fronds sound almost like waves
the mean geese almost like gulls

On a Wednesday

(when your sister video calls you from beyond the border)
If you push your cheek up to the phone screen
and close your eyes
you can almost feel your niece blow you kisses
you can almost see the big-grinned flicker of her
knowing you long distance
you can almost hear her first words

On a Thursday

you can starfish on the front yard
and breathe in the pollen
until your eyes itch and blur and
it finally spills

On a Friday

You can dig up a smile in the garden before

your fiancé comes out with lunch

On a Saturday

if you stop reading the news you can almost convince yourself

that this is still all for something

that the government has not jumped the gun

that everyone you love will be there when you return

On Sunday you pray

that the hospitals will cope.

Meteor 1947

A Meteor Jet screams over Helensville Convent school

The air booms

snaps the tops off Norfolk Pines sends them

scattering into the trenches the kids dug

to practice hiding in

Signal

The crossing signal twitches
like it's filled with hot
crickets
and They Whisper
touch touch touch

And so you reach out, press the cold metal button
press the cold metal
just to say:
I'm here,
I'm here, please
let me cross safely.

Fishing

Sprat

fizz under the current like
a school of ghost thumbs.

I tie my hook to the end of the line
knot a sinker
and cast into the lapping.

We feed chicken liver to the sea like
magicians with handkerchiefs and top hats.

The sprat suck the bait from the jag but
keep their lips clear from the point.
Limpets climb the concrete columns
and the day rolls over and breathes out.

Grandad buys us kahawai from the fish'n'chip store and we
watch the men stumble in their dinghies.
We throw chips out to the gulls
and they catch them mid air.

My hands are coated in oil and loose on the reel

I am learning
how to fish
how to let the line run out
how to be okay with it.

The First Easter After

You believe
in the resurrection
with a boulder-rolling faith.

*(the stigmata,
the torn shroud
those three long holy days)*

I try to believe too
I kneel and pray
with everything
I have left.

*(these empty hands
these winded lungs
the broken
beat in my chest)*

At rest

She lies in her towel and stares at the ceiling until she is gooseflesh shiver. She records her lectures into a black Panopto screen and sees her eyes flat and dim. She ticks boxes and marks assignments and answers emails. She gets home from work and scrubs her lipstick off. She watches the sun set and rise again. She does not sleep. When she does sleep, she dreams terror. She dreams of that night. She dreams she could have saved her. She dreams she's returned. She dreams she never left. She wakes up and forgets for a moment. She wakes up out of breath. She wakes up already sobbing. She Googles impossible interventions. She tries to find the right words to wind back time. She curls into the small of her love's back and waits for the morning.

Kevin & Mary

2019

My grandparents like cheese sandwiches thick with margarine and Choysa tea without sugar. We clean the teaspoons with baking soda and vinegar. We paint the birdhouses with brushes that shed black crackle into the finish. We clean the brushes with methylated spirits that are bubble gum purple. Grandad likes good-old-fashioned stories. Three acts only and none of this funny business. Beginning, middle, end. He counts the three essentials on his fingers. Index: impossible odds. Middle: chase scene. Ring finger: the good guy gets the girl. Nana likes big-print murder mysteries with hard covers. Agatha Christie, Patricia Cornwell, J.D. Robb. She can nearly always guess who the bad guys are right away. The family bible lives in the second lounge on a rosewood table beside the Sky remote. It is gilded and as thick as my thigh. Grandad buys battered Westerns at garage sales on rainy Saturday mornings. He likes Louis L'Amour, and says *L'Amour* with a twang, and then shakes his head a little. In the bible there is a lot of killing and other tragedies—too many to think about all at once. Beside her armchair, Nana has a little red book with everybody's birthdays in it and she has never missed a single one. I have never seen my grandparents open the bible. The most worn book in the house is the Māori dictionary my grandfather uses to look up the names of all the places we go. My grandad reads *The word for today* while he eats his muesli with hot water. Nana has boysenberry jam on toast and reads the news. We go to mass every Sunday. Nana wears Red Door by Elizabeth Arden and it smells like home. Grandad goes: *you know it says in the bible to turn the other cheek, but my father always said to remember, you've only got two cheeks.* I tell my grandparents that in mass when we say *I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come* I think about zombies, and sometimes when I take communion and lose focus, I think about chewing someone's ear off. My Grandad laughs and says oh yes, it's all a bit of a mystery and my Nana says yes, a holy mystery. Nana gives everyone second and third and fourth and fifth chances. I kneel in church and think about Agatha Christie and how I've never read one of her stories past the first page. I'd like to, I really would, but I don't wanna guess whodunnit. I would rather know who the baddies are right away. When I get bored in church I look up at Jesus and practice mindfulness. My grandparents fall asleep doing the rosary. They dedicate each bead to one of us.

Dear reader

I will write you a list so you can
pack

[find your way

back]

Rooms

Kevin slept in the outside laundry
and Pohutukawa shed crimson
on the roof

He says his room smelt like
soap and he had to sleep with his feet
against the wringer washer

He says he slept with his boots on
so-as to keep his toes dry on the way to the
long drop

He says
Those were the days.
He says
You wouldn't get away with that now

It got so cold he'd put newspaper
between his sheets
and the ink would letter his skin by morning

Diagnostics

She perches on the edge of the moss-green couch and tells her grandad about how the car is making a new noise. Only sometimes, when it rains, when it idles, when she's waiting at the slow red light on Mill Street. She's recorded the sound on her phone, hung her hand out the window and pressed it to the hood like a stethoscope. In his lounge it sounds so small, gets swallowed up by the spearmint carpet. He closes his eyes to hear it better, and they both lean in. Can you hear it? she says. She stops the recording. Folds her hands in her lap. It's like this. She looks at her fingernails and whistles like a hatchling.

Waikato Hospital Menzies Building July 2020

In the waiting room there is still plastic mistletoe
zip tied to the handrails
balding tinsel snakes and droops on the walls
TV1 News plays on silent
A montage of bad luck

My favourite uncle keeps reminding us to keep the noise down
there are so many of us
I blink and can't make any sense of him
his paleness his begging his mouth glub glubbing open and shut
his hands out to me
palms up in surrender

Soon
there is no more waiting to do
we have knelt and prayed with fingers pressed-together desperate
all of us, the long-left atheists and half-baked faithful and

It is done.

Spirit-fishing

I dream that I am fishing for ghosts
in the bitumen
My feet bare and rock-dented
I wind the reel and
pull up the line

look:

No bite

No ghoul

No bait

No hook

Waihi 1962

Danny's shooting south to Waihi
to meet up with his girl Sylvia
there's talk of another girl too:
Sylvia's best friend
plays A grade tennis
works for the Auckland Traffic Department
the morning is bright blue and wide open

Kev tags along

They meet just south of the surf club
she's brunette and leggy glamorous
he's big-grinned
sunkissed
they hit it off

the beach
soft banks of rolling gold

Blood Glucose

I trail her everywhere

like a little shadow

chattering sprite

lost lamb

I pick orange pansies from the front garden

drag flour from the kitchen lino out into the lounge

knock puzzle pieces off the table where we

begin with the edge pieces

build the ragged outline.

I chew at my nails

push my thumbs through jumper sleeves

tag along

down to the end bedroom

beside her dresser

stacked with

 talcum powder

 lavender moisturiser

 cameo brooches

 tortoiseshell mirror

 pearl comb

I drink it all in

perch on her flowery duvet cover and let my legs swing.

She sits near her pillow

untucks her blouse from her pleated fuchsia skirt

holds a small gather of her belly and

pushes the needle in

tells me that it doesn't hurt

but the blood wells up and I blink back panic

She shows me how the little blue strip tells the machine

a number and
she tuts and writes it down in her battered
blue book.

Pukekohe Maternity Hospital

For Kerry and Sean

Things were different back then—
simpler.

The maternity hospital an
orange brick
single level
sprawling.

New mums coddled cotton in
sunlit rooms and
lambs stumbled in the front paddock.

Things were different back then—
more secret.

There weren't scans like there are these days
and the men waited outside while the women worked.
Kevin wore down the floor tiles in the hall
pacing
until it was done.

The nurses call him in and
Mary watches his face

He walks to the bassinet
On her right
and peers in
notices a second on her left and asks:

'So,
which one's ours?'

After

We step outside and it is 9:30 and dark

Jared pays the \$4 for parking and says something about lunch or dinner
says that if we are gonna drink

he needs something to make sure he can drive us home after

it is like he is speaking through a thick glass pane but

he is so pale and looking right at me

my stomach is full of sawdust and

I need an adult

he leads me by the hand

We stop at *PaknSave* on the way to the house

and everyone we pass steps out of our way

The supermarket is like a huge barn

legs of ham glistening-fake in the open refrigerators

steak and sausages plump and gasping at their wrap

promotions lit up in hazard-yellow

everything chiming with slashed dollar signs

the aisle looming and leaning in at the ends

Sparrows chirrup and fly between heavy iron beams

cling to the pendant fluorescents

build their nests in the high dark corners

Brighton Road

Waihi Bach 2001

Nana meets us in the laundry and
fusses over the shells we bring back.
She holds each one up to the light like it's
some rare treasure
like we're the only ones to have discovered pipi
cats eyes
blue mussels
scallops
She rinses the sand
and it falls into the tin tub like
golden static
She dries the conches
gently on her pink half apron and
teaches us to hold them up to our ears
listen to the waves deep inside

Pilgrimage

i. Dry Ice

You drive us to Auckland in your silver Aurion. The fog is thick and drains the morning, white so thick as to seem fake. The Hakarimatas have fallen away and the Fonterra building is nothing but a dull red glow. Hayley and Tom are in the back with their knees hard against the seats. We listen to rock n roll and doo wop but mostly we turn it down and yarn. We sail up out of the basin near Pokeno and the world clicks into colour. You talk and I see the past rush by like a crackled double exposure. Doctor's Hill filled with transit tents at the close of the Second World War, trains spilling steam near Mercer, a green gap where Glenbrook Steel Mill looms.

ii. Coordinates

He does not need a map but I follow along on my phone. The highway bulges like a tendon. I sketch places in my journal and try to catch it all:

the Pukekohe racecourse with the grandstand he built and nearly fell from

The Pukekohe Maternity Hospital where the twins and Kevin jr were born

The Catholic Cemetery where baby James rest

Jim and Rita at the Public Cemetery due to water table concerns

O'Connor's Building on West Street which Frank O'Connor built to show up

Great Grandad James

Helensville Convent School where grandad got the strap across his calves

Page's Point where his great grandfather settled

Brown's Bay primary where the kids wouldn't let Catholics on the bus

Takapuna Hospital where he was born

We are hushed when he takes us to her places:

Saint Mary's Ponsonby with a view out to the ocean

Government House where her grandfather tended to prize-winning orchids

86 Calgary Street where she grew up

80 King George Avenue where she once lived

Greenlane Hospital where she was born

The house at the foot of Pukekohe Hill where they lived together

And later, once they moved away and returned to visit their families,
The Pizza hut and the park where they would sit together and eat.
The Astor motel where they slept.

iii. Winstone's Cove

We drag our lunch down the damp gully and duck for the sign: 'Look For Falling Rocks'. Grandad points to the spot where he slept in a one room bach, and we side-eye the multi-million-dollar house. Pohutukawa cling to the cliffs all bedraggled and knotted, and we lay out a blanket on the clay bank. The beach here clinks with sea glass Heineken green and Bombay sapphire. Rangitoto crouches on the horizon and watches us chew our bread. On its back is a ship graveyard, a place for scuttled wrecks to rot and rust.

iv. Scoop

We stop for a giant Pokeno ice cream—it's tradition—and the fog has crept up to the shop. It's quiet in the car until Hayley asks you *what was her favourite ice cream flavour?* I hold my breath. You don't hesitate, say *raspberry ripple, oh and chocolate, and lime, and of course, she had it with the choc dip.* Yes, of course the choc dip, those little indulgences she shared with us. She snuck us extra biscuits when the adults weren't looking, let us stay up late, let us talk all night if we had something heavy on our minds. She'd listen—like *really listen.* Make us feel like little people with big things to say.

Navigating

Everything that's moving is
glare
and I am drawn to the oncomings like
a moth drawn to the
centre line

These roads are ghosting in the rain
tar brushes just out to the reach of my headlights
feeble-dim
scratched useless by the decade

The Fonterra trucks roar
corner fast and wide
feverish with red bulbs
dazzling and fantastic
like lumbering carnival tents

I turn up the stereo
loosen my hands on the wheel and
focus hard on the left line
let the road lead me
into the dark.

For Nafanua

After Tusiata Avia's *Bloodclot*

Your homes/ have the doors/ kicked in, the glass/ shattered/ on the concrete, the soft/
throbbing/ centre/ torn and studded/ with sharp things. My childhood/ home had dents in/ the
doorframes from dinner/ plates and bourbon/ bottles and gold-gilded picture/ frames. My
monster/ lived in the master/ bedroom and smelled of lemongrass and never/ touched me/
with her hands. You survived/ a whole host. Of hands, and monsters with soft/ voices,
crawled out from under/ the bed and on top of it, and inside shredding/ and shredding the
sheets. There are ghosts/ hunkered in the hot/ water/ cylinder, pressed in the window/ glazing/
crouching/ in the dark/ corners of our eyes/ I'd climb/ into our walls and tear them/ out/ if I
could.

There's No Place

2021

- i. When we get back to your place after mass
while the garage door is still droning shut and
you go to wash your hands for tea
I touch the photograph of her in the hallway
like it's some holy icon
like I'm still a believer
like I could turn water into wine
I could still the storm
I could bring Lazarus back

(I don't really talk to God anymore
But I pray for you both every day)

- ii. For years, your house was the only place I could sleep
The grandfather clock beside the front door
tocking an echo down the hall
the heavy gong of each hour
the quiet scrape of
golden teeth in the lock
as you wound it up
the mechanism tensing to keep
time passing

(In your house I do not hold my breath)

- iii. We watch the Wizard of Oz
when I am seven and it terrifies me:
the wicked witch with
her radium-green face and
those monkeys with their wings and
their circus-fezzes:

falling asleep and not being able to find
my way back.

(she taught me to close my eyes and cover my ears if I needed)

- iv. In your house we play cards and
drink hot chocolate
You teach me my times tables and how to read a map
She teaches me how to write letters to my mum
how to address the envelope so it will find its way
how to write in pencil first then go over in blue ink
how to erase the graphite so the practice is a shivering
ghost

(she licks the stamps for me because they taste like bitter)

- v. One night
I don't hear her crutches clack down the hall
and she hears me snuffling
she doesn't say much just
lies down on the bed across the room from me
and says she will stay
says she will watch the door

(In your house we pray a lullaby)

Chicken

The lot of you driving through to Auckland
on Sunday afternoons to deliver vegetables at the markets
your carburettors stained
running tractor petrol dyed red to mark it untaxed
for farm use only

A case of cabbage for all you could eat
at the Silver Pagoda Chinese Restaurant
before you would head off to mass at St Benedict's then
the Irish Society dance

The lot of you dressing up formal
grey sports trousers white shirt
matching green nylon tie and socks
Frankie's flashy white sportscoat.

Afterwards, the lights of Karangahape road
cast you young and giddy
peasants in the big smoke
I bet you stuck out like country trouble

The lot of you slouching suspicious
around a power pole, mesh rubbish bin
local cop on the beat
brass zippo filled with red and a fast flickering
the first to run loses

Dear Neil

After Airini Beautrais's *Dear Neil Roberts*

The symbol for the extinction rebellion is an hourglass with sharp edges and I think you might have liked that. We marched this week with the high school kids. We lay down in the streets and played dead. People got stuck in the traffic on Vic street, looking embarrassed, adjusting their radios and mirrors, idling carbon into the air. It was ironic (I think) and made us feel powerful, stopping traffic.

You would be 60 now, mighta been one of the old guys teaching us young ones how to make barricades with our bodies, how to lie with our heads all together, and our legs out like starfish. How to tuck our chins down and huddle to keep our skulls clear of boots and bludgeons. How to relax ourselves defiant in gloved hands, to make our limbs awkward and heavy, like when we were toddlers and people tried to move us from our car seats when we weren't ready.

Dear Reader

I don't know how to write about place
without telling you that
this place is melting.

Sometimes,
late at night,
when the house is settling,
I can hear icecaps creaking in the
ceiling.

Rhubarb

After Sarah Howe's 'Crossing from Guangdong' in *Loop of Jade*

I try to imagine you as a boy—
the small town coated in red dirt and dust,
the homestead, shrinking, quiet creaking
(that black and white photo framed in kauri wood)—
you, kneeling in the rhubarb, your father in
the next green paddock, stern-faced, rubber bands pulled
to tie, rich bundles for sale, the cart hitched
waiting, like time, horse paused and heavy hooved
blinks, snorts *schh! Hu! Rumph!* breath clouds your morning
my heart is filled with small sprouting gardens
you so young and far away

Kitchen Table

Kevin's main seat of learning was around the kitchen table
at Pukekohe, looking over the Kumara crop to the Bombay Hills

Newcomers at Church would be invited home after Sunday Mass
and Rita would magic scones, butter, raspberry jam and cream

They often had boarders to help pay the bills
They'd tell Kevin stories and let him follow them around

The phone was beside Jim's chair, and beside that the home's three books:
The Bible, An English Dictionary and a Māori Dictionary.

Politics were a regular feature and if something came up
Jim would ring their local MP, tell them what the O'Connors thought

That was his thing, he'd often ask Kev:
Well ... What are you doing about it?

It was custom built for us

the extra beds and spare pjs

the hall cupboard with the crayons and puzzles

the Disney video cassettes in the flash lounge

the garage with the bicycles and kites

the bubble bath and rubber duck

the horse swing grandad made

the bubblegum blue paddling pool

a whale in the middle with a sprinkler instead of a blowhole

the unprickled miracle grass

the lolly jar Nana kept full

Dear Neil II

After Airini Beautrais's *Dear Neil Roberts*

My grandmother was not a radical. Before she had her babies, she worked for the police. She was the secretary for the head of the traffic department in Auckland. She said she had the best boss you could ask for. When she sat her driving test, she asked if she could please wait for the rain to pass before they began. My chest aches when I think of the sincerity of that.

She was kind, always. She was kind when I invited an anarchist home for one drink, and he had five instead. Said he was welcome back anytime. She was kind when I joined this activism group for a year and rolled my eyes at her when she read the Herald. She would quietly smile when I got out the soapbox and started preaching. She read the articles I sent her from *The Spinoff*. Nana and I would oftentimes get right into it. About the Capital Gains tax. About immigration. About the police. About prisons. Very occasionally, she'd sigh and say *you are still young*, and she would be right. She was a safe person to be young around.

When she was in high school, the hostel girls conspired with the day girls to sneak them in food. Nana smuggled in treats and the girls crept out onto the lawn late at night. Scoffed cakes and cucumber sandwiches in their nightgowns. Blinked up at the moon. When the nuns saw their beds empty, they followed the crumbs. The girls scrambled. Some ran for it, and others climbed the trees and perched like treasonous pigeons. The nuns confronted them in a whole-school assembly and demanded that the co-conspirators step forward. None of them did. They were all punished.

When I was about seven, I fell from my bicycle onto their bricked patio. She used safety pins to hold the shirt away from my grazed spine. She held me and called me a brave soldier. I still have the scar. She wasn't much of a rulebreaker, but she helped us smuggle snacks into the movies. Grandad would take us, and Nana would stuff our pockets full with sugared jubes and bite-sized crunchies and peppermints. Neil, I think of you now when I go to the movies at night. I think of you when I watch the final scene of *Fight Club*. I dunno. There's all that blood, all that rubble. But then there they are, holding hands. There's a sort of hope in that.

Australia Fires 2019

Across the ditch is

on fire.

People are comparing the sky in Sydney to
stills from *Bladerunner*.

Calling it 'apocalypse-red' like

it's some new season Resene paintchip.

The smoke crossed the sea

made our sky hazy.

We climbed the Hakarimatas and

the whole world was a smeary lens.

The caption on a news article celebrated the aesthetic.

It's important to make the most of these moments.

'The haze makes for some sweet sunset photos'

Phantom Pain ii.

I glimpse you for months afterward, a flash of your fuchsia cardigan in the reflective columns in the Chartwell Farmers. I mistake you for strangers all over the city, a man hunched busking outside Countdown, I see you behind the reception counter shuffling paper while I wait for the specialist. I glance in the glared windows of cars stalled at the Te Rapa lights. I hear your shuffle and walking stick click down your hallway, your quiet humming stirring the rippled glass. I smell your perfume like a crashing wave when I am hiking, it flattens the bracken and knocks the air from my chest. I look it up, to make sure I am not losing it, to see if I'm cracking up, see if I should pay someone to check it out. The blue screen blinks back, tells me that it's quite common, just the brain trying to remap, trying to place you back where you ought to be.

Farming Family Sculpture, Hamilton 2021

Sculpted by Margriet Windhausen

Commissioned by ROBT. JONES INVESTMENTS LIMITED 1990

Ulster and Victoria choke at
rush hour in the
petrol fume gush

The bronze family
cluster, marooned,
cold patina on cracked grey
stage

The children cling and climb,
their folks all
gumboots and strong hands,
sleeves rolled up to show
their elbow grease.

The sheep and dog look
set to
scatter:
cross the hot bitumen,
panic the attendants at the BP forecourt,
sprint to the KFC,
nudge the dented 90c fizzy bottles,
trample the guttered cigarette butts,
blink at the beggars
cardboard signs and lowered gazes

The cow faces away from them all,
her horns point to the Fairfield bridge its
milky arches,

the awa
a fast flow of faecal coliform

Since the latest lockdown
someone has spray painted her eyes black
the aerosol tar
streams down her neck
stains her sad and watching

Market Gardening

You tell me about the gardening days
The times you went capital B broke
Up to your eyeballs in debt
That season of chance cabbage that saved your skin

You tell me about tilling
rolling
pest control
About how after the war you'd hire pilots
in tiger moths to drop
cropping chemicals
They'd slip under the powerlines
and drop the blue powder like a copper sunshower

You tell me about the poisons you would use
3 pints of paraquat per acre
to control the final weeding of kumara¹
Metasystox for chewing-insects²
and Saffos powder for caterpillar hiding in the cabbage
1 level Tablespoon to 60 gallons of water
plus dishwashing liquid to make it spread and stick³
When the white butterflies flew through the mist they would
drop dead
caterpillars curled and died instantly on contact
The cabbage would be harvested within the week and
sent right off to market.⁴

¹ We learnt later it was the main active chemical in Agent Orange.

² Gardeners would swell up and get very ill from prolonged use.

³ We would stir it up with our bare arms, we would wear black footie shorts as we sprayed.

⁴ Most other market gardeners working at the same time are dead now. Most died young.

In Stitches

2016

The readings in mass tonight were about the End Times,
when our merciful God grinds us to pulp
and shakes the cosmos down to stubble

Leonard Cohen died this week
but our Hallelujah is from the seventeenth century and has far less
sex, so
we sing it with our eyes open

My favourite part of mass is the sign of peace
when we open our palms and let go of the sharp things
and hold each other for just one moment

They've lopped more cancer from your calf and
you can't kneel, so I
repent double time

On the drive home you make an illegal U-turn
in front of a police car
The officer shakes his head
and we laugh about God's grace

At the dinner table,
I disembowel a bread bun with my fingers,
tear it like candyfloss.
Ginger beer prickles my nose and
you ask if I've been writing lately

I say
so much

I say

you couldn't even begin to imagine

I ask you when they're gonna take the stitches out.

6 mo. AD.

In the hushed warm after eucharist, when the piano is playing softly, her eyes prickle. She can make it look prayerful. She can kneel with her head bowed and push her hair over her eyes. She can let the salt fall silent into the plush blue carpet. She can look up at the ceiling and blink some of it back like an earnest Hallelujah. No one will look. No one will look for too long. Only the babies squirming in their parent's arms are allowed to howl. And even then.

Dear Reader

Lately, every poem I
write is like a red flare
an orange smoke signal
a dented black box.

Pūriri

(ghost moth)

You tell me that in kumara season
your dad would
hire locals to harvest
mostly Māori
bloody hard workers but
got a bad rap in town.
Your dad was fluent in te reo
and so would catch the gist
stomp down to the courthouse to put across their cases.⁵

You remember this one time you were about seventeen
picking cabbage in the mid-morning sun
and this great caterpillar
the size of your thumb
wriggled out from under the green leaves
and all the women saw and screamed
Puriri! Puriri!
downed their tools and left.

⁵ I am ten when you tell me this and eager to imagine Great Grandad Jim as an advocate for the downtrodden. You bring me back down to earth. You remind me of the soil. Their hard work was Jim's livelihood. He cared about fairness, sure, but had skin in the game too. I am twenty-five now and I imagine you all kneeling in the dirt. Tangata Whenua employed by Irish immigrants to work the soil for a better life. I wonder who the land belonged to before our family moved in. You tell me that the locals were usually charged by police for borrowing tools to fix the broken things they needed. You tell me your Dad explained to you early the difference between Pākehā individualism and Māori collective care. You tell me about Jesus flipping tables in the temple. You tell me about your Dad's trouble with drinking. You tell me he would sometimes be off work for a few days. You tell me he was known in certain imminent circles as *that bloody Jim O'Connor*.

Winstone's Cove

(Torbay)

- i. The O'Connor family lived here
in a single-room bach
when Kevin was eight

His mother used to say that those were the best days
of her life
(less house to tend, more time)

The bach was 20 metres from the beach
sheltered from the wind by clay cliffs
and thickets of toetoe

At high-tide
kingfish would swim right up to the shore
their green tops flashing in the salt.

- ii.

Kevin and Jim stand
under the Pohutukawa
and watch a man
row out
into the South Pacific
in a little wooden
clinker dinghy.
The toiling hunch of him
two oars
rolled sleeves
leaving nothing but ripples.
They watch him go and go and
never

come
back.

Kōtare

We stop in a carpark
to look down at the
white crests bobbing in the
Waitematā Harbour.

A halcyon bird
lands on the powerline overhead.

Nana winds up the car window and
Grandad turns the ignition.

They tell me that in Ireland,
the kingfisher is
a portent of death.

It watches us go
tucks its black beak
into its white collar.
Its plumage is a sunset
an electric-blue omen.

True North

He teaches me how to find my way
with my two hands,
the sun, and the hour:

Step into a puddle of solar gold
Plant the tip of your right index finger in the soft centre
of your open left palm and watch
the shadow fall like the hand of a clock

Spin on the spot
slow—
Line up the shadow
so it points to the hour—

And you will be facing North
(more or less)

Last Card

I do not know much about Nana's Mum but

I know she was a wicked card shark

she could cheat real good and had

that innocent look about her

like Nana

Watch her, Grandad says,

And don't ever bet with anyone older than you

Nana winks and lets me peek at her cards

Grandad pretends he doesn't see but fake grizzles anyway

A good game's a fast game

He knocks his knuckles on the table twice means

hurry up

means

Hit me

Gorse

After Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat*

We climb the farmer's stile
clamber through wet clay
slip down the mossbanks
We drop into the stream and stand with our hands out
Fantails
chatter and swoop
skim our fingertips
We call out to you
ask you to haunt us here
skeleton leaves floating in the flurry
widowmakers wedged in the branches
lurid lit gorse
lupins the same bright purple you often wore
We spot a kingfisher high
on an old telephone post
follow the trail upstream
sidestep cattle pugging and
tractor tracks
like rockpools filled with saltwater and pain
bloodworms squirming red.

Grave Goods

The funeral mass is at St Joseph's
and we are almost all together
Our brothers carry her in
we read the scripture and the prayers of the faithful and
our fathers carry her out
Matt plays the piano
the ivory sparkles at his touch
it all feels like
a loosing

Months later I watch a documentary about exploring submerged pyramids
The narrator talks in a calm BBC monotone
and I feel it but keep watching
Flooded chambers still preserve the glint
The pharaohs went into the next world with
gold and riches
food
small carvings of
pets and gods
The scientists put on their diving gear and follow a rope down

We buried her with our own treasures
a doll she rescued from the garage sale pile for Laura
a pack of cards
a felt drawing
celestite
one scallop shell
the letters our parents suggested we write her
our words curling in the dirt.

Wall

Dad would tell us this story that came over from Ireland with his father

It's well-known, common there, in County Kerry

It happens often:

You'll be walking along the side of the road along a wall

(those walls made of drystone stacked up you see them around most fields)

And you swear you hear someone walking on the other side

Talking even,

But when you look there's nothing

There's no one

Communion

You seldom lock
the door and
I don't knock
I leave my shoes at the compass
drop keys and phone beside the clock
tuck myself into the high-backed chair that rocks
and you put the kettle on

We talk about faith
the church
about the Magdalene laundries
the crusades
forged relics
my primary school there on that scrolling list at the end of *Spotlight*

about those kids they buried

I tell you about that one Nick Cave song that makes me cry
and how most days I'm ready to fistfight
all the popes and all the priests
You nod and don't excommunicate me
You tell me Christ would have
thrown the lot of them out of the temple

We light a candle in a red glass vase
you grab your ipad and load up a mass in Vegas
and put a crucifix on our little altar

We hunch together on the low couch
jumble the creeds
forget the words to prayers we have prayed

whole decades

We close our eyes for the prayers of the faithful

And beat our fists over our hearts

murmur *mea culpa*

shake hands and

flinch when they mention our beloved dead

(no one sits in her armchair,
still)

We tune out the homily and instead watch your garden

through the ranchslider pane

the kids flying nylon kites in the park

the mums marching their prams on the path

the one-legged thrush picking

over the espalier apples

her fast ruffling hustle

flashy in the decay

You sing the closing hymn

even though it's just us

Your voice clear and strong

full-lung-ed through the hush

Ave Maria

I love you more and more

with every minor

chord.

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Select Sources

John Stezaker, in *Collage: assembling contemporary art*, ed. by Craig Blanche (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), p. 27.

Anna Jackson, *Actions & Travels: How Poetry Works* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2022)

Anne Michaels, *Infinite Gradation* (Canada: Exile Editions, 2018), p. 50.

Many of these poems were inspired by the verse biographies I studied in my research on Aotearoa New Zealand verse biography. Most draw on the oral stories told to me by my grandfather since my earliest memories, and the private archives of my life and the photographs and ephemera from my grandparents' home. I often consulted *Papers Past* and *Te Ara* and James Belich's *Making Peoples* (Auckland: Penguin Press, 1996) to verify my historical understandings. I provide a select list of further sources here:

'Rhubarb' is inspired by Sarah Howe's verse biography *Loop of Jade* and gratefully borrows the premise and rhythms from an excerpt of the poem: 'Crossing from Guangdong'.

'Betty Guard' is inspired by Nina Powles's *Luminescent*, and draws information from episode 3 of the documentary series *Frontier of Dreams*.

Auckland Council Pukekohe Heritage Survey 2014.

The Nick Cave song referenced on p.81 is 'Into my Arms'.

