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Anhedonia

He kohinga whiti mai i te tirohanga o ngā wahanga e rima o te pōuri

*A collection of poetry themed around loss presented through the lens of the
five stages of grief*

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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at

The University of Waikato

by

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Pēpēhā

Ko Mauao tōku maunga

Ko Tauranga tōku moana

Ko te Awanai tōku awa

Ko Mataatua tōku waka

Ko Hungahungatoroa rāua ko Te Kohinga Mārama ōku marae

Ko Ngāi Te Rangi tōku iwi

Ko Te Rangihouhiri tōku hapū

Ko Kirk Nicholls tōku papa

Ko Aroha Ellis tōku mama

Ko Nicholls tōku whānau

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Abstract

Anhedonia is a collection of personal experiences centred around loss examined through the lens of the five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) and framed within a personal confessional postmodernism style.

It was also influenced by the collected works of Federico Garcia Lorca, Sylvia Plath, Cassandra Barnett (Ngāti Huri, Raukawa), Kirsty Dunn (Te Aupōuri, Te Rarawa), and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (Te Arawa, Tūhoe).

While loss and grief are intrinsically linked to death, within this collection, I further explore other forms of loss and grief. I touch on my loss of cultural identity, mind, and self. As a student, I have been diving deeper into my cultural identity of being Māori and what that means to me.

I have lost many things throughout my life at the hands of abuse, depression, grief, and mental health. The poetry within this collection will continue to serve as a blunt reminder of the experiences (both positive and negative) that I have endured or witnessed over the last couple of decades.

I have seen a multitude of losses (in its many variations) as I continue the dance to discover what the mortality of not only myself but those around me means to me. While everyone will experience feelings of grief and loss, I have framed my own experiences in my interpretation of our collective mortality.

Whakataukī

Me tangi, kāpā ko te mate i te marama.

Let us weep for this loss, as it is not the death of the moon.

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Whakakāhoretanga

Succumb

i.

i visited her today

she welcomed me with a kind smile

she made me her favourite tea: earl gray

what a large crop of tomatoes this year

i tried a new fertiliser seems to be working well

she boasted while handing me my tea

my hands traced the spring bouquet design

before i added cube after cube of sugar

your teeth will rot faster than i will one day

she always had such a morbid sense of humour

she filled me in on all the family goss' between sips of tea

your father's annoyed me again

what's new?

we smirked

your cousins called yesterday, checking in to see how i was doing

more like checking to see if i was still kicking

still sweet of 'em, i guess

almost as sweet as that tea you've got there

we both grinned at the playful banter

she had begun knitting another blanket

lilac row after lilac row

chunky wool resting on its side

only half done by the looks

freshly baked bread wafts
rests on a steel rack
it's ready if you want some
her bread always had the best rustic crunch
we shared a thick slice that was both firm & light
topped by sweet but slightly acidic slices of tomatoes

we watched the sparrows dive at the caterpillars
as we devoured our afternoon tea.

ii.

i visited her today
she welcomed me with a kind smile
her hands shook slightly as she rummaged about
eventually finding her teapot
she paused for a moment, staring blankly forward
what tea do i usually drink?
ah, earl gray, that's right

she poured our tea into our usual bouquet porcelain ware
silly me, i seem to have forgotten the sugar
my hands traced the stems of each of the flowers while i waited
the warmth of the teacup flowing through my hands
she soon returned
i'm not sure what i left for
sorry dear, i've been a little forgetful lately

the lilac throw that she had been knitting
had grown longer, but the odd stitch had been missed
the same chunky wool resting on the side

her tomato plants were beginning to wilt
i forgot to water them last week
pretty sure i watered them yesterday, though
they'll be fine

your cousins haven't written or called for a few weeks now
i wonder when they'll check to see if i'm still kicking
a stack of letters piled near the door

we watched the caterpillars wriggle as the sparrows swooped
looking for their next meal.

iii.

i visited her today
who are you, dear
you remind me of my grandson.

Kūwaha

heed the call of the patupaiarehe
like the ebbs and flows of sea
for their flutes, bring the mists.

Myiasis

i watch them burrow between puckered flesh

writhing they feast devouring onwards & inwards

intimate & one they slurp their soup delight

watch the lump grow beneath my skin hardening & kicking

itching i become their favourite food

i am their mother their chrysalis, their food

am i tasty? i wonder, watching them move within me

giving them my all watching them grow

my loose flesh hangs we play peek-a-boo

in & out

in & out

they emerge wriggling forth

it's so hard to let your kids go.

Candied Apple

flightless bird
baptised in red
rests its head
against damp earth
to be coated in saliva
— to be devoured

ripe flesh spoils
falsehoods fester
a world undone
unnatural warmth
within its meat
mimicry of life

soulless beads
peer forward
beak ajar
a failed attempt
to fill deflated lungs

scooped by
sudden tender hands
a grave where
shallow earth clings
to the withered frame
of the kōwhai.

Repurposed Memoriam

when the earth is unpacked,
we come to circle
the newly ripe crops
that have been freshly planted
under the embrace of the kōwhai
in the weeds and soot
before she lays claim
to those returned to the earth
before they dance
naked under the moonlight
or whisper through cracked lips
we appraise the newly placed adornments
we skirt the veil while they remain warm
all while a single plastic windmill swirls
fuelled with each of her exhales

*leave the lilacs they'd wilt by sunrise
chrysanthemums — one of the best
if roses are firm — another to grab
suckers love roses; they sell for the most
marigolds & peonies will do in a pinch*

a husk of a man
financed by brittle bones
as hollow as his words
fingers his coin pouch
readying the week's inventory
alleyway deals for our crops of memoriam.

M i sit on the porch
e the moon glistens
l it bathes the tī kōuka
a her branches sway
n hypnotising me
c D
h a moemoeā prance between
o n the tongues of grass that suckle at the dewed tears
l c that must have fallen between my panic attacks
y e slug trails cling against my face
occasionally catching the grasp of marama

room temperature merlot sloshes
against the inside of my mug
as i flick the ash
— from my cigarette into the garden

in this moment,
i am not alone in my darkness.

Whakamomori

have you thought of taking your life even if you wouldn't really do it?

how do i say that earlier today, i felt like stepping into traffic,
feeling the not-so-gentle caress of the oncoming semi-truck

or sitting in an idling car watching the carbon monoxide pool,
slowly filling an unkept garage

or how easy it would be to take the entirety of my prescriptions,
perhaps then i'd be able to sleep

have you seriously considered taking your life?

have i? — only theoretically, of course, i'm far too stubborn

have you intentionally tried to hurt yourself?

how do i disclose all the little self-destructive activities i've become all too familiar with

the feeling of nicotine within me, swaddling me when no one else would

being unable to eat / unable to bring myself to eat / unable even to raise food to my mouth

shredding my fingertips because wrists were all too noticeable,
enjoying the feeling of tacky stalactites forming - wanting
to watch my blood drain from me

longing for the ache
that my body would feel during & afterwards
drowning myself in alcohol & sex
in hopes of feeling but also becoming numb

holding a knife to my body as if trying to edge myself on
the serrated edge leaving teeth marks on my skin

i'm fine.

Secondhand Sorrow

i feel performative

i attend the funeral

since it's expected

 i shed a tear

since it's expected

i say i'll miss you

since it's expected

 i hold my family

since it's expected

 i am a pallbearer

since it's expected

this grief is not my own

 but i play my part

since it's expected.

Pyre of Lies

sporadic street lamps
hang his silhouette
luminescent streaks cut daybreak
standing there
where we grew;
where he left

hair of aged mahogany
voice of ash & soot
smile often hidden from the world
oh, how i loved that smile

luminescent licks
emerge from my room
plead for my return
he looks back

eyes of sunlit whiskey
mischievous grin of a hedgehog
laugh like a purring cat
oh, how i'd do anything to hear it

shamrock green
stares back

hands of firm punishment
presence of power
gaze like a predator hunting prey
oh, how i crave to be devoured

“i said you’d be mine,
didn’t i?”

gaze lusted by need
presence closer to god
devotee on their knees
oh, how i long to worship at his altar.

Spider's Feast

bile riddled toilet bowl
drool hangs like tacky webs
from the spider that watches me

saliva pools in my mouth
trying to get past my teeth

reposado bottle gripped in hand
swigs between shivers
trying to warm the cavity left in me
maybe if i drown it, i'll feel whole
perhaps i'll feel nothing at all

moth larve swims amongst phlegm
my only sustenance wriggles away

the spider scuttles forward to pounce
agave redworm in its sights

swaddled in melancholy
i watch the spider drag their meal home.

Riri

Faggot

on the darkest nights, i hold my knees
as mosquitoes buzz up my nose & out my ears
whispering your hate-filled rhetoric
spread by bloodsuckers in passing cars
poof / queer / faggot / cocksucker

just because my happiness apparently affects you
you treat my gayness like a disease
that you might catch
but you're all too happy to ask me
how much for a blowjob or
how you want a threesome
you want me to guzzle your fluids
to choke on your cum
spit-roasted between
your bated breath and ignorance
you'd like that, wouldn't you?
a new notch on your bed frame
for a bullet in my head?
for a nail in my coffin?

i am not shackled to your falsehoods
i will not sleep in a morgue
in return for your pleasure
i will not be your statistic.

I Was Eight

when i was told we were leaving
uprooted from the only place i'd known
my school / my friends / my identity
stolen by your hands
because "we had to move"
pulled around our city
by get-rich-quick schemes
and extended family
lubed by snake oil salesmen
to somewhere cold & away
dad always said
he hated having to drive all this way
i felt so guilty
like such a burden
your day was long & you were frustrated
but you would still come
i loved you for that
i watched mum keep herself up
so that she could sleep
without being swarmed by anxious thoughts
or how she'd spend her sleepless nights in tears
while dad would sedate his with beer and isolation
you both loved us so much
i was forced to be in the middle
while the two of you
used me to bicker on your behalf
tell him this
don't tell her that
you both used me as your go-between
like some little errand boy
all too eager to do as he was told

i never saw either of you at prize-giving
despite always remaining hopeful
that there would be someone in the crowd who cared
yet seats remained empty
and tears would be stifled and awards collected
i dreaded parent-teacher interviews
because i knew neither of you would want to go
i would tell my teachers that you were both busy
it was just easier
you each saw the other in my eyes
yet, often failed to see the child that i was
the window became my friend
i would spend so much time gazing out
of the car / bedroom / school
better there than here, i guess
since you both remained out there
rather than in here with me
why was so much left to me
to help you both heal
to raise my sister / i went without
after all — she was the most important
you both craved your vices
alcohol / pokies / cigarettes
i felt like i drove you both away
i now understand
your needs to escape
but, *i was eight.*

Prothoracic Legs Outstretched // White Flag Waving

was i a cockroach adhered to the underside of your boot
or a spec of mould on your lunch that you brought to the office

were my questions worms that wriggled in your ears
or did you fumigate my emails to kill off my parasitic questions
— i just figured you never opened ‘em

i asked for help but was met with your opinionated views
you bitched behind my back
dragged me down

your inability to listen ate away at me
fruit flies would circle as my innards
festered on the pavement

my life swirled down the drain
all you did was watch while you held the plug.

Matakite

you broke me down so low
made me feel so small
'cause you wanted to feel big
your feelings of greatness
weighed me down as if i wasn't there
you remained irritable at my very breath
when you'd yell, i would remain silent
my defence was marked as a personal attack
you seemed to almost beg for a chance to strike
i had to justify each question that left my mouth
with *i'm justs & i was told to asks*
your fuse shortened by superstitious breath
from those who would visit you in dreams
how you'd not be left alone
your moods swirled like the art against your skin
or the smoke from your cigarette
black tattooed ink aged green by the sun
nicotine stained your fingers
as you pinned me against the wall by my collar
while you yelled your resentful words
each sentence that escaped your lips
stripped for parts from the previous
contradictions on contradictions.

The Loneliness Came Back Again Today

i thought i was doing ok
i made sure to eat & sleep
i went for walks out in the sun
i talked about my feelings
i made progress

//

but the shadows still found me

//

i sit in the darkness
enveloped by steam
while the shower assaults my body
i hear the drone of water pressure
the drain begins to clog
and all i can do is sob.

Redacted

i cough ~~dit~~
my voice buried
returned to papatūānuku
but not by my own hands
you held the knife
its teeth bared your grudge
my neck was cut
but the blood of my ancestors
gushed forth
painting
my land
my parent's land
my grandparent's land
the land of my tūpuna
not yours
the land you say was yours
claimed in exchange
for showing us your true faith
gifted by your enlightenment
we become tacky
coated in the blood of my people
not your first time
it comforts you
as if confirming your generosity
you leave me slumped
against my tūpuna
against their bodies
within the grace of papatūānuku
our mother god.

Audacity

you spoke endlessly
about how you loved your girlfriend
& were going to marry her
as you studied together

//

thinking back, you were so full of yourself
you knew i was poly, but we had never spoken
about the possibility of opening your relationship
or if i had any interest in being your experimentation

//

you must have thought i was dumb
if you even thought at all
sometimes i wonder
if there was even room for your ego
you tried to kiss me
literally out of nowhere
when we were drinking with friends

//

our lips may have touched
but my eyes remained wide
locked with the room's
i can't even remember
the texture of your lips
it was all a blur

//

you told us all
how it was a joke
i don't know if your girlfriend knew
or even knows now
but perhaps that black eye helped.

Marionette Waltz

dancing with the deranged
across an unknown landscape
i stumble over my feet
your hands holding my waist
guiding my movements
making me play your games

your skilled fingers pull my strings
each twitch tugs me
drowned in your desire
i dance still
trying to forget myself
to remove your hooks
you implanted so deep inside

happy adjacent
but it doesn't stay long enough
for me to notice it against the numbness
how am i this weak?
i want to be strong

my arms empty
dragged down by cinderblock-memories
drowned in flat beer from the night before
how do i plant my feet and stand my ground?

i am broken.

Te Rewera I Roto I Ahau

hugged in my womb of bed bugs & itchy blankets
the kind your tūpuna gives you
my body almost seeps through the thin foam mattress
the box frame whispers my name in an attempt to claim me

e ono waewae rewera watches me from the countertop
antennae bob to provoke me
slowly, i reach for the nearest thing
a draft of my thesis rolled up, ready to swat
a fitting end for a disgusting little thing
killed by another that revels in decay

but of course, i missed
his six thin legs dart away under the countertop
as my hand brushes against the corpse of his former lover
i can hear his little mouth laughing at my failure
while i pull away in disgust

we both return to our nests
mine above his
i still hear his laughter as i drift off to another world
a world where my veins are deviled
and he swims within them.

I Hoatu E Ahau Ki A Koe Ngā Mea Katoa

how can there be more warmth on an overcast monday
than in your eyes when you look at me?
i don't know if i dare to ask you why

all i did was compromise
i did all i could for you
i let you play your games
helped you add to your collections
— of notches on your bed frame

you stripped me down with fake concern
and faulty love
you hid me from my thoughts
tucked them away
with the other things that inconvenienced you
like having a partner with depression
you say you can't do this anymore
nō te mea kua ngaro taku hihiri
because i don't have any drive
simply because mine differed from yours

i watch my ahi o roto die
smothered by your touch.

Denial / Anger / Bargaining / Depression / Acceptance

your denial is the lies you've told yourself / how you'd feel better about yourself when you were in love with someone / that you liked what you saw in the mirror or in the many reflections in the windows of stores / how you were only suicidal for attention / that you loved yourself and how you were beautiful / you'd never kill yourself.

your anger is a hunting knife that you brought your father / you always wished you could be closer / he hasn't passed / it's just difficult to communicate sometimes ya' know? / it's drawn blood / your own as well as your father's / it's been used to gut animals / freeing their entrails from their imprisonment / they steamed as they rested on the ground.

you bargained with your mum to keep a rock / it's your favourite / you can't remember if it was always so smooth or if you wore it down over time / you'd rub it between your index and thumb since it calmed you / stained it with the oils from your hand / you know where it is / second draw on your nightstand / you still find it comforting.

your depression is a heavy sweater that reminds you of your grandfather / he passed some time ago / you found it in his wardrobe / it smells faintly of him or at least of any other old man / you hold it close when you sleep / you wear it around home / it feels like his hugs / itchy and slightly uncomfortable but warm all the same / you haven't washed it / you don't want to wash him away yet you do so each night when you're alone / gripping it in your hands as you sob.

you accepted what they said to you was the truth / you need to learn how to share — even though it was their kid that was spoilt and wanted everything / how they'd be there for you when you needed them / that it was just your anxiety getting out of hand and that they weren't gaslighting you / that they loved you.

Snagged Thread

flowering kōwhai
dragged across cracked concrete
bruised yellow
congealed blood fights to flow
longing to paint the asphalt
tacky residue coats his hand
e kore e taea te toto
zested flesh

moss lines the divides
stitching them together
te rāranga i mahia e ngā ringa kore mōhio
a failed attempt

tangled barbs gnaw at bared legs
the scratches of a second-hand lover
splattered ink falls from the gemini moon
his necklace of baby teeth chalks the sidewalk
i roto i te mate he pōuri me te aituā engari he koa anō
you fear the past & the potential of it repeating
thin walls line a broken home
encompassed by her roots.

Say It With Your Foul Mouth & Blackened Tongue

the mouth that grinned when it saw me
another toy to use at your discretion
used me until i broke even further

//

the mouth that would complain when i succeed
frustrated it wasn't you
how could anyone other than you succeed?

//

the mouth that would frown when i'd voice my pain
and tell me how you couldn't have another partner with depression
because what if people thought it was due to you?

//

the mouth that wrapped around my cock
you made me moan & whimper
i surrendered to your touch

//

the mouth that wore me down with i love yous
after being together barely a month
made it commonplace until i slipped & said it

//

the tongue that begged for me
to get you off because that's what you wanted
easier to give you what you wanted than deal with saying no

//

the tongue that twisted words about those i loved
contorted interventions because they must have been broken
if they weren't in love with you

//

the tongue that was allowed to venture
simply because it was yours
an attempt to find more things for you to lay claim to

//

the tongue that saw me as an investment
your little nest egg
expected to be paid back tenfold

//

the tongue that forked as you invited me to your reception
since i should be so honoured to even be considered
shouted at me over the phone

//

that you're sorry.

Hokohoko

Sky Raisins

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every morning, i am thankful that you are not hundreds of flies swarming
in the form of a lover draped in a tattered trench coat.

your deafening buzz would rattle my house & loosen my teeth
how could i hold myself together?

would i need to plant meadows of daffodils & daisies
for you to thrust inside & regurgitate your juices within?

would we bathe in the morning sunlight
as your engines start to drone?

would i need to battle silvereyes & fantails
so you could rest without being plucked & pecked?

where could i take you for dinner on our anniversary
for you would devour anything in hopes of reproducing.

i wonder what you would do if we were to part ways
would you enter my ears, mouth & nostrils?

would i replace your battered coat with my flesh & bone
as you twitch through my veins to move your new limbs?

luckily for me, you have yet to pupate
for you still wriggle & writhe planted in foreign matter
waiting for your chance to amass & knit yourself together.

Hoodie

why haven't i returned it?
it still smells of you, even if only faintly
it's the only way i can hold something of yours
and pretend that i'm falling asleep on your chest
i imagine it's your skin as i touch myself
while i moan your name & wonder
what it would be like to hear you moan mine

i withhold it from you as you do to me
for it has touched your skin far more than i
it has held you while you slept
while i slept alone.

Blackberry

thorns scratch against bare legs
slicing me with a scalpel's precision

they play naughts and crosses
my flesh — their paper
i am your little etch-a-sketch
— picasso, my body
testify your will against my form

purple clots begin to congeal
slowly, their edges round —
becoming glossy balls of juice

ready to be picked
their taste —
to be savoured.

Martyr

we met one evening when i was drowning my sorrows
and you were trying to escape the dullness of everyday life

reposedo clung to each of my words
slurring them into gifts from the cosmos
vodka and caffeine twisted our senses
you craved to be filled
i wanted an escape from this numbness
we became each other's vices

we both had things we were trying to bury
so we thought we might as well asphyxiate within each other

a moment of silence in an ever-screaming world
you rode me like you had something to prove
we marked each other with our mouths and nails
you were a pinprick of light in a warped cocoon of nothingness
i was your conquest, somewhere you could plant your flag
and you, a moment of escape from the encroaching darkness.

Pessimistic Optimist

what does it mean to survive
i dance between two extremes
hope and decay

some days, i've spent in blissful optimism
perhaps the harshest cruelty
that i've inflicted upon myself
watching everything crumble around me
the world burning itself away
yet i remained hopeful
that things will get better

other days — i've wished to be erased
to have the very idea of me drowned
stripped of all meaning as i erode
into the sea in hopes of starting again
like a pebble washing up on the shore
after being smoothed

roses splattered in the blood
that i release from its vanity
becomes tacky
trapping the mosquitoes
that would have preferred to eat me fresh.

Kua Mahue Tōku Riri I Ahau

my anger was a drive
stripped from me
it was my fuel
now I sit
unable to rise.

Undergrowth

as the sun reaches the white of my eyes
over the canopy of tī kōuka and kaponga
i wait to be thawed by rā —
for i am rooted in place

pīwakawaka chitter my name
cutting the silence of the morning
with their mournful chatters —
calling me from behind the veil

my body is the numbness of the frost
it is an abscess of identity and self
an empty cocoon —
something emerged from long ago

i am but a fly without a name
merely a pest that darts
lives then dies —
swallowed by the pīwakawaka.

Apollo

damp sand clung to his frame
his eyes — the only thing that shone blue
against the cold greyed sky

crashing waves smash the coast
salt sprayed locks frame his apollo-kissed face

sunbleached boardshorts — waterlogged
latched to his thighs
closer to him than i would ever be

molluscs watch us — devoid of emotion
what would that be like
i wonder to myself

while i feel this rot inside me
for a man that i would never feel inside me

i toss him a towel.

#C21E56 // #880808

you reached for my hand
one night, when i sat alone
i was drinking my sorrows
 you wanted to dance
 you pulled me forward
 hand in hand
 we danced so well
 the others parted
 we took the stage
 the others stared
 we moved together
 i had never been
 so in sync with another
 your autumn hair fluttered
 we swirled across the room
 as if in flight
 your eyes the darkest black
 perhaps reflecting my abyss
 you held me close
 you smelled of rose
your thorns wrapped around me
as we swayed further and deeper
 further and deeper
 nicks started to appear
 down my arms
 across my face
 yet you remained pristine
 a glistening red jewel
 our eyes remained fixed
my senses became drunker, still
 as we spun

spun

spun

undone

spun

until only i remained

a glistening smear

pierced by your thorns.

Personal Severance

my chest rises & falls
yet i remain breathless
i touch my arm
needles dance across it
a dead bee sputters & dies
did it have any friends before
its little drones stopped?

detached & floating
child that lost their balloon

honeyed winds call me
seduces my senses
is it a fae
here to envelope me
or has it succeeded
and these feelings
are what remains?

A Three - ~~Month~~ - Moth Love Affair

if i were a moth
would you hold my fluffy paw & whisper sweet nothings
so that my little ears would not rupture?

would you share your cereal
so that i could let our larvae grow plump
gorged on weet-bix & all-bran?

would you take me out on dates
to look for new light fixtures for our home
laughing as you watch me flicker between different choices?

would you make me sugar water
so that i don't leave to find my food
out of fear that i may not return to your side?

would you let me dart undeth the lampshade by our bed
so that i can tap against it erratically
attempting to find mach bands to hide in?

would you introduce me to your family
and protect me if they try & swat me
tell them i'm not like other moths
and how in love we are?

would you mourn me when i only live for 90 days
then raise our 300 children
or would you just call an exterminator & move on?

Pōuri

Death Knell (*He Reta Ki Taku Whānau*)

i have failed you so many times
struggled to hold on
to move forward when i kept walking backwards
i am so tired of this numbness that clings to me
like a wet hoodie drenched in the sweat of countless sleepless nights
i am buried under so many layers of exhaustion
i can't even remember what it's like to feel rested
i have taken on so much, so you did not have to
i care for others so deeply
in the hope that someone would do the same for me
to reach out to me
to see me rocking in the corner of a lightless room
and not walk away
i have not found solace in any gods
not even the ones you all put your faith in
faith
what is faith but a means of escape
placing your beliefs in something you cannot see
kāre ano i kitea e ahau taku whakapono
i wish i could feel that kind of belief in something
even if only for a moment

is this a suicide note or a love letter
or perhaps both?

Salted Baptism

i'm told it doesn't take long to drown
but i've been drowning for sometime

i have forgotten how to swim
or has that knowledge been stolen
by the endless sunstroke
and lapping of water

my only reprieve is the occasional seagull
that lands on me before it tries to peck my eyes

i am unable to surface fully
my head is held slightly below the surface
bubbles escape from within me
i didn't know i held so much

my body slowly plumps
as i bump against the buoy

sometimes i glimpse the hands
that hold me down
we have the same scar
on the right of our palm.

Smudge

my body's a paperweight
a collection of poems
of stories
wow, that's depressing

i am nothing more than
blotched ink on a page
sometimes smeared
sometimes crisp and sharp
sometimes, the carcass of a bug
smashed into the page
bleeding / staining

but mostly —
just scuffs across scrap
signed in bitter breath
spat across the page.

Last Supper

scalding water lapped
the remains of last week's curry
i truly meant to eat this one
i rinsed off the container
porcelain-toothed flesh
swirled down the sink
ready to gnaw its way
off to wherever the pipes go.

Kaipēita

my movements
not my own
i am dulled
i am canvas
stretched and pinned
behind a pane of glass
glazed eyes gaze back
— they are not mine

my own hands hold the brush
yet i feel nothing
not even the give of the bristles
as they stroke the canvas

there are moments
when i feel like i don't exist
ngaro i te pōuri
blankness and empty spots

the painter bleeds indigo
my skin crawls

please don't touch me
i said, don't touch me!
he paru ahau.

Dysania

you asked me how long my depression sticks around for
but when i told you it didn't leave, you looked confused
i've always been depressed
it clings to each exhale
it waits in the corner of my vision
it hides from me the knowledge that things will get better
it screams when there's a moment of silence
my nights are long
i am exhausted.

Chalked Lungs // Kore E Tāea Ki Te Hamama

sometimes, i hold my breath
until i'm just short of gasping

slowly i inhale
dragging it out
longing for the sensation
of nails etching the inside of my lungs

slowly i exhale
the stinging turns to a burn
as i fade to purple
then black.

**Kua Hinga Te Tōtara
I Te Waonui-a-Tāne**

my body heaves

my gut wrenches

nausea sets in

but i can not

(will not)

bring myself to cry

i am stone

until the karanga starts.

Sediment Sentiments

i feel so gross
i am a murky bog
— also a swimmer
that got tossed
into that same bog
i can't swim

why am i here?
i can't wade through it
the mud clings to me
pulls me down / fills my lungs
i can't breathe / i am clayed
please help me

so many little bugs
swarming over me
- in me
craneflies steal my eyes
carried off with their dainty legs
i watch myself desiccate
as my eyes flutter away
help me

i heave — but can't vomit
he paru ahau / the muck swells
out every pore
before i'm gone

murky water spews forth
mouth ajar in fright
refilling what i took from the bog.

Spoilt

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liquid snow

freshly washed sheets

a blank page

the foam perched atop your latte

porcelain lambs & nativity scenes

pure & innocent

unblemished

untarnished colour

now,

hugs the glass, unwilling to let go

a bird's broken rib

lumpy & slimy

the kiss of leftovers when cleaning the dishes

the lick of wet socks seeped in piss & bile

unripe tomatoes riddled with worms

they scream as their meal is dispossessed

the colour of flem tainted green with sickness

bitter clumps like homemade rafts & foreign symphonies

assaulting the senses of the unwary.

I'm Not Dead

air fills my lungs
but i remain breathless
i have not eaten food
or had anything to drink
i have not showered
what do i sound like?
i can not seem to remember
i'm a dragonfly
caught in a spider's web
waiting to be devoured
this bed is my coffin
with the lid sealed shut
even though i toss and turn
i am unable to kick it off
i hear the kuia's karanga
perhaps i am dead.

Devour / Consume

callus by body
spatter my juices
butter your rēwena
with my spinal fluids
crack my bones
with your rolling pin
slurp at my sockets
like the frail kuia
with their kai moana
treat yourself
to my pop-rock-joints
suck my meat
off my spine
salt my eyes
with my tears
let your tongue
savour my taste
a treat, i'm sure.

Broken

you didn't break me

i had already broken myself

so you couldn't have the satisfaction.

Kua Mau Ahau I Te Pōuri

i slumber in a well of poisons
bathed within the glow of marama
salted with childhood tears

pennied eyes stare back at me
barely illuminating the nail marks
— my failed attempts to escape

i manage to claw myself upwards an inch
before another penny falls
— strikes me down
shooting star carrying its wish

the tastes of damp earth
cobble me / rot greets me
as i descend ever further.

Feast / Fester / And Feast Again

dew-coated toadstools wept at her approach / their tears — beaded jewels
shattering as they reach the earth / dislocated wing hangs limp
nestled between twigs / the remaining carcass begs to attract attention

centipedes march their holly pilgrimage / weaving between the foliage
haunted brushstrokes divide the undergrowth / ready to devour their banquet
maggots writhe between layered meat / millipedes march across goosed-flesh
seeking out rotting wood

her curves slice, sharing scattered juices / her understory cries out raw & guttural
spidered fluffs scatter / looking for a place to rest, craving the warmth of her underbelly
waiting on prey soon to arrive / they nest within her open folds.

Recital Of Decay

curdled milk clumps against an unwashed glass
replacing transparency with foamy yellow

slugs sing of lost homes from rafters
powered shells sweeten green tea

with shoes of rheum earwigs dance
the waltz of many feet across cataracted eyes

rats percussion between floorboards
plump, gorged on unwanted fingers

dust bunnies swirl against unmoved furniture
collecting crowd favours of flaked skin

stained baroque grandeur peels reaching toes
bowing after a decades-long performance

sun streaks cut the applause, returning all to silence.

My Family Raised Me Right

i stare at my ceiling
reminiscing of my childhood —

//

i would visit the neighbour's kids
just to play with their toys
i don't know if i even bothered to learn their names

//

i felt forced to justify any question i had
since i was annoying when i asked too many
i had no problem talking to strangers
i thought this was how you made friends

//

i was too much like my grandfather
i was too much like my dad
but i never felt enough like me
you were so quick to place blame for how you saw others
i was creative and loved expressing myself
but that slowly faded and dulled

//

i was suicidal more than once
i felt so alone for the longest time
i was just attention-seeking
so i tried to bury those feelings deep down
since i didn't want to burden you
it was easier for me to go along with the flow
as i'd rather make others happier than myself

//

my family raised me, *right?*

Today, I had my way with your memory

i tried to drown it —
with more than a dozen rocks to weigh it down
yet each time kōkopu nudged them away

i wrung it out to dry —
you wouldn't believe the state of the water
that flowed out tainted at your touch

i tried to starve it —
but you embodied the cheeky weka
i should have known you would be a scavenger

i tried to bury it —
return you to papatūānuku
but not even our earth mother wanted you back

i tried to salt it —
you had no moisture to give
i should have known you were a salty bitch

i tried to smother it —
to have you pass peacefully in your sleep
yet you struggled and gasped until you were released

i even tried to set it free —
perhaps you'd leave of your own accord
but you clung to me even tighter than before

Tomorrow, perhaps, it will finally leave.

Whakaaetanga

I'd Watch the World Burn If It Were With You

hand me sliced sourdough
filled with thick-cut salami
and a sliver of cheese
sourdough squeaks against the plate
rough and chewy
protecting its soft innards
cracked pepper cuts the fattiness
is this what domesticity tastes like?
if so, i could get used to it

there is a stillness here
i feel paused in time
while i watch the outside shift
petals fall, drifting on the wind
welcome-swallows circle, in search of worms
emerging after a heavy rain
a crispness i've been missing
for what feels like a lifetime
flowers bud in their fresh ball gowns
the occasional bleating of sheep
or some other farm animal

i slow my breathing
imaging myself almost corpse-like
marinating in the stillness
i feel that even my shallowest of breaths
would disrupt the calmness
and give myself away as something
that doesn't belong.

How do I kill a Part of Me?

the part that —
leaves the door open for you to return to
even though i know you'd never knock again

the part that —
argues with me when i say i'm ok
as if it doesn't truly believe me

the part that —
blurs the boundaries i set for myself
since you never liked them

the part that —
can't believe what you did to me
since you said you loved me

the part that —
still wants to leave the light on
even though you watched it slowly die in me

the part that —
let you strip me for parts
to make yourself somewhat whole again

the part that —
rocks itself to sleep each night in the corner of my room
crying like the lost child it is

the part that —
wants to scream / fight / claw / bite
tear its flesh and feel blood

the part that —
wants to go quietly in the night
when all i want to do is fight

the part that —
dug its own grave but won't sleep within
until the rest of me goes with it.

Tangihanga

kahikatea blades slice
propelling the waka forward
against the twisting waters of silver
karanga laps at its underside
summoning it home
salt spray bleeds from each hīrau
before returning to the hands of tangaroa
becoming whole once more

the air shakes with the wail of wāhine
pare kawakawa crowned
obsidian flakes in hand
etchings of haehae still fresh
ever-flowing against leathered-sepia ridges
congealing against our mother's flesh
returning to the embrace of papatūānuku.

You Said You Loved Me

you wore me down
smoothed my edges
you wanted a prize
so you could say —
you conquered me first
because others wanted me
you wanted a doll
to sit on a shelf
nausea sets in
i'm going to vomit
your rent is overdue
get out of my head
kua pahemo

i blocked you today
so why do i feel —
like, i'm in the wrong?

Epitaph

there's a sun-bleached windmill
pinned on the coat of a cracked headstone
it spins and hums
blades fueled by wilted breath
it sees those who transition
from one stage to the next

*a son watches
as a casket is lowered
caressed by earth
his expression blank
chocolate-eyes empty
losing more
than just his mother*

once vibrant purple
now, a muddied red tinge
smeared against the jaw of rot
where it now watches over visitors
offering hymns to those
who come draped in black

*a young women
with oily, unkempt hair
punches the ground
"how could you leave me?"*

worms weave tunnels
waiting for coffins to soften
crickets scream, sharing their pain
with any who will listen

*man worn by grief
weeps with loss
stumbles past
bottle of whiskey in hand
to soothe his ache
of a grieving father
he heaves out a name
but it falls flat against the rain*

a forgotten scarf
carried by the wind
finds a place to rest
before autumn sets in
curled around an oak

*crib-sized hole
topped with a concrete slab
swaddled between
a mother and father
faces hidden
in each other's embrace*

the moon's cold eye
purifies the soil
as she watches over
the field of chipped teeth

*women sits by a grave
yellow dress shirt and jeans
holds her frame
one hand resting against stone
the other clutches a letter
shares a laugh with an old friend
bittersweet smile*

a snail creeps and streaks
its trail glistens against granite
kissed by moonlight
almost revealing a name
that has long since smoothed.

Found at Dawn

caught in the light of day
you sat in your favourite spot
te aku at your feet
sand between your toes
two rods cast at your side
bucket full of tāmure
april 20th.

Dedicated to Puhirake Ellis (1964 - 2024)

I'm Neurotypical / Maybe I'm Not

i'm neurotypical

i have a hard time
feeling constantly present
like a mis-composed song
knitted by lost keys
numb, confused blurs
and wondered thoughts
legs rubbed together
like a cricket's scream
assaulted ears with
discordant melodies
textured sounds;
cutlery on plates
ice grated
music on the tv &
videos on my phone
while i write
multifaceted mirror
learned behaviours
avoiding eyesight / looking past
learned mannerisms
removing a mask
i never knew
i had always carried

or maybe i'm not.

Passing

- 6th i didn't know you had died
 the day was like any other.
- 11th then almost a week past
 and then you were brought up
 i was in shock.
- 12th today i sat alone
 we were planning on catching up for coffee
 to share our new writing
 but we had never settled on a date that worked.
- 15th i spent the day trying to think of what words to use
 they just didn't come.
- 20th two weeks had passed
 i had found some words
 but they felt too weak.
- 22nd i read this piece into the silence of the night
 wondering if the wind would carry it
 to wherever you are now.

Dedicated to my friend, Freya Norris (1990 - 2024).

I Walk Along Tracks Forgotten By Trains

following the bends and straights
without any clue where they lead
i watch your funeral on repeat
skirting the outside not to interrupt
i don't want you to yell at me again
i sink to the bottom of great lakes
where the fish have all died
or been sold into slavery
i visit markets that have long been forgotten
a thick blanket of dust is the only clerk
i leave my coins in a wooden bowl
i skip rocks across motionless streams
hoping to see even a single ripple
but the water's surface remains pristine
i dance with the memory of you in my arms
we hum abba's *mamma mia*
you somehow still steep on my feet
i hide in grainfields and make crop circles
to let the soil breathe, for it has nearly suffocated
scarecrows scream when they find out what i've done
i sit at the end of a pier and swing my feet
stars kiss me as they fall
sizzling as they embrace the mirror
i am a stranger in my head.

Miere

blossoms buzz
proletariat drones

bumped stamens
anthers // stroked

visceral vibration
fuzzy hands

— pollen scooped
baskets packed

plumped gout
fructose flounders

woven hair from
— others' backs

caked foundation
powdered snow falls

twisted squall
sugar tapped sweats

pleasure bred
honeyed workforce.

Te Wahine E Kanikani Ana Me Te Mate

dinner party in the moonlight adorns toadstool tables
delusions pitter-patter between our legs as tea is sipped
gray-cloaked beauty sits across / mother of many
hine-nui-te-pō watches her forest scape with veiled eyes

cardinal mother sleeps against the base of a toadstool
plumed / ready to burst / while her clergy chatters above
owl pellets fall to the ground / mice geodes nestled in hair
damp squelches against the plant litter carpet
flesh & bone laid bare for everyone to see

coaled butterflies dance & dive towards the fittering fantails
pulling them forward / towards the twigged border of their world
— the leaping place of spirits / te rerenga wairua
nearby leaves crunch as a hedgehog trots forward
looking for plump slugs & centipedes to devour

rubied tears pool against sphagnum / hydrating it
roundworms wriggle between the fresh falling droplets
words decayed by deceit / coated in bile / freely exchanged
the waka of aituā greets all / you are not special
drowning our sorrows in tea / as the last song falls quiet.

Where Warm Flesh Falls

have you heard the war cry of the worms
as they march towards the ripening flesh
the shrill screams from their toothy mouths
while battalions of farmers approach to till the soil
ready to circle their prey
and puncture its cellophane skin

burst ribcage of a fallen red-breasted robin
the womb of maggots & larvae
freshly birthed & ready to consume

fallen child festers on a bed of leaves
like a half-cut tomato
sweating in the afternoon sun
cheese-filled aroma calls flies
honeyed juices call the hungry
wreath of grubs prelude their arrival

silently she waits
to be torn apart & butchered
to be turned over & over
& over once more.

What's The Use Of Feeling Blue?

the way your body sunk into my hands
after your last breath, left
you were small, like a pebble
i would skip against the tide
you left such a hole
any sea would surely drain
and it did — it flowed from my eyes
so much left that sea
even the wreckage of a thousand lost ships
came tumbling out with every sob

your small eyes
i would never look into again
stared blankly forward
like the newly revealed basalt
that hugged the sea floor
glistening from a life past

your hand still loosely gripped mine
it was so hard to let go
so i kept a part of you
— this hole inside me
so much larger than you ever grew to be

the doctor said that this wasn't my fault
it was most likely genetic
but even now, a part of me blames myself

some nights, while i sleep
i hear your voice whispering to me

What's The Use Of Feeling, Blue?

may you rest
within the embrace of hine-nui-te-pō
i will always remain your whānau pani
it reminds me of how close you were to me

this pain is personal to me
that you know i did all i could for you
i hear your voice whispering to me
some nights, while i sleep

but even now, a part of me blames myself
it was most likely genetic
the doctor said that this wasn't my fault

so much larger than you ever grew to be
— this hole inside me
so i kept a part of you
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your hand still loosely gripped mine

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your small eyes

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any sea would surely drain
you left such a hole
i would skip against the tide
you were small, like a pebble
after your last breath, left
the way your body sunk into my hands.

Dedicated to Blue my bearded dragon.

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Appendix

Whakataukī / Proverb

Whakakāhoretanga / Denial

- Kūwaha / gateway
- Patupaiarehe / humanoid fairy-like entities that dwell in forests or within mist
- Tī kōuka / a native tree of New Zealand also known as cabbage tree
- Moemoeā / dreamlike visions
- Marama / moon
- Whakamomori / suicide

Riri / Anger

- Matakite / seer
- Papatūānuku / the earthly wife of Rangi-nui
- Tūpuna / ancestors
- Te rewera i roto i ahau / the devil inside me
- E ono waewae rewera / six-legged devil
- I hoatu e ahau ki a koe ngā mea katoa / I gave you everything
- Nō te mea kua ngaro taku hihiri / because I lost motivation.
- Ahi o roto / internal fire
- Kōwhai / a native tree of New Zealand also known for its bright yellow flowers
- E kore e taea te toto / unable to bleed
- Te rāranga i mahia e ngā ringa kore mōhio / weaving done by unskilled hands
- I roto i te mate he pōuri me te aituā engari he koa anō / in death there is sadness and tragedy but also joy

Hokohoko / Bargaining

- Kua Mahue Tōku Riri I Ahau / my anger has left me
- Kaponga / a native tree of New Zealand also known as silver fern
- Rā / sun
- Pīwakawaka / a native bird of New Zealand also known as a fantail

Pōuri / Depression

- He Reta Ki Taku Whānau / a letter to my family
- Kāre ano i kitea e ahau taku whakapono / I am yet to find my faith
- Kaipēita / painter
- Ngaro i te pōuri / lost in darkness
- He paru ahau / for I am dirty
- Kore e tāea ki te hamama / unable to scream
- Kua hinga te tōtara i te waonui-a-tāne / the tōtara tree has fallen in Tāne's great forest
- Karanga / a traditional Māori ceremonial call used to welcome visitors onto a marae
- Rēwena / traditional Māori bread
- Kuia / elderly Māori woman
- Kai moana / seafood
- Whaikōrero / speeches
- Kua mau ahau i te pōuri / sadness has overtaken me

Whakaaetanga / Acceptance

- Tangihanga / the act of grieving and providing funeral rites for the dead
- Kahikatea / a native tree of New Zealand often paddles were carved from its wood
- Waka / a traditional Māori canoe
- Hīrau / a type of traditional Māori paddle
- Tangaroa / one of the sons of Ranginui (the sky father) and Papatūānuku (the earth mother)
- Wāhine / women
- Pare kawakawa / a traditional mourning wreath that can be seen adorning the head of women during funerals
- Haehae / the act and result of lacerations made with obsidian flakes against the skin of women during funeral rites for the dead
- Kua pahemo / begone
- Te aku / a location within Tauranga
- Tāmure / a fish often caught in New Zealand called a snapper
- Mīere / honey

- Te Wahine E kei te mura o te ahi / the woman who is at the precipice of the fire
- Hine-nui-te-pō / the goddess of death
- Te rerenga wairua / the leaping place of spirits
- Waka of Aituā / the boat of Aituā
- Whānau pani / bereaved family

Whakataukī

Tukua mai he kapunga oneone ki ahau hei tangi māku.

Send me a handful of soil so that I may weep over it.