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Staying with our Trouble:

Disease and Dis-ease in Sick-Lit & Eco-Fiction

from Aotearoa New Zealand

A thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Doctor of Philosophy in English

at

The University of Waikato

by

HEIDI LEE ROGERS



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2026

Abstract

In this thesis, I compare depictions of disease by Māori and Pākehā/European authors of young adult fiction, demonstrating that while Pākehā illness narratives tend to employ the microscope, and individualise disease through a form of narrative containment and compartmentalisation reflective of a Western world view, Māori illness narratives tend to employ the macroscope, and collectivise disease, moving the focus from the individual to broader human and other-than-human environments. However, I argue the containment observed in pre-COVID Pākehā illness narratives appears to be disintegrating, as post-pandemic publications move into closer alignment with Māori-authored narratives, which combine elements of sick-lit and eco-fiction genres. Further, I argue that within these Pākehā texts, te ao Māori (the Māori world) offers healing for Pākehā characters, yet the fundamental concerns driving Māori-authored fiction—namely, the dis-eases rooted in colonial capitalism, such as, for example, intergenerational grief, trauma, and inequity—are left largely unearthed. Though disease appears to be ubiquitous in Māori fiction, I found Māori characters are often absent from Pākehā-authored hospital-based sick-lit, and relegated to the margins in Pākehā-authored eco-fiction, where they appear healthy, and content to support the goals of dis-eased Pākehā. In contrast to their fallible Pākehā counterparts, I argue these Māori side-characters are limited by "goodness", and are at risk of being reduced to a kind of "herbal supplement", as Pākehā authors fail to address the conflicts and disparities between Māori and Pākehā worlds: a vital aspect of our local ecology that I propose cannot, in good faith, be divorced from realist Aotearoa New Zealand eco-fiction, given the significance of Land Back and decolonisation movements to the health and wellbeing of our Treaty partners, and arguably, to all New Zealanders. Despite

disparities in representation, I argue Māori and Pākehā authors of young adult eco-fiction essentially identify the same "poison" and "medicine"—respectively: toxic masculinity, and reconnection with the other. In conclusion, this thesis presents my original young adult novel, which incorporates aspects of human and environmental disease and dis-ease I argue are underrepresented in local young adult fiction by Pākehā authors. *Tāne and the Invisibles* follows a queer Pākehā protagonist and her Māori and Tauiwi friends as they navigate eco-anxiety, anticipatory grief, and the uncertainties surrounding their increasingly complex relationships with Self, each other, and the human and other-than-human Other.

Acknowledgements

Professor Maebh Long, I would not have commenced, continued or completed this thesis if it had not been for your belief and relentless good humour. Thank you for this opportunity, and for your empathetic and dedicated supervision. I learnt as much from our conversations as my research, and though you told me not to be grateful to you, I leave this scholarship with immense gratitude for the skills, insights, and experiences you afforded me. My sensibilities as a writer are forever altered thanks to your influence, and I will continue to smile recalling how I approached you like a cyclone of dis-ease for four years, and you had the grace to say, “it’s always a pleasure!”. Sláinte!

Doctor Tracey Slaughter, you created the conditions under which Tani was able to come into the world. Since our first conversation, you have held me and my writing with a warmth and enthusiasm that is nothing short of medicinal. You showed me that my ability to perceive the world through my body is a gift—a painfully difficult gift, at times, but one that becomes manageable, and even beautiful when illuminated creatively. Thank you for the profound level of trust and acceptance you have given me. I treasure your feedback.

Associate Professor Catherine Chidgey, I like to say you built-up my courage to face the dangerous and speak the unspeakable one pencil-tick at a time. When I first shared my story idea, you banished my self-doubt with two words: “Love it”, and you have continued to hold space in a way that has enabled me to develop my most vulnerable work with confidence. Thank you for your hilarious wit, your unwavering positive regard, and for somehow knowing when I needed a morale boost. I will always treasure the memory of your reaction to my characters.

Thanks to the Marsden Fund team for enabling this research; and to the University of Waikato staff. Anne, your library sessions were a delight. Alex, Janey, Mele, your

assistance and accommodations were much appreciated. Maryam, you saved my sanity when my footnotes randomly started acquiring limitless paragraph spaces.

A special thanks to Doctor Sara Wasson, and Doctor Bonnie Etherington for the time and energy given to my work. Your insights helped me complete this process on a truly positive note.

Thank you to the teachers (of all ages) who contributed to my creative and academic journey over the years. In particular, to the Learning As Families and The Home Educators' Network communities.

Kia ora, Whaea Mihi for gifting me my first Māori dictionary, for letting me play under your desk, and for the Hei Tiki you sent home in my pocket. Haere rā!

Mum, Dad, Tim, Nick—my first best friends and fellow storytellers—thank you for being you and for letting me be me. Mike, Sharyn, thank you for always supporting my endeavours, and for believing in me, even when everyone else thought I was weird! Thank you for the choice, the space, the discussions, and adventures. Thank you, Ingrid, Christoph, Cara, Amanda for all you bring to our family. Thank you, Archer, for befriending the moon and reminding me why I love the world. Kahu, for the cuddles. Anya, for your input, including hours of proofreading. Thank you for wholeheartedly believing in this thesis. You saw me at my worst, and reminded me of my best. Hearing you laugh, cry (and seizure!) through my novel made it all worth it. Thank you, Gillian, Martin, Rebecca, and family, for your kindness and generosity. Penelope, for the countless hours of "sophisticated play" over the decades. (Doctor!) Fabienne for leading the way. I have cherished your companionship through this. Laura, Rosie, Steven for checking in and cheering me on. And to Sylva, Cintia, Johanna, and all the creatives above (and beyond) who inspired me to pursue my art even though the world is as it is. Because the world is as it is.

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Introduction

In *The Whale Rider* (1987), Witi Ihimaera (Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki) weaves together human and other-than-human nature with an intimacy typical of Māori narratives, including conceptualisations of health.[1] Chapter one takes the perspective of the land, then whale and human voices alternate, calling to each other as their stories of disease and dis-ease move in parallel through Aotearoa New Zealand's Indigenous and settler-colonial waters. This intimacy exemplifies, I suggest, the "embedded",[2] "embodied",[3] and "localised"[4] storytelling which Alice Curry argues is necessary for a "sustainable engagement with place".[5] Curry's notion of embedded storytelling, rooted in eco-feminism and deep ecology, is pushed to its extreme in Donna J. Haraway's 2016 concept of the "Chthulucene", an alternative, she proposes, to our human-centric Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourses. According to Haraway, the Chthulucene names "a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth",[6] whereby the overarching narrative can be "reknitted" so "human beings are not the only important actors . . . with all other beings able simply to react", but rather, people are positioned "with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story".[7] Māori authors have long approximated this kaupapa through their narratives, demonstrating, I suggest, mastery in both the art of "staying with the trouble", and the resonating concept of "staying in [the] body", which Curry refers to when she suggests: "an embodied relationship with the earth

[1] Leonie Pihama and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Ora: Healing Ourselves: Indigenous Knowledge, Healing and Wellbeing* (Huia Publishers, 2024, ProQuest)
[2] Alice Curry, *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 42.
[3] Curry, p. 73.
[4] Curry, p. 20.
[5] Curry, p. 121.
[6] Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (United States: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 2.
[7] Haraway, p. 55.

will require a mode of being that Patricia Gunn Allen (1990:52) lyrically calls 'staying in your body, accepting [and respecting] its discomforts, decayings, witherings and blossomings'".[8] An "embodied ecofeminist ethic", then, needs to arise from "a discourse not of transcendence but of immanence".[9] Through this thesis, I call for another layer of narrative "reknitting", one that insists that white, able-bodied, heteronormative New Zealanders "are not the only important actors" within Pākehā-authored young adult fiction. And further, that Pākehā authors firmly plant Pākehā-identified characters within the Aotearoa New Zealand context, so that our location-specific diseases, and interrelating dis-eases—including those griefs, traumas, and anxieties pertaining to our settler-colonial past and present—are made visible by relatable characters role-modelling the art of "staying with the trouble" as it unfolds within and around us. Currently, Māori creatives appear to bear the brunt of this work.

According to *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction* (2011), "'New Zealandness' is a subtle, at times almost invisible [. . .] concern" within the genre.[10] Similarly, I argue that locating Pākehā identity within the white-coded, culturally non-descript characters typical of Pākehā-authored young adult fiction requires "reading against the grain".[11] In contrast to the cultural immanence we see in Māori-authored narratives, whereby "New Zealandness" is interrogated explicitly, I found Pākehā authors demonstrate a tendency towards the Pākehā sublime. The "Pākehā sublime" is my reworking of Patrick Evan's notion of the "colonial sublime", which Anna Jackson paraphrases as an "emphasis on the romantic relation between settler and landscape" that, alongside a forgetting of

[8] Curry, p. 73.
[9] Curry, p. 73.
[10] Anna Jackson, *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction* (NZ: Victoria University Press, 2011), p. 9.
[11] Ibid.

colonial history, pervaded Pākehā historical novels of the 2000s.[12] We see this evasion of colonial/Indigenous politics combined with a romanticised portrayal of our relationship with the land in Pākehā-authored illness and eco narratives, such as, for example, David Hill's *See Ya, Simon*, (1992), Sarah Ell's *Talking to Adam* (2005), Des Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay* (2009), Eileen Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall* (2018), and Adele Broadbent's *If Only* (2020).

Narrative contrasts between Māori and Pākehā representations of disease and the interconnected concept of "dis-ease"—which I use to discuss "intangible" ailments, such as pain, grief, and anxiety, for example—is likely symptomatic of the reality that despite "establishing a so-called universal, taxpayer funded health system from 1938, New Zealand's health system has never delivered equitable health outcomes for its indigenous population".[13] Further, efforts to improve Māori health have been undermined at a parliamentary level through dis-establishment of the Māori Health Authority before it had a chance to function.[14] It follows that Māori authors bring Māori disease to the fore; however, their depictions of healing extend beyond the Māori individual.

In early 2024, Stacy Gregg's (Ngāti Mahuta, Ngāti Pukeko, Ngāti Maru Hauraki) novel, *Nine Girls*, and Rachel House's (Ngāti Mutunga, Te Ātiawa, Ngāi Tahu) film *The Mountain* were released, both portraying spirited young kōtiro Māori who die of cancer during the fight for reclamation of their Indigenous culture; a fight which occurs alongside young Māori-/Pākehā characters, and which is linked to the land. Other-than-human nature plays an active role in both film and novel, communicating with humans, while soothing and

[12] Jackson, p. 46.

[13] Hayley Brown and Linda Bryder, "Universal Healthcare for All? Māori Health Inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand, 1975–2000", *Social Science & Medicine*, 319 (2023) < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_2713306652> [accessed 21 October 2025]

[14] Karanama Ruru, "Crown Admits Move to Disestablish Māori Health Authority was Political", *Stuff*, 20 December 2023, <https://shorturl.at/kDKUG> [accessed 18 January 2024]

contextualising their dis-ease. *The Mountain*'s recognition of other-than-human agency is reminiscent of Haraway's otherkin: "No species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too".[15] Haraway's conceptualisation moves into even greater alignment with a te ao Māori understanding of other-than-human whakapapa when she observes, "All critters share a common 'flesh,' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically. Ancestors turn out to be very interesting strangers; kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), uncanny, haunting, active".[16]

Mount Taranaki, who was granted legal personhood in 2023, is listed in *The Mountain*'s credits alongside the human cast. A main character in their own right, Taranaki Mounga performs the role of ancestor, at one point surrounding the human protagonist (Sam) and her friends in a protective mist, which Māori-raised Bronco interprets as a warning to stop their ascent.[17] This awareness of the land as communicator, along with the blurring of boundaries between human and other-than-human nature is mirrored, this thesis argues, by a growing trend in Pākehā-authored young adult fiction, whereby the wellbeing of young New Zealanders is shown in direct relationship to the wellbeing of broader environments. This trend is in contrast, I argue, with the containment and compartmentalisation observable in Pākehā sick-lit texts for young adults—particularly those published pre-COVID.

[15] Haraway, p. 100.
[16] Haraway, p. 203.
[17] Piki Films, *The Mountain Official Trailor*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 February 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tJEhKoMcu8&t=2s> [accessed 5 November 2025]

The following chapters will show that in post-COVID-pandemic narratives, the Pākehā protagonist's skin no longer appears representative of their outermost barrier, instead disease (or dis-ease) seeps beyond the confines of the individual, taking root in external systems and institutions; embodying animals, trees, mountains, oceans, winds, landscapes and cities. I found Mother Nature, who primarily performed the romantical reprieve in pre-COVID teen sick-lit texts by Pākehā authors (see Hill's *See Ya, Simon*, Ell's *Talking to Adam*, or Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*), looms increasingly ominous in recent publications. For example, Hill's eco-fiction *Below* (2023); and Merriman's disease-themed narratives, including *Double Helix* (2021); the *Black Spiral Trilogy* (2021-2022); and *Catch a Falling Star* (2023).

Further, te ao Māori is increasingly positioned as a place of healing for Māori *and* Pākehā; however, as the chapters to come will show, although Pākehā-authored Māori characters support their non-Māori protagonists, Māori disease and dis-ease is virtually invisible. The same is not necessarily true of general (adult) Pākehā fiction, for example, in *Double Helix*, Merriman discusses prejudice and inequity within the Western medical system; further, diseased and dis-eased Māori and Pākehā characters relate intimately—aspects that are absent from Merriman's teen sick-lit texts, and the majority of Pākehā young adult narratives I located. Though a thorough examination of general fiction exceeds the scope of this thesis, Māori-Pākehā biculturalism appears to be a salient concern in the non-fiction realm. Alison Jones' *This Pākehā Life: An Unsettled Memoir* (2020); John Bluck's *Becoming Pākehā* (2022); and Avril Bell's *Becoming Tangata Tiriti: Working with Māori, Honouring the Treaty* (2024) speak to the experience of Pākehā identity in relation to Māori—an exploration that I claim is neglected in Pākehā young adult fiction, and which the creative component of this thesis addresses, in part, through representation of a child who

begins to explore her identity as Tangata Tiriti in relation to Māori and non-Māori (Tauiwi) characters.[18] While the need for Māori voices in publication is ongoing,[19] I suggest both Pākehā *and* Māori readers could benefit from increased Pākehā narrative engagement with our country's biculturalism (and, indeed, multiculturalism), particularly in regard to the "invisible" diseases and dis-eases troubling our interpersonal and interspecies environs. After all, it is difficult to care for wounds we cannot perceive, and fiction offers a unique holding space from which the complexities and pluralities of the past and present can be unpacked and processed, while divergent, sustainable futures may be imagined into reality. In "Writing Outward into the International World", Ihimaera argues:

> if you believe, as I do, that the Treaty [of Waitangi] is a partnership that must be engaged with by all peoples in my country, then in my opinion you can learn as much about it or at least its impact from reading both Māori and Pākehā fictional texts. Examples can be found most recently in Catherine Chidgey's magpie narrator in her latest novel, *The Axeman's Carnival* (2022) and my cousin Monty Soutar's pre-European novel *Kāwai: For Such a Time as This* (2022), to Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood* (2023), in which an eco-activist group in Aotearoa becomes involved with an American billionaire, and Alice Te Punga Somerville's book of poetry *Always Italicise: How to Write While Colonised* (2023). In my case, even in just writing my books I prosecuted the Pākehā in power from a Māori perspective, the perspective of the Crown's Treaty partner. I brought the work of a Māori writer into the building, into the house of New Zealand literature if you like.[20]

[18] Tauiwi is a term often used to describe non-Māori New Zealanders, particularly visitors or recent migrants.
[19] Paula Morris, "Māori Writing: The Struggle Continues", *Newsroom*, 21 September 2023 <https://newsroom.co.nz/2023/09/21/paula-morris-on-maori-writing/> [accessed 9 March 2024]
[20] Witi Ihimaera, "Writing Outward into the International World", *Journal of New Zealand & Pacific Studies*, 11. 2 (2023), 141-149 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/

Ihimaera suggests he "gave due notice of this intention" in 1959, when he threw a book out the school library window, because it contained "a story about Māori that [he] considered racist".[21] Māori authors of contemporary young adult fiction have followed the likes of Patricia Grace (Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Raukawa, Te Āti Awa) and, indeed, Ihimaera "into the house of New Zealand literature", "prosecuting" both the settler-colonial other and the Indigenous self, often taking no prisoners in narrativisations of Māori-Pākehā conflict. The complimentary tone with which the Pākehā authors studied here have incorporated aspects of te ao Māori into their narratives suggests disparities in representation are surely not ill-intentioned, but rather a symptom of what sociologist Martin Tolich coined "Pākehā paralysis";[22] a dis-ease iwi-affiliated Pākehā academic Alex Hotere-Barnes defines as:

> [The] emotional and intellectual difficulties that Pākehā can experience when engaging in social, cultural, economic and political relations with Māori because of: a fear of getting it wrong; concern about perpetuating Māori cultural tokenism; negative previous experiences with Māori; [or] a confusion about what the 'right' course of action may be.[23]

During an interview in 2020, renowned Māori author Patricia Grace stated that writers have sent her their work, "wanting her approval of how they have written Māori characters",

64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1386_nzps_00165_1> [accessed October 9 2024] (p. 142).

[21] Ihimaera, Ibid, p. 142.

[22] Martin Tolich, "Pakeha 'Paralysis': Cultural Safety for Those Researching the General Population of Aotearoa", *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* (2002), 164-178 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_gale_infotracgeneralonefile_A99849276> [accessed 25 March 2025] (p. 164).

[23] Alex Hotere-Barnes, "Generating 'non-Stupid Optimism': Addressing Pākehā Paralysis in Māori Educational Research", *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 50.1 (2015), 39–53 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_nlnz_indexnz_998577403602837> [accessed 25 March 2025] (p. 41).

something Grace, understandably "can't deal with".[24] These requests indicate that authors may want to include te ao Māori in their fiction, but are unsure how to do so respectfully. The fear of "getting it wrong" is likely exacerbated by the uncertainty as to whether non-Māori should even write Māori characters in the first place.[25] A question that essayist Nadine Hura (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Hine) argues is a concern for Māori authors, too, when she states, "Being Māori doesn't give me the right to tell any Māori story. Whakapapa is not a backstage pass to go wherever I want".[26] Hura writes that the words of Maata Wharehoka, renowned Taranaki weaver and kuia of the Parihaka Pā, "reminded me that 'Māori' is really just a descriptor and that iwitanga is where it's at", before suggesting her interpretation of Wharehoka's observations was not that "nobody can write stories unless they inherently 'belong' to them", but rather, "thinking about ownership and kaitiakitanga is imperative. Relationships are key. Interrogating your own reasons, stating them up front and declaring who you are and where you come from is as important on the page as it is in whaikōrero".[27]

And so: I am a Pākehā born during a "Māori renaissance", who spent my early years in close proximity to a bilingual school run by a wahine Māori principal and my Pākehā father; then my youth in a family-oriented home-educators' network run by Māori, Pākehā and Tauiwi mothers, including my own Pākehā mother; then my young adulthood working with Māori, Pākehā and Tauiwi families, and within multicultural early childhood institutions that purported to follow a bicultural curriculum. Throughout my life, I have been encouraged to perceive and interact with te ao Māori, in particular by wāhine Māori.

[24] Charlotte Graham-McLay, "Patricia Grace's Literary Legacy: Giving Māori Characters Their 'Natural' Voice", *The Guardian*, 23 February 2020, < https://rb.gy/d9d27s> [accessed 4 January 2024] (para 21).

[25] Nadine Hura, "Who's Allowed to Tell Our Stories", 25 October 2015, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/arts/whos-allowed-to-tell-our-stories/ [accessed 12 October 2025].

[26] Nadine Anne Hura, "Part of the Bargain: The Right to Write", *Te Waka Taki Kōrero*, 30 January 2019, <https://mlt.org.nz/part-of-the-bargain-the-right-to-write/> [accessed 12 October 2025].

[27] Hura, "Part of the Bargain", para 12 of 17.

I have had tamariki call me “Auntie”, and climb onto my knee for another story, and have found bookshelves full of characters who look and sound nothing like them. My intention is not to be a “white saviour”, or a white gatekeeper, or to claim any undue authority, but simply to put my care into action in the ways accessible to me. I care about the relationships we have in this country, and I am troubled by the conflicts “my people” often sweep under the rug.

Thesis summary

In the thesis that follows, I interrogate portrayals of disease and healing in Aotearoa New Zealand-based young adult texts broadly classifiable as teen Sick-Lit or Eco-Fiction. My dual focus reflects the interconnected nature of human and environmental wellbeing, and better captures Māori representations of human disease (and dis-ease), which I observe are often shown to occur collectively and in relation to the land, rather than individually and in relation to Western medical institutions. Further, this focus exemplifies real-world narratives concerning human and other-than-human health, which have been amplified across mainstream media in recent years, as Gen Z and the first Gen Alpha cohorts enter young adulthood against a backdrop of global pandemic and climate crisis, while anticipatory and ecological grief remain neglected areas of study.

The authors and primary texts studied are as follows:

Māori authors:

- Witi Ihimaera (*The Whale Rider*, 1987)
- Tim Tipene (*Patu: A Novel*, 2012)
- Whiti Hereaka (*Bugs*, 2013)
- Shilo Kino (*The Pōrangi Boy*, 2020)

- Tania Roxborogh (*Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea*, 2020)
- Steph Matuku (*Falling into Rarohenga*, 2021)
- Airana Ngarewa (*The Bone Tree*, 2023)
- Stacy Gregg (*Nine Girls*, 2024)

Pākehā authors:

- Joy Cowley (*The Shadrach Trilogy*, 1991-2000)
- David Hill (*See Ya, Simon*, 1992; *Below*, 2023)
- Sarah Ell (*Talking to Adam*, 2005)
- Des Hunt (*Whale Pot Bay*, 2009)
- Mandy Hager (*Singing Home the Whale*, 2014)
- Eileen Merriman (*Catch Me When You Fall*, 2018)
- Adele Broadbent (*If Only*, 2020)
- Kate S. Richards (*Call Me Madeleine*, 2021)
- Kate De Goldi (*Eddy, Eddy*, 2022)
- Arlo Kelly (*Echo*, 2022)

I acknowledge the potential for misattribution, given the complexities of cultural identification; further, as it is rare for authors to self-identify as Pākehā, this attribution is based on 1) the absence of iwi affiliation, and 2) British/European ancestry as reported online. The inclusion of Pākehā authors raised within Māori families (and potentially vice versa) also highlights the limitations of the either/or dichotomy so prevalent in Māori/Pākehā discourse.[28] While it was not my intention to categorise by cultural identity, my findings prompted me to do so for clarity's sake.

[28] Christina Stachurski, *Reading Pakeha?: Fiction and Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand* (The Netherlands: Rodopi, 2009, ProQuest Ebook Central), p. xix.

In a further bid for clarity, I differentiate between "disease"—pertaining to physiological sickness—and the hyphenated "dis-ease", which harks back to the word's original meaning, namely a lack of ease or comfort.[29] Though it is inaccurate to imply "disease" is bodily while "dis-ease" floats beyond the corporeal, I employ the prior for ailments readily palpable in a medical/biological sense, while the latter pertains to the physical, emotional, spiritual or psychological "discomforts" that accompany disease. Importantly, I do not intend "dis-ease" to imply a lesser ailment. Afterall, "[pain] can impact employment, relationships, and even suicide risk".[30]

Eco-fiction is an "elastic term" according to *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, "accommodating a variety of fictional works that address the relationship between natural settings and the human communities that dwell within them".[31] In *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (2010), Jim Dwyer suggests the debate is "ever evolving"; however, he cites Lawrence Buell's criteria, which is more or less reflective of the texts I classify as eco-fiction:

> 1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation. 4. Some

[29] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2025), < https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7477710214> [accessed 5 November 2025] s.v. disease, n.

[30] Sara Wasson, "Guest Editor's Introduction: Pain's Plurals and Narrative Disruption: Communicating Pain and Honoring Its Telling", *Literature and Medicine*, 41.2 (2023), 283–302 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_3046514194 > [accessed 28 November 2025] (p. 283).

[31] Jonathan Levin, Clare Virginia Eby and Benjamin Reiss, "Contemporary Ecofiction", in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. by Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1122–1136 (p. 1122).

> sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.[32]

In *The Promise of Multispecies Justice* (2022), Eben Kirksey and Sophie Chao suggest many writers have "abandoned" the term "nonhuman", given "it implies the lack of something—like 'nonwhite'".[33] Following their lead, I have adopted the term "other-than-human".

Further, I extend the "eco-fiction" definition to consider medicalised environments in recognition of the apparent merging of sick-Lit and eco-fiction genres.

In Chapter One—Pākehā Sick-Lit—I examine a selection of pre-COVID illness narratives, demonstrating the internalisation and compartmentalisation of disease which I claim is characteristic of early Pākehā sick-lit texts, whereby disease origin, diagnosis and treatment is contained within a relatively insular medical-personal-biological orbit, while healing—if possible—is shown to hinge on a combination of luck and trustful compliance with Western medical institutions. I argue this Pākehā disease "script" assumes that survival of the white, middle class, heteronormative individual is a satisfactory outcome to the story of disease, while health remains narratively divorced from Aotearoa New Zealand-specific geographical and socio-political contexts. In contrast, Chapter Two—Māori Sick-Lit—finds the origin of disease is located outside the individual body, in the colonial-capitalist macrosphere, where individual conditions are treated like manifestations of a generalised disease afflicting an entire people, rendering the ability to heal, above all else, a collective political issue.

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[32] Jim Dwyer, *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction* (United States of America: University of Nevada Press, 2010), p. viii.

[33] Eben Kirksey and Sophie Chao, "Introduction: Who Benefits from Multispecies Justice?", In *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*, ed. by E. Kirksey, S. Chao and K. Bolender (Duke University Press, 2022, JSTOR), pp. 1-22 (p. 2).

In Chapter Three—Māori and Pākehā: Self and the Other—I demonstrate how Pākehā authors include and exclude te ao Māori within their narratives, highlighting the discrepancies I found between Māori- and Pākehā-authored side-characters. I argue that while te ao Māori is increasingly shown as a place of healing for Pākehā, the near absence of Māori disease and dis-ease in Pākehā fiction encourages the perception that Māori are content to exist within the margins of Pākehā life, where they risk becoming a supplement to Pākehā wellbeing.

Chapter Four—Whales—demonstrates how the containment and compartmentalisation of disease is starting to break down in the Pākehā disease script, and while Pākehā authors gesture towards the strengths of te ao Māori in facing human and environmental degradation, Pākehā eco-fiction, in failing to address Indigenous issues, ultimately serves to let Pākehā off the hook. However, both Māori and Pākehā authors identify the same "poison", namely: toxic masculinity, rooted in racist, misogynistic, homophobic, capitalist, patriarchal violence, meanwhile connection and communication with the human and other-than-human Other is shown as antidote.

In conversation with the findings and discussions of these chapters, the creative component of my thesis, *Tāne and the Invisibles* introduces my original Aotearoa New Zealand-based young adult fiction which brings Pākehā individualism and Māori collectivism into the diseased space, following a Pākehā protagonist and her Māori and Tauiwi friends as they learn how to stay with our trouble.

My introduction concludes, now, with a brief overview of the illness narrative, before turning to young adult fiction, specifically.

The written word has a long and multifaceted relationship with medicine, from ancient Egyptian practices involving the literal consumption of healing incantations written on strips of edible papyrus paper, to the figurative consumption of comedy or tragedy by ancient Greeks and Romans for the purpose of medical catharsis, to doctor-prescribed courses of therapeutic reading (bibliotherapy) and writing (scriptotherapy) following the First and Second World Wars.[34] Then, more recently, from the rise of autobiographical "narrative medicine",[35] and its broadening body of ethics,[36] to medically-themed fiction, such as teen sick-lit,[37] the written word has continued to be treated as both a legitimate supplement to health, and a potential health hazard. Superstitions surrounding contagion and the potential of literature to "poison" young minds (particularly those of girls)[38] is a centuries-old concern, with book banning still evident in the third decade of the new Millennium.[39] This perceived blurring of the boundaries between the reader and the text, the consumer and the consumed, is more positively analysed within academia, where studies suggest fiction

[34] Janella D. Moy, "Reading and Writing One's Way to Wellness: The History of Bibliotherapy and Scriptotherapy", in *New Directions in Literature and Medicine Studies*, ed. by S. M. Hilger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, SpringerLink Books ebook) <https://doi-org.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/10.1057/978-1-137-51988-7_2> [accessed August, 2023] pp. 15-30 (pp. 15-16).

[35] For example, Rita Charon, Savantani DasGupta, Nellie Hermann, Craig Irvine, Eric R Marcus, Edgar Rivera Colsn, Danielle Spencer and Maura Spiegel, *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)

[36] Howard Brody and Mark Clark, "Narrative Ethics: A Narrative", *The Hastings Center Report*, 44.1 (2014), S7–S11 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_1531932145> [accessed 8 September 2023] (pp. 7-11).

[37] Julie Elman, "'Nothing Feels as Real': Teen Sick-Lit, Sadness, and the Condition of Adolescence", *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 6. 2 (2012), 175–191 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_journals_1026945997> [accessed August 2023] (pp. 175-191).

[38] Claudia Stokes, "Sentimentalism and the Feeling Body", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body*, ed. by T. M. Foster (Cambridge University Press, 2022, Cambridge Ebooks), pp. 29–43 (p. 31).

[39] Robert Kim, "Under The Law: Banning Books: Unlawful Censorship, or Within a School's Discretion?", *Phi Delta Kappan*, 103.7 (2022), 62–64 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_openaire_primary_doi_c026a45226346fd9931e92b964dac699> [accessed 15 January 2024] (p. 62).

can inspire empathy in children.[40] Charles Dickens' literature is credited with "laying the groundwork for a variety of [human rights] reforms";[41] Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877) with changing Victorian attitudes towards horses, leading to advances in animal welfare;[42] and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) with prompting the "modern" environmental movement.[43] I suggest the didactic tone surrounding disease symptomatology, diagnosis and treatment within Pākehā teen sick-lit texts speaks to an assumption of narrative's educative potential, though it is not clear who these realist portrayals of illness, recovery, and death aim to serve. Lindsey Grubbs argues in "Health Humanities, Illness, and the Body in American Literature" that the "disease narrative" ought to be used as a tool to "confront structural injustice".[44] According to Grubbs, this pro-social shift is increasingly called for by academics in the field, given that health is inextricably intertwined with issues relating to race, gender, disability and socio-economic status.[45] It appears this sentiment has long informed Māori-authored narratives, and closely aligns with a Kaupapa Māori approach to health and research.[46] The importance of story to the Māori world reverberates through pre-colonial histories, through the utilisation of the spoken word to pass on vital social,

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[40] Maria Nikolajeva, "What Is It Like to Be a Child? Childness in the Age of Neuroscience", *Children's Literature in Education*, 50.1 (2019), 23–37 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1007_s10583_018_9373_7> [accessed August 2023] (p. 26).

[41] Richard B. Gunderman, "Advocating for Children: Charles Dickens", *Pediatric radiology*, 50.4 (2020), 467–469 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_pubmed_primary_31901998> [accessed 13 October 2025] (p. 467).

[42] Nathan Poirier, Rebecca Carden, Hilary McIlroy and Courtney Moran, "Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Fauna-criticism and Black Beauty", *Animalia* 4.1 (2019) < https://shorturl.at/jOfOO> [31 December 2024] (p. 13).

[43] Sarah E. Boslaugh, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (Online), Britannica Academic <academic-eb-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/levels/collegiate/article/Silent-Spring/605447> [Accessed 20 November 2025] s.v. Silent Spring.

[44] Lindsey Grubbs, "Health Humanities, Illness, and the Body in American Literature", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body*, ed. by T. M. Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, Cambridge Ebooks), pp. 195-209 (p. 197).

[45] Grubbs, p. 197.

[46] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (3rd ed., Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), p. 149.

cultural, technical and ecological information.[47] In "'The Ancestors Within': Genetics, Biocolonialism, and Medical Ethics in Patrica Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*", Clare Barker argues the ethical considerations illuminated within *Baby No-Eyes*, provide "conceptual foundations that could contribute to the decolonization of genetic science".[48] Waikaremoana Waitoki and Andre McLachlan reiterate the importance of narrative to contemporary Māori worlds, in "Indigenous Māori Responses to COVID-19: He Waka Eke Noa?", arguing: "In telling the story of Indigenous wellbeing responses during this difficult time, we confirm our resilience and our wisdom as peoples who thrive in relation to each other, and to the natural environment".[49] This interpersonal care and resilience is further evident in marae responses during extreme weather events, demonstrating the collective ethics so prevalent in Māori literature.[50]

Across the globe, scholars of narrative ethics argue that the co-opting of the "recovery narrative" by health initiatives and organisations—particularly to the exclusion of other types of illness narrative—may inadvertently harm consumers, as only those who have experienced positive outcomes are given a platform.[51] According to Joy Llewellyn-

[47] Hēmi Whaanga, Priscilla Wehi, Murray Cox, Tom Roa and Ian Kusabs, "Māori Oral Traditions Record and Convey Indigenous Knowledge of Marine and Freshwater Resources", *New Zealand Journal of Marine and Freshwater Research*, 52. 4 (2018), 487–496 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_crossref_citationtrail_10_1080_00288330_2018_1488749 > [accessed 17 October 2025] (p. 487).

[48] Clare Barker, "'The Ancestors Within': Genetics, Biocolonialism, and Medical Ethics in Patricia Grace's Baby No-Eyes", *Journal of literary & cultural disability studies* 7.2 (2013), 141–158 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_journals_1426059412> [accessed 19 February 2024] (p. 141).

[49] Waikaremoana Waitoki and Andre McLachlan, "Indigenous Māori Responses to COVID-19: He Waka Eke Noa?", *International Journal of Psychology*, 57.5 (2022), 567–576 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_pubmedcentral_primary_oai_pubmedcentral_nih_gov_9347506> [accessed 8 January 2024] (p. 574).

[50] Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, Whānau Lead Way To Strengthen Marae Resilience, *NPM* < https://www.maramatanga.ac.nz/news-events/our-stories-our-people/wh-nau-lead-way-strengthen-marae-resilience> [accessed 8 May 2026]

[51] Joy Llewellyn-Beardsley, Stefan Rennick-Egglestone, Kristian Pollock, Yasmin Ali, Emma Watson, Donna Franklin, Caroline Yeo, Fiona Ng, Rose McGranahan, Mike Slade and Alison Edgley, "'Maybe I shouldn't Talk': The Role of Power in the Telling of Mental Health Recovery Stories", *Qualitative Health Research*,

Beardsley et al, these happily-ever-after testimonies are not necessarily reflective of the ongoing or shifting nature of recovery, and may perpetuate the underrepresentation and alienation of marginalised peoples whose experiences of illness are less hopeful.[52] Dis-eases that persist, including chronic pain, further problematise the healing-centric outcome. [53]

Similar concerns could be raised regarding dominant illness narratives in publication. For example, I found that within Aotearoa New Zealand-based young adult fiction, sudden or post-bereavement grief is favoured over anticipatory grief—the more complex variety, according to the literature.[54] Eliyahu Rosenheim and Rivka Reicher referred to anticipatory grief as "the lonely predicament" back in 1986,[55] and studies suggest children may still experience it as such.[56] According to research by Rachel Fearnley, palliative care nurses avoid talking to children about their parent's terminal diagnosis, because doing so would "open up a can of worms" which they neither had the time nor skills to manage.[57] Likewise, parents cited overwhelm, and uncertainty as barriers to discussion. Young people who experience good communication during the lead up to parental death have better mental health outcomes post bereavement.[58] Similarly, children who survive natural disasters may experience "post-traumatic growth", whereby an increase in psychological resilience is

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32.12 (2022), 1828-1842 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_sage_journals_10_1177_10497323221118239 > [accessed 11 November 2023] (p. 1828).

[52] Ibid.

[53] Wasson, p. 284.

[54] Rakel Ekland, Ulrika Kreicbergs, Anette Alvariza and Malin Lövegren, "Children's Self-Report About Illness-Related Information and Family Communication When a Parent Has a Life-Threatening Illness"*, Journal of Family Nursing*, 26.2 (2020), 102-110 < https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/pdf/10.1177/1074840719898192> [accessed 26 August 2021] (p. 107).

[55] Eliyahu Rosenheim and Rivka Reicher, "Children in Anticipatory Grief: The Lonely Predicament", *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 15: 2 (1986), 115-119 <https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp1502_2> [accessed 25 August 2021]

[56]Rachel Fearnley, "Death of a Parent and the Child's Experiences: Don't Ignore the Elephant in the Room", *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, 24:4 (2010), 450-459, < https://doi.org/10.3109/13561820903274871 > [accessed 25 August 2021]

[57] Fearnley, p. 455.

[58] Ekland et al, pp. 102-110.

gained, along with greater consideration for the natural environment, however, this outcome "requires the developmental and psychological abilities to grieve and articulate feelings in a narrative format".[59] Young participants in a 2015 study said they wanted to talk more about their grief, but avoided doing so to spare their ill parent, or because they were unsure how to start the conversation.[60] The invisible nature of this dis-ease is articulated by one girl's statement, "Sometimes I'll just feel alone, like I'm the only one dealing with this and it's like having the weight of the world on my shoulders".[61]

Eco-anxiety and anticipatory grief may suffer in narrative representation, in part, because some conditions lend themselves more readily to traditional (Western) plot structures than others. While discussing the human struggle to perceive "deep time", for example, John Parham states:

> literature is ill-equipped to address a requirement, in the Anthropocene, for human perspective to readjust to vast spatial, temporal and existential scales. Literature is habitually structured to a human scale – households, workplaces, villages, towns or cities. Narratives and perspectives centre on human drama (events happening to individuals, families or communities) and invariably reach humanly meaningful or rewarding conclusions with proportionately little account of environments, other animals or the Earth.[62]

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[59] Susan Clayton, Christie, M. Manning, Kirra Krygsman and Meighen Speiser, *Mental Health and our Changing Climate: Impacts, Implications, and Guidance* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, and ecoAmerica, 2017) p. 37.

[60] Farya Phillips and Frances M. Lewis, "The Adolescent's Experience When a Parent Has Advanced Cancer: A Qualitative Inquiry", *Palliative Medicine*, 29.9 (2015), 851-858 <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/pdf/10.1177/0269216315578989> [accessed 26 August 2021]

[61] Phillips and Lewis, p. 854.

[62] John Parham, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 5.

Deep time relates to Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence", or the "gradual, near invisible destruction of ecosystems, indigenous cultures, and nations in the global South by processes of colonialism, imperialism or globalisation".[63] Nixon states:

> Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.[64]

In my search for depictions of human and environmental grief in young adult fiction, I found an abundance of "immediate", "explosive", and "spectacular" events, employed by authors, perhaps, to shock the reader into continued engagement, rather than to explore grief in earnest. Similar limitations of narrative form (and perceived market demands) may dissuade portrayals of invisible human dis-ease and disease which take place across non-sensational or anti-climactic temporalities. In "The Radical Potential of Sickness Stories", Char Heather argues, "Chronic illness is an experience that does not easily fit into the conventions of narrative arc. It can ebb and flow, explode in debilitating pain or fatigue; it can feel fractious, meandering or fragmented".[65] Narrative arc "heavily emphasises resolution and elements of causality", while "chronic illness experience resists such a form as it lacks, most

[63] Parham, p. 11.

[64] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011, ProQuest Ebook Central) pp. 14-15.

[65] Char Heather, The Radical Potential of Sickness Stories, *The Polyphony: Conversations Across the Medical Humanities* <https://thepolyphony.org/2023/05/11/the-radical-potential-of-sickness-stories/> [accessed 22 July 2024]

often, a specific endpoint and has a complex relationship with causality".[66] As Sara Wasson states:

> Expectations of illness story—in the sense of both the events and the narrative of those events, the way they are told—has a direct impact on what kinds of pain experience can most readily be heard, and who is heard. Cultural contexts and expectations of illness story influence what can be heard in pain, what can be known about it, and who is respected as knowing. These are matters of epistemic justice.[67]

Aotearoa New Zealand-based academic, Melody Julianne May interrogates these issues in her thesis, "Erased: Representations of Women's Bodies in Chronic Invisible Pain", where she observes:

> stories of chronic pain and disability are often chaotic. Unlike the familiar cure-or-death endings of traditional disease narratives, these stories have no resolution, and audiences often reject them. When research participants are told a chaotic story of pain and disability, they rewrite it, so desperate is their need to erase the suffering. They long for a hero who overcomes all adversity.[68]

This desire for resolution results in stories that "set impossible standards" for women with chronic illnesses, therefore potentially exacerbating their isolation—a concern which ought to be considered, I argue, in regard to depictions of young protagonists who save the day in realist eco-fiction, while eco-anxious young readers remain bound to an "unsolvable" world that continues to flood and burn.[69] As May argues, unrealistic illness narratives may harm

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[66] Heather, para 1.

[67] Wasson, pp. 284-285.

[68] Melody Julianne May, "Erased: Representations of Women's Bodies in Chronic Invisible Pain" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2022) p. ii.

[69] Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville R. Ellis, "Ecological Grief as a Mental Health Response to Climate Change-Related Loss", *Nature Climate Change*, 8.4 (2018), 275–81 <https://www-nature-com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/articles/s41558-018-0092-2.pdf> [accessed 22 November 2021]; Terra Léger-Goodes, Catherine Malboeuf-Hurtubise, Trinity Mastine, Mélissa Généreux, Pier-Olivier Paradis

the very people they purport to represent—a concern that is relevant across marginalised groups. In "Sanitizing Chronic Illness? Representations of Cystic Fibrosis in Contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature", Dorothee Marx states that "stories about chronic illness often misrepresent or gloss over certain parts of being sick", while illness narratives involving young people "are often dominated by the voices of nondisabled caregivers or doctors".[70] The sanitization of "leaky bodies" in fiction, Marx argues, does a disservice to readers, especially those who live with "uncomfortable, painful, or even debilitating symptoms . . . related to bodily liquids and defecation, two realms which are considered taboo topics". The erasure of symptoms perceived—it would seem—to be too offensive to portray, only serves to reinforce the stigma and shame surrounding them.[71]

I have found this "sanitisation" is observable across Pākehā-authored young adult fiction, whereby bodies are kept relatively clean and contained, aside from incidents of vomiting. In contrast, Kino's depiction of Brown bodies stained with urine, snot, drool, and faeces in *The Pōrangi boy*, like Ngarewa's depiction of young and old bodies leaking blood, and visible disease in *The Bone Tree*, exemplifies, I suggest, the Māori author's refusal to conceal (or sanitise) that which Pākehā authors of young adult fiction avoid. The way Māori authors reveal and handle bodily fluids is comparable to the manner in which they expose the dirt on Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history; however, the willingness to narrativise taboo is not without risk. In "'Our Stories Could Kill You': Storytelling, Healthcare, and the

and Chantal Camden, "Eco-Anxiety in Children: A Scoping Review of the Mental Health Impacts of the Awareness of Climate Change", *Frontiers in psychology*, 13 (2022), 1-21 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_doaj_primary_oai_doaj_org_article_1099dc4f937b4aebb2c22044aed8bf09 > [accessed 25 January 2024]

[70] Dorothy Marx, "Sanitizing Chronic Illness? Representations of Cystic Fibrosis in Contemporary Children's and Young Adult Literature", *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 17.2 (2023), pp. 217-232 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_journals_2808362358> [accessed 10 October 2024] (p. 218).

[71] Marx, p. 219.

Legacy of the 'Talking Cure' in Patricia Grace's *Baby No-Eyes* (1998) and Georgia Ka'apuni McMillen's *School for Hawaiian Girls* (2005)", Emily Timms suggests both Grace and Ka'apuni McMillen "emphasize the *risks* to well-being associated with storytelling, and highlight how silence might function as a restorative practice" in its own right.[72] In reinforcing her argument, Timms states:

> This intermediary space where we evaluate *when* stories are told, to *whom* they are told, and *why* stories are unspoken until a particular time or remain untold, can qualify or nuance the turn to "narrativization" in postcolonial trauma studies and indigenous health research.[73]

Timms cites Cathy Caruth's "aporia", or the idea that trauma is "paradoxically unspeakable, even as the traumatized feel a compulsion to tell".[74] According to Timms, Māori and Indigenous trauma researcher, Irene Visser, argues that this notion "sits uneasily with indigenous 'spirituality' which extols the restorative power of oral ritual" as the "enunciated story is equated with amelioration".[75] Timms argues that Visser has created a "false dichotomy" here, whereby "silence is associated with Caruthian aporia", and suggests that this view "risk[s] romanticizing the principles of the 'talking cure' which, in turn, obscures the cultural subtleties and dynamics involved in the storying process in Māori and Hawaiian contexts".[76] However, Timms argues that "Despite some scepticism about the 'talking cure'

[72] Emily Kate Timms, "'Our Stories Could Kill You': Storytelling, Healthcare, and the Legacy of the 'Talking Cure' in Patricia Grace's Baby No-Eyes (1998) and Georgia Ka'apuni McMillen's School for Hawaiian Girls (2005)", *Journal of postcolonial writing*, 54.5 (2018), 627–640 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_crossref_primary_10_1080_17449855_2018_1524942> [accessed 19 February 2024] (p. 631).

[73] Timms, p. 631.

[74] Timms, p. 631.

[75] Timms, p. 631.

[76] Ibid.

found in other postcolonial spaces, the tone of analysis for [the therapeutic use of] indigenous Pacific storytelling is optimistic".[77]

This optimism—which is contingent on nuance and an ability to hold multiple realities at once—is reflected by May's suggestion that despite imperfections, the illness narrative is an artform that may dismantle oppressive beliefs surrounding chronic illness and in turn nurture a "more inclusive world".[78] Similarly, Heather observes that while the "unruliness" of chronic illness makes for a problematic relationship with stereotypical narrative structures, it can also be "a generative space for exploring different shapes of stories, with cripping and queering potential on what we expect from narrative".[79] May exemplifies this "cripping and queering" approach to illness narrative in the creative component of her thesis, *Happy Birthday Kelly Wisely*, a realist fiction that follows two protagonists: a teenage girl, who is introduced to the reader in the days leading up to the onset of a debilitating chronic illness; and a woman (a single mother of a young daughter) who lives with the pain, fatigue and unpredictability of her own invisible illness, while navigating a world that neither fully perceives nor accommodates her reality and often makes her experience worse. Here May shows with gut-wrenching realism how the wheel of illness self-perpetuates at every level of a woman's life, from personal and interpersonal struggles to issues with employment and healthy housing, all of which exacerbate symptoms and contribute to ongoing shame and insecurity. While the narrative initially follows a traditional structure, with an inciting incident and the initiation of a goal which sparks momentum and carries the reader along, right when the reader's investment reaches its peak, this momentum disintegrates without warning, and all is lost into the warp and

[77] Timms, p. 631.
[78] May, p. ii.
[79] Heather, para. 1.

entropy of the young protagonist's invisible illness.[80] The goal within the narrative dematerialises, I suggest, in order to serve an external goal: that of an enhanced comprehension in the able-bodied reader, free of sugar-coating or sanitisation. And, most vitally, to validate and empathise with the disabled or chronically ill reader, by making unapologetically visible aspects of their experience so typically "erased".

Regardless of genre or authorial intent, narrative seeped in medical metaphor has long served as a kind of vial, capturing the zeitgeists and underbellies of time and place, preserving attitudes towards health, illness and disease through its portrayals of the normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural, human and inhuman. The vulnerability of the young reader has been mirrored through feminised[81] characters confronted with disease. From the Victorian "romantic" tubercular,[82] and the "happy ending" deaths of child characters in 19th and early 20th century children's literature (see Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847); Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69); or Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* (1894), for example);[83] to a hardier cohort of young orphaned girls overcoming hardship while conjuring "miraculous healing" in others (such as Johanna Spyri's *Heidi* (1880-1881); or Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911)). These characters show feats of recovery not achieved by their doe-eyed predecessors—the young women of late 18th century sentimental literature (see Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1791); and Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797)) who dared give in to lust and were subsequently left

[80] May, p. 177.

[81] In *Environmental Crisis in Young Adult Fiction: A Poetics of Earth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), Alice Curry refers to "feminised peoples" as those who are not cis-gendered, heterosexual white men (for example, women, People of Colour, LGBTQUIA+ peoples, and children).

[82] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 31.

[83] Maria Nikolajeva, "Recent Trends in Children's Literature Research: Return to the Body", *International Research in Children's Literature*, 9. 2 (2016), 132–45 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_edinburghupress_primary_10_3366_ircl_2016_0198 > [accessed August 2023] (p. 40).

to perish for their sins.[84] The positioning of sex in relation to health and disease is worth noting, particularly given the observable shift from cautionary tales that link premarital sex to destitution and death (for young female characters, at least), to contemporary teen sick-lit texts, such as John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and its ilk, which depict sex and romance as a kind of parallel medicine which serves to affirm and enhance a young woman's quality of life while she faces her own mortality. Sex, in this case, can be extrapolated to sexuality, or rather, heterosexuality—based on the content of the vast majority of Aotearoa New Zealand-based teen sick-lit texts—which contains its own implicit narratives regarding health and healthy behaviour.

In the next section, I continue this discussion, highlighting common themes and assumptions within the teen sick-lit genre, which are problematised by issues of race, gender, sexuality, and disability.

YA and Health

Imbued with its myriad moralistic overtones, the novel has long been used as a device to ink conceptions of disease not only on the bodies of the young and female, but also on the cripped,[85] the queer,[86] and people of colour. In *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (2014) Eula Biss suggests "avoidance of outsiders" is an "ancient tactic for disease prevention" which feeds into "the longstanding belief that disease is a product of those we define as others".[87] Biss references a history of prejudicial attitudes and behaviours towards poor, Black, gay,

[84] Stokes, p. 29.

[85] Lennard J. Davis, "Crips Strike Back: The Rise of Disability Studies", *American Literary History*, 11.3 (1999), 500–512 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_chadwyckhealey_abell_R01759414> [May 16 2024] (p. 504).

[86] Travis M. Foster, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body*, ed. by T. M. Foster (Cambridge University Press, 2022, Cambridge Ebooks), pp. 1-10 (p.1).

[87] Eula Biss, *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (The Text Publishing Company, 2015, Ebook Central), p. 140.

disabled, disfigured, Indigenous, and immigrant populations, whereby, in the minds of white, heterosexual, able-bodied, "settled" majorities, these "outsider" bodies signify contagion—a concept that has been reinforced by Western science, contributing to distrust of the institution.[88]

The pathologising of "othered" bodies is evident in the original American teen sick-lit cannon from the 1980s, which Julie Elman refers to as "a genre of adolescent fiction that fused illness and romance narrative to reinforce the interdependent norms of ablebodiedness, heteronormativity, emotional management, and maturity among American youth".[89] Elman suggests these early narratives can be contextualised as a response to the countercultural movements of the 1960s and 70s, with sick-lit's conservative themes reinforcing the values some feared had been corroded by the liberations of previous decades. She refers to this original teen sick-lit as an "assiduous reconsolidation of traditional, heteronormative, white femininity and an anxious disavowal of liberal second-wave feminist ideals",[90] citing Julia Eccleshare's argument that while the women's liberation movement was finding its footing leading up to the birth of the "problem novel"—the first category of fiction written explicitly for and marketed to teenagers—the sick-lit genre was left untouched by feminist sensibilities, despite the fact both authors and their target-audience were predominantly female.[91] Elman also points out that the majority of early sick-lit protagonists are white. While this observation is not explicitly dwelled on, Elman gestures towards intersectionality when she states:

[88] Biss, pp. 36-37.
[89] Elman, p. 175.
[90] Elman, p. 181.
[91] Elman, p. 181.

> my analysis responds to Kenneth Kidd's recent call for a greater queer theoretical engagement with youth literature and expands on Robert McRuer's theory of "compulsory able-bodiedness" as a discourse in which "able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things". In this framework, heterosexuality and health often seamlessly imply one another, while queerness and disability exist as epitomes of abnormality.[92]

One could argue that an "assumed whiteness" (another "nonidentity", perhaps) runs in parallel to the compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality Elman outlines, further dictating how the "natural order of things" looks through the original landscape of American teen sick-lit, which implies that to be healthy is to be white, straight, and able-bodied. In critique of Lee Edelman's conceptualisation of "futurity", Jose Esteban Muñoz argues, "The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity".[93] Muñoz goes on to state:

> Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race or class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal—which is to say a subject whose time is a restricted and restricting hollowed-out present free of the need for the challenge of imagining a futurity that exists beyond the self or the here and now.[94]

If, as Muñoz suggests, the future is occupied by "privileged white babies" in the imaginaries of the white and privileged,[95] these "princes of futurity" are no doubt bearers of Susan

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[92] Elman, p. 177.

[93] José Esteban Muñoz, "Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity," in *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 2nd edn, ed. by J. E. Muñoz, J. Chambers-Letson, T. Nyong'o and A. Pellegrini (New York University Press, 2020, JSTOR), pp. 83-96 (p. 95).

[94] Muñoz, p. 94.

[95] Ibid.

Sontag's "good passport" to the "kingdom of the well", as opposed to the erroneously dichotomised "kingdom of the sick".[96] Or, indeed, of the disabled. The sick and/or cripped character does not fare well as a normalised identity within the yesteryears of Western illness narrative, given their conditions are not typically shown beyond the dramatic plot-point. In *Take Up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* (2001) Lois Keith highlights how the inability to stand and use one's legs is depicted within classic Western fiction as a tragedy that must be overcome, while tools of enablement—such as wheelchairs—are treated as inconveniences that disabled characters resent.[97] In turn, the sitting or horizontal body is coded as inhabiting transient states, rather than valid modes of embodiment in their own right.

Attendant on the insistence on the right kind of bodies is the right kind of gender performance, as injury and illness are presented as catalysts for young protagonists to undergo celebrated attitudinal or behavioural transformations. Lurlene McDaniel, prolific author of the original American teen sick-lit cannon, for example, portrays her young male and female characters' experiences of illness differently. According to Elman, in McDaniel's novels "Boys demonstrate their athleticism and virility 'in spite of' their illness or within their remission, while girls with illness must continue to cultivate their normality by rehabilitating their physical beauty in mostly all-female communities".[98] In *The Dawn Rochelle Series* (1985-2001), McDaniel's protagonist (Dawn) "saves" fellow cancer survivor, the "tomboyish" Marlee, by acting as a beacon of conservative femininity. Elman describes Marlee as an "unruly crip and genderqueer [who] resists rehabilitation" both through her

[96] Sontag, p. 3.
[97] Lois Keith, *Take up Thy Bed and Walk: Death, Disability and Cure in Classic Fiction for Girls* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 2001), p. 212.
[98] Elman, p. 178.

un-ladylike behaviour towards her peers at cancer camp, and her unwillingness to wear makeup or "pull herself together" aesthetically.[99] Though Dawn experiments with disabled love interests, Elman suggests, "Rather than acknowledging everyone's 'dual citizenship' in the 'kingdoms' of the sick and of the well, the series encourages Dawn to adhere to the logic of compulsory able-bodiedness by choosing Jake, who fully embodies the 'good passport' of the well".[100] On her deathbed, Marlee, the reformed tomboy, asks permission to imagine a kiss from Dawn's boyfriend, thus ridding herself of any residual genderqueerness before she dies, both redeeming herself, and further codifying her friend's transcendence into a "healthy", heterosexual, able-bodied future.

If the intention of 1980s sick-lit was, in part, as Elman suggests, to steer girls away from supposedly "un-whole" (i.e. crippled) and "unnatural" (i.e. queer) ways of being,[101] conflating disease with othered bodies and equating health (or spiritual transcendence prior to death) with white, heteronormative able-bodiedness, do the themes of Aotearoa New Zealand-based post-1980s sick-lit move along a similar vein? If so, what has been inherited, and if not, are there new patterns inherent in its contemporary embodiment? It is worth noting that the scope of the genre has broadened to include narratives depicting a wider spectrum of maladies. In 2016, Inis Testoni et al described teen sick-lit as "a genre rooted in illness, self-harm, suicide, sufferance, violence and death,"[102] highlighting the drift beyond physiologically-coded diseases (typically cancer) towards the psychiatric. In fact, the

[99] Elman, pp. 181-182.
[100] Elman, p. 185.
[101] Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006, Ebook Central), p. 34.
[102] Ines Testoni, Giulia Parise, Adriano Zamperini, Emilio Paolo Visintin, Emanuele Toniolo, Silvia Vicentini and Diego De Leo, "The 'Sick-Lit' Question and the Death Education Answer. Papageno versus Werther Effects in Adolescent Suicide Prevention", *Human Affairs Bratislava, Slovakia*, 26.2 (2016), 153–166 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_walterdegruyter_journals_10_1515_humaff_2016_0016262153> [accessed 11 November 2023] (p.154).

majority of grief/illness-themed local texts I located centralise neuro-divergence, mental illness, and suicidality (for example: Merriman's *Pieces of You* (2017), *Invisibly Breathing* (2019) and *Catch a Falling Star* (2023); and Fleur Beale's *Faraway Girl* (2022)). Given the popularity of the genre and its current trend surrounding self-harm, opinions regarding the appropriateness of the realist "death narrative" are divided, according to Testoni et al, with some arguing for its "educative usefulness" and others highlighting its "potentially dangerous copycat effect".[103] While I am weary of over-inflating authorial responsibility, I suggest more critique is needed in respect to representations of issues affecting young people, particularly those that receive inadequate attention on and off the page. In questioning who is most served by the content of sick-lit narratives, particularly given the genre's white-dominated, heteronormative, ableist history, this thesis not only provides an account of how contemporary authors in Aotearoa New Zealand engage with illness, from that of the individual to the community to the land, it also offers an original work of fiction that counters the aforementioned biases and strives to exemplify an alternative Pākehā approach. In the chapters to come, I demonstrate how Māori and Pākehā authors depict health, disease, healing, and dying, and how they avoid, unpack, problematise or romanticise the Māori-Pākehā relationship through illness narrative.

[103] Testoni et al, p. 153.

Chapter 1: Pākehā Sick-Lit

> You just don't think about dying when you're a teenager [. . .] the only people who die are your grandparents, or other people you don't know. [104]

The threat of early mortality is so rare according to Pākehā-authored young adult fiction, diseased characters are outliers within their respective worlds, as is disease itself. In this chapter, I examine a selection of Pākehā-authored young adult novels with illness themes, published from the early 1990s to the late 2010s. Section One begins with Sarah Ell's *Talking to Adam* (2005), and Eileen Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall* (2018): two texts that fit the original medical-romance definition of the American teen sick-lit genre as articulated by Elman, and which demonstrate the narrative containment and compartmentalisation of disease I argue is characteristic of the Pākehā authored sick-lit text. I then bring David Hill's *See Ya, Simon* (1992) and Joy Cowley's *The Shadrach Trilogy* (1991-2000) into discussion, demonstrating how privileging of the zoomed-in, individualistic focus naturalises certain disease narratives while obscuring others. Expanding on this claim, Section Two identifies the characteristics of healers within Pākehā-authored texts, while Section Three discusses depictions of "poison" versus "medicine", arguing the Pākehā disease script is not as objective as it first appears.

Origin of Disease

I begin my examination on the "origin of disease" in Pākehā sick-lit with Ell's *Talking to Adam* and Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*—two texts that centralise disease discourse on the cancer-stricken cells of young (white) female protagonists. Drawing on David Hill's *See Ya,*

[104] Ell, *Talking to Adam* (New Zealand: Scholastic, 2005), p. 153.

Simon, I then highlight deficiencies stemming from this mindset, including Hill's positioning of risk and contagion solely in relation to the wellbeing of the able-bodied majority. While questioning who these illness narratives serve, I then bring Cowley's *The Shadrach Trilogy* into discussion, arguing that disease is so unusual in Pākehā-authored fiction it becomes a phantom antagonist, or a psychological play-thing for young Pākehā characters to toy with their existential fears, without actually suffering loss of life. When young white characters do die—such is the case in *See Ya, Simon*; and *Talking to Adam*—the dead appear to take their diseases with them, solidifying the perception that normal Pākehā life is free of illness.

In *Talking to Adam*, Ell's Katie directs the reader's attention towards the individual physicality of disease from the first line: "I didn't even know I was sick when my hair started falling out".[105] This diary-entry style prose mirrors and emphasises the positioning of disease as a personal occurrence marked by physiological loss, from the contents of Katie's stomach, to her hair, skin, and other superficial aspects of her appearance. Katie lists symptoms she noticed prior to diagnosis, including fatigue, nausea, weight loss, and a strange freckle "sitting alone on a hairless patch of skin [. . .] and when I rub it, tiny flakes of skin float off".[106] However, Katie is able to ignore the prospect of disease until she is hospitalised for alcohol poisoning, leading to examination of her blood under a microscope, revealing the elevation of certain cells, which her doctor tells her indicates her body is fighting infection, while "Some of the other elements in [her] blood test were not what [he'd] expect in a good, healthy person [her] age".[107] This discovery leads to further tests, including a chest x-ray, exemplifying how Ell's narrative zooms in, and returns to this zoomed-in perspective throughout, portraying the personal and the medical-physiological-microbiological realities

[105] Ell, p. 9.
[106] Ell, p. 33.
[107] Ell, p. 116.

of disease in parallel. I argue this scientific lens serves to validate the structure of the disease narrative itself, implying—through vivid physiological accounts of disease and close proximity to the institution of Western science—that the personalised medicalised dyad typical of Pākehā teen sick-lit naturally paints a complete and objective picture of disease.

Merriman utilises the same zoomed-in focus in *Catch Me When You Fall*, which begins with Alex[andra] awaiting a blood test. Like with Ell's *Talking to Adam*, medical professionals explain the diseased state to the young female protagonist by verbally translating her cellular behaviour, which Alex suggests is like learning "a whole new language".[108] In turn, both Merriman's Alex and Ell's Katie use this bio-medical lingo to describe their illnesses, reinforcing the perception that disease is, first and foremost, an internal phenomenon, naturally shrouded in the mysteries and complexities of Western science. According to Ell and Merriman's texts, the disease script goes as follows: the young (white) protagonist learns she has cancer; she surrenders her rebellious body to the technologies of Western medical science; then, from within this liminal space of passive compliance, she hopes for remission—a result that, once all available treatments are exhausted, hinges on luck, much like the onset of cancer in the first place. While this script is reasonable, the closed-circle narrative arc—which starts and ends with an inward focus on the diseased individual—gives, I argue, a false impression of conceptual completeness, whereby the healing of the individual is shown to be the ultimate satisfactory conclusion to the story of disease. This interpretation is reinforced, I suggest, by the philosophical—rather than political—nature of questioning that protagonists in Pākehā sick-lit are shown to engage in with their love interests.

[108] Merriman, p. 42.

Ell's Katie and Adam discuss what happens to a person after death, prompting Katie to question whether there is more to human life than biological machinery.[109] In Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*, Alex and Jaimie are similarly philosophical in their tinkering with mortality, as Alex likens herself to Schrödinger's cat: "locked in a box with a source of radiation and a poison. The poison will be released if the radioactive source emits radiation, which may or may not happen".[110] Due to her cancer, Alex—like Schrödinger's hypothetical cat—is "simultaneously considered alive and dead until the box is opened".[111] Merriman does not clarify which aspect of cancer represents what element of the metaphor; however, broadly speaking, it makes sense that Alex, by virtue of her condition—which continually presents new "boxes" to open, each time revealing her state as living or dead—occupies two realities simultaneously. First, Alex represents the cat. We see this when she signs-off as "SC" (Schrödinger's cat), and Jamie gives her the nickname "puss-cat": a morbid in-joke reminiscent of the dark humour American author John Green's dying adolescent lovers share in *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). Within both Green (USA) and Merriman's (NZ) narratives, potentially terminal illness is the catalyst that thrusts young (white) characters into a close relationship with death, and while their able-bodied friends and family flail around them, often saying or doing the wrong things, only the young and afflicted know how to exist in their tragic-romantical limbos. While inhabiting their own private worlds, somewhat suspended from reality, Green's Hazel and Augustus, and Merriman's Alex and Jaimie are simultaneously alive and dead, weighed down and transcendental, young and old—older, in a sense, than the adults around them, due to the sheer magnitude of what they have had to endure in order to survive (a point that ties in to the dis-eases of young activists, which we

[109] Ell, p. 238.
[110] Merriman, p. 10.
[111] Ibid.

see depicted in the eco-fictions discussed in the following chapters). Merriman's Alex attributes the outcome of her disease, by and large, to chance—a factor beyond her control that will only be revealed once "the box" is opened. If Alex is Schrödinger's cat, then her body, at a microscopic level, is presumably the box. At the same time, Alex, along with her entourage of specialists, could represent Schrödinger, given Alex is the conjurer of her own thought experiment; the perceiver who holds two opposite outcomes simultaneously, meanwhile the scientists who have shepherded her into the experiment of Western medicine occupy a somewhat heroic role in their ability to wield technologies that tip the odds of remission in her favour.

Environmental disease and dis-ease is hinted at within Ell and Merriman's texts; however, narrative associations between external disease and the internal diseased state are loose at best. In *Catch Me When You Fall*, Merriman's Alex references the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, noting the damage to roads and houses, and to her nervous system; however, she makes a point of noting that the worst day of her life was not the earthquake, but rather the day she was diagnosed with leukaemia.[112] Alex's ability to centralise personal illness over collective catastrophe is further evident when she states, "[I] tried to ignore Parliament TV (*New Zealand flag debate homeless people 480,000 Syrian refugees*) and waited for my white cells to appear".[113] Thus, while the young Pākehā protagonist does superficially notice the blemishes across her macroscopic landscapes, she is able to ignore them and return her focus inward—much like how Ell's Katie, prior to her diagnosis, is able to ignore her flaking skin; then later, remains passive upon learning of her love-interest Adam's dis-eased homelife. Katie informs the reader that Adam's mother is "on a benefit and can't afford the

[112] Eileen Merriman, *Catch Me When You Fall* (New Zealand: Penguin, 2018), p. 12.
[113] Merriman, p. 158.

petrol to come down to Auckland [to visit Adam in hospital]", and that his friends are "pretty bad at looking after him when he's sick – their idea of a square meal is a pie and a few cans of beer", so he stays with his aunty between hospital treatments and makes do with his sickness benefit.[114] When Katie meets Adam's mother, she tells the reader, "She seems a little . . . mad [. . .] She smokes a lot – now I know where Adam gets it from".[115]

Thus, while both Ell and Merriman's protagonists perceive environmental disease and dis-ease, their commentaries are politically passive. Kathryn Walls discusses the "apolitical" nature of renowned Pākehā author Margeret Mahy's early narrative style in relation to wealth disparity, arguing, "In *The Changeover* it is love, the love of individuals for each other, that defies the cash nexus. The novel contains not a single reference to politics, and it does not acknowledge the possibility of political action".[116] Walls goes on to state, "[T]he challenge faced by the young adult protagonists, whether rich or poor, is to rise above the psychologically unhealthy mentalities generally contingent upon their particular socioeconomic station. It never occurs to them to campaign for the redistribution of wealth".[117]

We may read between the lines in Ell's text and deduce that impoverished living conditions and exposure to carcinogens (alcohol and tobacco) are tangentially related to Adam's inability to heal; however, this is not stated directly, and mention of Adam's mother only serves to link environmental dis-ease with the behaviours of dis-eased individuals, in alignment with Walls' observation above. In *See Ya, Simon*, Hill demonstrates the aforementioned containment and compartmentalisation of disease in multiple ways. While

[114] Ell, pp. 216-217.
[115] Ell, p. 250.
[116] Kathryn Walls, "Money", in *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction*, ed. by A. Jackson (Victoria University Press, 2011), pp. 112-138 (p. 126).
[117] Walls, p. 128.

his plot revolves around Simon's character, the reader is only given insight into the dying, disabled boy's experiences through the perspective of his able-bodied best friend (protagonist Nathan), creating an element of distance which reinforces the sense that Simon's wheelchair-bound and visibly deteriorating body is a discrete container of disease: an unfortunate genetic abnormality in an otherwise "normal" landscape of able-bodied characters. Further, since the reader is not inside Simon's narrative, illness and disease are effectively pushed "over there". Simon exists within able-bodied microcosms, which is true too for Ell and Merriman's protagonists, to whom disease is isolated—and through whom disease is isolatable—leaving their respective families and broader environments relatively unscathed. In *See Ya, Simon*, Nathan assures the reader Simon's condition poses no risk to others:

> You can't catch muscular dystrophy from germs [. . .] You get it from certain genes [. . .] some stupid fool started a rumour that Simon had AIDS, and that's why he was sick. Next thing you know, some parents wouldn't let their kids play with Simon, in case they caught something from him. One father even rang up the Catholic school and said he didn't want his child sitting next to Simon in class. Then one afternoon a mother, who'd come to pick her kid up after school, found her talking to Simon while he waited for his Mum to come in the van and get him. This other mother started calling to her kid things like, 'Come away. Quickly! You know you're not supposed to go near that boy!'[118]

These anecdotes are presented early on, before Hill's relatively large cast of characters proceed to demonstrate an admirable level of inclusion. *See Ya, Simon* was published in the

[118] David Hill, *See Ya, Simon* (Puffin Books, 2002), p. 13.

wake of the AIDS pandemic, and Hill's characterisations reflect the ideal that was promoted by anti-discrimination campaigns in Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 1990s; however, this depiction likely challenged a less inclusive reality, given stigmatisation and marginalisation is still a concern four-decades on.[119] I suggest that by role-modelling the ideal, Hill calls-out disabling attitudes and behaviours, while reflecting, and perhaps inadvertently reinforcing misguided fears of contagion. Muscular dystrophy, unlike AIDS, is non-communicable; therefore, in contrasting the two diseases in a way that justifies Simon's inclusion based on what he does not have, and by what he cannot pass on through infection, Hill solidifies the inward, self-contained nature of Simon's condition. The distancing of genes from germs drives the direction of illness inwards, beyond the character's cells to their internal blueprint, which, in Simon's case, is framed as a positive thing, given that this means disease will not spread outwards posing a threat to his able-bodied community. Nathan's teacher labels a student's misattribution of AIDS a "cruel rumour". The reader is led to assume the child who spread the rumour intended to be derogatory, using "AIDS" as a slur, and perhaps this was intended to be the case; though, it would not be unreasonable for a young person to mistake an unknown medical condition for AIDS during a global AIDS pandemic, nor would such a diagnosis warrant enforced social distancing between Simon and his peers. Hill's narrative does not explore this nuance, rather, he uses the concept of AIDS to make a point about inclusion—a point that unfortunately does not extend to the condition itself.

[119] Education Gazette Tukutuku Kōrero, Challenging Ableism, *Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauranga Ministry of Education* <https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/challenging-ableism/> [accessed 27 July 2024]; Susan Mundt, Nearly Half of People Living with HIV Experienced Stigma from Healthcare Providers: Research, *Burnett Foundation Aotearoa* < https://www.burnettfoundation.org.nz/articles/news/nearly-half-of-people-living-with-hiv-experienced-stigma-from-healthcare-providers-research/> [accessed 26 July 2024]

While the reader is assured Simon's friends will not catch MD, Simon's own compromised immune system receives little attention, as such, Hill demonstrates who is perceived to be most at risk from his disease, namely, his able-bodied peers. In truth, immunocompromised people are more likely to be at risk of infection from the able-bodied majority than the other way around, and given Simon's body is in the process of shutting down, it is odd no consideration is given to how the potential infectiousness of others may impact him. This assumption does, however, echo societal narratives that position the vulnerable Other, first and foremost, as dangerous to the able-bodied self. In *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (2014), Eula Biss unpacks the notion of the "risk group", which, according to Susan Sontag, "revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged".[120] Exemplifying Sontag's point, Biss states:

> When the last nationwide smallpox epidemic began in 1898, some people believed that whites were not susceptible to the disease. It was called "Nigger itch," or, where it was associated with immigrants, "Italian itch" or "Mexican bump." When smallpox broke out in New York City, police officers were sent to help enforce the vaccination of Italian and Irish immigrants in the tenements. And when smallpox arrived in Middlesboro, Kentucky, everyone in the black section of town who resisted vaccination was vaccinated at gunpoint. These campaigns did limit the spread of the disease, but all the risk of vaccination, which at that time could lead to infection with tetanus and other diseases, was absorbed by the most vulnerable groups. The poor were enlisted in the protection of the privileged.[121]

[120] Biss, p. 28.
[121] Biss, pp. 28-29.

The vilification of perceived risk groups is still visible across multiple aspects of health and intersectionality, and it appears these marginalised groups continue to be "enlisted in the protection of the privileged".

Persecution of the transgender community, for example, is an ongoing concern nationally and internationally, with trans-visibility alone treated as a form of abuse, or a contagious disease with the potential to infect others, particularly young people.[122] Though transgendered individuals are significantly more likely to be victims of abuse than they are to be perpetrators of it, members of the cis-gendered majority continue to claim victimhood.[123] Transphobic rhetoric is given a platform in the guise of protecting a cis-gendered majority from hypothetical victimisation, effectively leaving a vulnerable minority at greater risk of violent assault and murder.[124] The most salient example of mis-attributed risk-grouping in Aotearoa New Zealand arguably concerns our Indigenous population. Though Māori have been systematically oppressed through colonisation, some maintain it is Pākehā New Zealanders who are at risk of disadvantage by equity and reconciliation measures, despite occupying the privileged majority for over a century.[125] According to

[122] Azaria Howell, "Upper Hutt Drag King Storytime Cancelled After 'threats' and Opposition from Destiny Church", *NZ Herald*, 25 June 2024, https://rb.gy/f0usp4 [accessed 28 October 2024]; Chris Harrowell, "Call For Removal of 'Gender Ideology' From Primary Schools", *Eastern Times*, 17 May 2024, < https://www.times.co.nz/news/call-for-removal-of-gender-ideology-from-primary-schools/> [accessed 28 October 2024]; Shaneel Shavneel Lal, "Shaneel Lal: Winston Peters' Transgender Women's Bathroom Ban is a Vibes for Votes Policy", *NZ Herald*, 27 August 2023, <https://rb.gy/svtjry> [accessed 28 October 2024]; Radio New Zealand, "Brian Tamaki's Destiny Church Notice With 'Time To Kill' Tagline 'Extremely Concerning'", *Radio New Zealand*, 14 May 2024, **<**https://shorturl.at/B9eh4> [accessed 22 October 2024]; Alex Hinton, Two Myths Fueling the Conservative Right's Dangerous Transphobia, *Sapiens* <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/transphobia-myths/> [accessed 22 October 2024]

[123] Rachel Dowd, Transgender People Over Four Times More Likely Than Cisgender People to be Victims of Violent Crime, *Williams Institute UCLA* <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/ncvs-trans-press-release/> [accessed 22 October 2024].

[124] Gretchen Rachel Hammond, "Trans Murders: Rising alongside: Anti-Trans Rhetoric", *Windy City Times*, 32.1 (2016), pp. 1-26 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_gale_infotracnewsstand_STND_A466413405> [accessed 1 June 2025]

[125] Lucy O'Hagan, A Call For Genuine Accountability: How Do I Explain Health Equity to the ACT Party and Mr Luxon?, *New Zealand Doctor Rata Aotearoa* <https://rb.gy/gzo9dp> [accessed 28 October 2024];

British professor of social policy, Nicola Rollock, those who perpetuate systems that disadvantage people of colour typically reject their racialised experiences, and assume white privilege is "the natural order of things", meanwhile, Rollock argues:

> Attempts to 'out' these processes, to name and reveal whiteness are often met with denial or hostility (Picower, 2009; Rollock, 2012). By constructing this 'racial fantasyland' (Mills, 1997: 18) and also determining the rules that govern it, whites are able to retain an invisible or, if present, innocent and 'neutral' role in their relations with other ethnic groups. Within this context, accusations of racism become remade as illusion, as fantasy.[126]

If we return to Ell's Katie and Merriman's Alex, this notion of "innocence" and "neutrality" becomes apparent as the young Pākehā protagonists quietly brush aside evidence of macroscopic dis-ease, and refocus their attention inwards, without narrative critique or consequence. Their "invisible" or "neutral" roles not only become evident in relation to the Other (for example, Māori characters are absent from both texts), but also in relation to the diseases and dis-eases that are perpetuated by systems that privilege the privileged and disproportionally disadvantage the marginalised. I make this point not to imply cancer survivors should direct their energy outwards, but rather to note how dominant disease discourses may reinforce assumptions about disease, not just as an experience, but as a concept, potentially diverting perceptions away from systemic collective culpability over shared environmental disease, for example, in favour of personal victimisation that seemingly occurs at random.

Virginia Fallon, "Signs of the (Racist) Times: Māori, Bilingual Signage, Still Used for 'Race-Baiting'", *Stuff*, 25 June 2023 <https://shorturl.at/0MuUl> [accessed 26 February 2024]

[126] Nicola Rollock, "Race, Class and 'The Harmony of Dispositions'", *Sociology*, 48.3 (Oxford: 2014), 445–451, <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_1692289492> [accessed 27 October 2024] (p. 447).

As Biss observes, the privileged self may indeed be "threatened" by the diseased marginalised Other, but the privileged self is also a threat, just by virtue of having a body, as Biss argues: "Even the little bodies of children, which our time encourages us to imagine as absolutely vulnerable, are dangerous in their ability to spread disease".[127] Similarly, as Hill's *See Ya, Simon*, demonstrates, the misinformed narratives children pick up from adults or create for each other also have the ability to spread dis-ease. The notion of the "absolutely vulnerable child" could more accurately be labelled the absolutely vulnerable *white* child—or, in other words, the children of a relatively privileged majority who overestimate risk to self, perhaps, while failing to perceive the ongoing harm the actions and inactions of the dominant cause the marginalised. Biss exemplifies this point by citing research from the United States which suggests it is often white, middle class parents who choose not to vaccinate their children, citing ethical objections, while children from marginalised communities are more likely to be under-vaccinated due to circumstances beyond parental control—circumstances that are also likely to increase the severity or impacts of illness if contracted.[128] In this instance, the privileged white child is perceived to be more vulnerable to vaccine than the underprivileged Brown or Black child is to potentially fatal illness. I argue Pākehā authors similarly treat the young Pākehā reader as vulnerable to uncomfortable discourse regarding their settler-colonial heritage, as evidenced by the erasure of Māori disease and dis-ease from their Aotearoa New Zealand-based young adult fictions. And like the marginalised Black and Brown children who bear the brunt of the white and privileged self-centring Biss alludes to, tamariki Māori who want to read books with Māori protagonists may struggle to avoid Māori disease and dis-ease.

[127] Biss, p. 30.
[128] Biss, pp. 30-31.

The narrative containment of disease and the perceived threat of the Other, is also evident in Pākehā author Joy Cowley's *The Shadrach Trilogy*. In book two, *Gladly, Here I Come* (1994), Cowley utilises terminology pertaining to disease and contagion to narrativise the arrival of orphaned Eden. Brothers Mikey and Sky liken the effect Eden's presence has on their household and community to a contagious disease: "'She's got a bad attack of Edenitis [. . .] By tomorrow night she'll have spots and dots and chills and ills and wheezles and measles'".[129] Eden's character introduces dysfunction to his new family and community. The collective excitement or "Edenitis" turns to suspicion, as Eden morphs in Cowley's characters' minds from an object of intrigue to one who cannot be trusted. Through using metaphors of contagion to discuss the arrival of the outsider, Cowley—like Hill, Ell and Merriman—positions disease as an abnormal phenomenon removed or removable from normal life. This conceptual distancing is amplified in book three, *Shadrach Girl* (2000), which implies on the blurb that the children's mother (Sophie) has a "serious illness". The expectation of a disease narrative is reinforced by Mikey and Eden's suspicion she has cancer:

> Eden and Mikey now knew for certain [Sophie's illness] was serious. For *three* days, Sophie had been taking the herbal tablets but was no better. Sometimes Eden woke up to hear her through the wall next to his bed, vomiting in the bathroom. [. . .] She had lost a lot of weight and there were dark shadows under her eyes but neither she nor Joe would talk about it. She kept saying that she would be fine. Fine didn't happen. Joe was treating her as though she were as frail as a butterfly [. . .] The truth was, he was treating her as though she wouldn't last long. Eden and Mikey kept

[129] Joy Cowley, *Gladly, Here I Come* (New Zealand: Puffin Books, 1995), p. 35.

> seeing it, but it was too big, too terrible for discussion. […] What would happen […] if Sophie died?[130]

Sophie's "serious illness" turns out to be pregnancy, thus, Cowley tricks the reader into anticipating death, only to reveal its paradox (new life). In a sense, this happens first with Eden's psychosocial rebirthing in *Gladly, Here I Come*, as the orphan only obtains full entry into his new family after he runs away, then figuratively (and almost literally) dies for their collective dis-eases. Death, in a metaphorical sense, precedes healing, and illness plays out on the individual body—from its playfully benign conception ("wheezles and measles"; "Edenitis") to its near fatal conclusion, at which point Eden's outsider status is corroborated by his geographical location—he is, in a literal sense, said to be lost outside. Healing can only occur when Eden is physically brought back inside the family home, and his return from the extremities of social, psychological and geographical boundaries occurs simultaneously. A theme that has parallels with Ell's Katie, who is pulled back from the implied toxicity of her teenage rebellion by cancer in *Talking to Adam*; and Adele Broadbent's Kayla, who is likewise nudged into behavioural re-alignment by the death of her Auntie Mae in *If Only*. The conclusion of Sophie's illness in *Shadrach Girl* is initially presumed to be "too big, too terrible for discussion". Indeed, any discussion remains firmly in the realm of fantasy for Mikey and Eden who play with concepts of disease—teasingly at first, then avoidantly.

By using physiological disease as a metaphor for psychological dis-ease in book two, and through her bait-and-switch tactics in book three, I argue Cowley turns physiological illness and disease into a kind of phantom antagonist. In *Gladly, Here I Come*, Eden embodies this role long enough to generate conflict; and in *Shadrach Girl*, cancer becomes an

[130] Joy Cowley, *Shadrach Girl* (New Zealand: Puffin Books, 2000), p. 34.

unspoken, looming entity, threatening death and destruction, and as the boys agonise in their shared silence, it is the *thought* of disease rather than disease itself that represents the true antagonist in this story—an interesting point to dwell on considering the previous discussion surrounding actual versus perceived risk. As Cowley only broaches the theme insofar as it excites fear, the complexities and realities of living with disease are not explored. While illness is presented as a fact of life through its proximity to pregnancy, paradoxically, it is Sophie's pregnancy that abnormalises illness, and effectively erases disease from the narrative. Essentially, Sophie's illness exists only in fearful speculation which is later corrected, such that *Shadrach Girl* insists that "real" life is a place of growth and progression rather than loss and death (though, we do see death of the family's beloved horse, in book one of the trilogy: *Bow Down, Shadrach*).

Further, Eden's recovery implies that a "good" trajectory into adulthood represents the norm, while dis-ease and disease represents an unfortunate exception. Eden initially deviates from his age-mate Mikey's assumptions of what constitutes healthy adolescent behaviour, given he smokes, swears, steals and does not talk or act like a child—behaviours that are presented as abnormalities stemming from unfortunate beginnings. The implication being that theft, deception, destruction and a general disrespectfulness towards one's hosts are "outsider" behaviours, as opposed to, say, the modes through which Aotearoa New Zealand's settler-colonial society was built, and to which the majority of New Zealanders are arguably still complicit. Cowley's central family are said to have Māori heritage; therefore, if one were to go out on a limb, it could be argued that Eden—the pale outsider who brings his dis-ease to a "new" land he eventually calls home—inadvertently symbolises the dis-eased white settler/coloniser, who is first met by his hosts with excitement, then fear. Eden's deviances are attributed to his disadvantaged upbringing, implying that the dis-eases he

inflicts on others are a product of his own troubling circumstances. The mechanisms of cause and effect are kept relatively individualistic, however. Eden is the proverbial apple who didn't fall far from the tree: his dysfunction is shown to be rooted in his birth-family's dysfunction, rather than, say, a society fuelled by disparity. This dysfunction is ultimately shown to be resolved within a good, humble nuclear family, still, Eden's dis-ease must lead him to the precipice of death before he can be saved and brought into alignment with the status quo: a notion reflecting Christian sentiments, perhaps, reinforced by the character's biblical name. Original sin occurs in the garden of Eden, and blame is attributed to the behaviours of individuals, as opposed to the governing authority responsible for creating the context for dis-eased consumption in the first place.

In *Gladly, Here I Come*, it is the job of individuals to rehabilitate themselves and each other within the microcosms of the nuclear family, and community. Likewise, we find depictions of individualistic accountability for healing the self and other in *See Ya, Simon*, when Hill presents what appears to be the crux of his narrative message, during a classroom conversation between Simon and his peers:

> "[W]hy am I at *this* school, an ordinary normal school[?]"
>
> 'Why not, Simon?' said Nelita. 'You should be treated like other kids as far as possible.' There were murmurs and nods of agreement around the room.
>
> 'Yeah! Right!' Simon agreed. 'All the spina bifida kids and MD kids and cerebral palsy kids I know, think that, too. They want to live like – live *with* – able bodied kids as much as they can [. . .] we don't want your bloody pity [. . .] we want your world!'.[131]

[131] Hill, pp. 83-84.

While this discussion between Hill's Simon and his young peers could have hypothetically turned political—regarding, for example, how the able-bodied world disables certain populations and how disparity needs to be addressed systemically—in the case of Hill's narrative, Simon's declaration leads to the admiration of his teacher and peers, who are reaffirmed for their inclusive behaviour towards their disabled friend, which requires little effort on their part. Throughout *See Ya, Simon*, Hill demonstrates how fun, easy and rewarding inclusion of Simon is for others. Even in his final weeks, Simon remains a model member of the diseased and disabled community—not only does he contain his disease in a way that is safe for the able-bodied, he protects them from suffering his dis-eases through endless good humour. This "sanitisation" of the dying state, along with Hill's positioning of contagion gives the impression that Simon's character functions primarily as a tool to inspire, educate, and entertain. As such, this narrative may not be intended for those with chronic or degenerative diseases themselves, but rather able-bodied readers who stand to learn a lesson on inclusivity while having their morbid curiosity entertained through a sanitised form of voyeurism: a criticism I extend to Pākehā teen sick-lit in general. I make this observation not to discredit the value of the narratives under investigation—I was deeply moved by *See Ya, Simon* and *The Shadrach Trilogy* as a child—nor to imply my own writing necessarily takes a different course, but rather to highlight a pattern, and to suggest Pākehā authors consider what assumptions may be inadvertently perpetuated through the conclusions we make to our narratives of disease.

Cowley's resolution to *Gladly, Here I Come* is reminiscent, I argue, of family movies from the United States in the 1990s, which approach complex issues affecting young people, like divorce, only to drop the full weight of the theme, or solve it too easily in the end. Were there more texts that normalise chronic illness and disease for young readers, simplistic

narrative outcomes would not necessarily be an issue; however, I found Pākehā authors tend to sensationalise disease, or use it in a way that can subsequently be recovered from, while the less dramatic, though arguably equally affecting day-to-day experiences of chronic and terminal illness are relatively invisible. In turn, this invisibility allows the able-bodied protagonist—as an entity representing the able-bodied reader—to remain passive, neutral or innocent. If disease and death of the Other resonate at the level of the individual alone, then the call to action is obfuscated by poignance and personal growth, and personal gain over someone else's loss (including loss of life) becomes reified in narrative form, almost as a rite of passage from Pākehā adolescence into a "normal" Pākehā adulthood.

In summary, this section found Pākehā authors of teen sick-lit typically centralise disease within the bodies of individual characters. At the same time, the diseased individual becomes synonymous with the "outsider", thus removing illness from normal life. In turn, this narrative containment and othering privileges certain disease scripts. In particular, I argue that the perceived wellbeing of the able-bodied individual is prioritised over the marginalised Other, while the diseased are covertly blamed for their illnesses, and broader accountability is lost through the filter of "neutrality" and "innocence"—an aspect that will be further elucidated in my examination of the Pākehā-authored doctor.

Who is the Doctor?

In this section, I discuss the traits of "healers", as depicted by Hill, Ell and Merriman, arguing that the paternalism we see between doctors and their young patients extrapolates to the institution of Western medicine itself, which is presented as a trusted, objective, and somewhat generic location of disease-care, supported by white and/or multicultural medical professionals, without explicit reference to Māori or Pākehā identities.

In Hill, Ell, and Merriman's sick-lit texts, practitioners of Western medicine are entrusted with the health of diseased youth, who are shown to be their top priority. In *Talking to Adam*, Katie states, "*Mr* Evans – is quite old [. . .] I suggest that maybe it's time he stopped working quite so hard and spent some more time on his yacht", to which Mr Evans replies, "But I want to go on helping people like you".[132] In *Catch Me When You Fall*, Merriman's Alex knows her doctor by the sound of his gait: "I heard Doctor McIntyre's distinctive footfall before I saw him. One of the nurses told me he'd had polio as a child, and that's why he had a slight limp".[133] Both teenage girls are brought back from potentially fatal rebellion (behavioural and cellular) by father-figure medical professionals, devoted to helping people like them. In *See Ya, Simon*, Hill's (female) Doctor Mehter is referred to by Simon with a familiarity that aligns with the dynamic we see in Ell and Merriman's texts. As healing is not an option for Simon, the novel implies his wellbeing is most impacted socially, and here, school provides the context in which socialisation occurs under the care of his (presumably Pākehā) male teacher. As such, Hill's middle-aged white male character further exemplifies how this demographic is favourably portrayed within Pākehā sick-lit, which creates a closed narrative cycle in which white characters occupy all roles, from victim, to hero, to survivor or martyr. Thus, Pākehā, as a collective, are not positioned as perpetrators of disease, either in relation to diseased Pākehā themselves or in relation to marginalised Māori or the natural environment.

The Pākehā identity of Ell's Katie and Merriman's Alex is never made explicit, while the existence of te ao Māori is only implied through the presence of symbols—factors that when combined with the absence of Māori within the medical context results in Tauiwi

[132] Ell, p. 145.
[133] Merriman, p. 18.

medical professionals appearing foreign, I argue, rather than exemplary of Aotearoa New Zealand's long-standing multiculturalism. As Merriman's text makes no explicit reference to Pākehā identity, or the grounding of our Indigenous population and Treaty partners, but describes Doctor McIntyre's "Scottish burr curling [in Alex's ear]"[134], or Doctor Garrett's "smooth and plummy"[135] voice, there is a strong sense that the medicalised environment—and by extension, disease—is a foreign place, suspended between a multiplicity of worlds, with no particular ties to Aotearoa New Zealand. This perception is exacerbated by the nicknames Alex gives her doctors: Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and the Big Friendly Giant (BFG)—all characters from well-known children's stories by British authors (Lewis Carol's *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871); and Roald Dahl's *The Big Friendly Giant* (1982) respectively). These nicknames evidence the transposing of British culture over a Pākehā childhood, while also reinforcing the surreal and shifting quality of Alex's medical experience as her body oscillates between life and death, and between the globalised and the specific:

> Did Tweedledum just say they'd found a bone marrow donor for me? It was hard to pick out, from his scattered monologue. [. . .]
>
> 'The identity of the donor must remain confidential.' Tweedledum beamed at me.
>
> 'But I can tell you that they are from Germany.' [. . .]
>
> 'Will I have to fly over there?'
>
> Tweedledum shook his head. 'We'll send our transplant coordinator over to fetch the cells and bring them back here.' [. . .] Tweedledum gave me a contemplative

[134] Merriman, p. 14.
[135] Merriman, p. 119.

look. ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious,’ he said. ‘It is the source of all true art and science.’ [136]

In this instance, both “healer” and “medicine” appears foreign, as the donor cells, and Tweedledum’s musings on the mysteries of science (borrowed from Albert Einstein) come from the other side of the world.

While disease is perceived at the level of the cell, which, on first impression, would seem to imply a remarkably intimate level of individualism, zooming in to this extent paradoxically strips away the layers of a person’s individuality, until they are, in fact, globalised. Alex’s cells are no-longer unique to her body, and, in turn, to her geographical locatedness. They belong, instead, to a larger pool of biological material that transcends space, and—it would seem—the personal characteristics Alex identifies with. Alex’s doctors are also globalised; they live and work in Aotearoa New Zealand, but their accents and surnames suggest an external origin.

As exemplified below, it is the white male doctor who contextualises the Western medical context for the protagonist, and the reader, while Merriman’s multicultural team of medical professionals exemplify diversity without actually exploring diversity of thought or practice:

> The [Big Friendly Giant] entered, his entourage in tow: the Asian junior doctor who’d drilled a hole in my pelvis last week, a tall blonde woman wearing a red dress, and Bonnie, my nurse [. . .] “Well,” the BFG said [. . .] “let me introduce the rest of the team to you.” He nodded at the woman in the red dress. “This is Heidi, our

[136] Merriman, pp. 141-142.

transplant coordinator. And I think you met Tiffany the other day, when she did your bone marrow biopsy."[137]

Through their uncomplicating presence, Merriman's diverse medical team—who apparently come from Asia, possibly Europe (if the Heidi character is German), Great Britain and, presumably, Aotearoa New Zealand—reinforce the perception that Western medicine, along with its underlying assumptions, is neutral by nature. An impression that is further amplified, I argue, by the absence of Māori characterisations. From a statistical standpoint, Merriman's fiction appears to represent a reality in the Aotearoa New Zealand medical system, with surveys by Te Kaunihera Rata o Aotearoa, the Medical Council of New Zealand, finding that the percentage of doctors identified as "Other European" increased from 15.4% in 2005 to 19.2% in 2022, making it the second most populous group after Pākehā/European. In the year 2000—five-years before Ell's *Talking to Adam* was published—76.5% of doctors identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā, compared to only 2.3% Māori. The percentage of Pākehā, while still the majority, decreased to 51.4% in 2015—three years before Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall* was published—and again to 45.7% in 2022; while the percentage of Māori only increased to 3.4% in 2015, and 4.6% in 2022.[138]

Considering the high prevalence of Tauiwi doctors and the relatively low number of Māori doctors, Ell and Merriman's depictions are not necessarily inaccurate. However, Māori are not absent, and considering that Western discourse would not be considered neutral ground by many New Zealanders, I argue there is a need for more Māori-Pākehā

[137] Merriman, pp. 95-96.
[138] Curtis Walker, *The New Zealand Medical Workforce in 2022* (Te Kaunihera Rata o Aotearoa Medical Council of New Zealand, 2022), p. 6.

narrative interaction, especially in light of the apparent mis-match between Māori narratives of health and the Aotearoa New Zealand medical system.

In conclusion, this section found the Pākehā compartmentalisation of disease is managed, primarily, by white, male, middle-aged characters within a trusted Western medical setting. Though Aotearoa New Zealand's medical multiculturalism is visible, depictions are relatively superficial, and imply treatment of disease is the reserve of a globalised bio-medicine as well as the perception that Western approaches to health are inherently objective—an assumption that without critique has the potential to cause harm, as the final section of this chapter demonstrates.

What is the Poison/Medicine?

"Poison" and "medicine" are interrelated concepts in Western tradition, like two ends of the same spectrum.[139] Similarly, "growth" can be perceived as beneficial, benign or malignant, depending on what it signifies for the observer, or the protagonist in a novel. This section furthers my argument somewhat paradoxically, suggesting that while the locus of disease is internal in Pākehā-authored fiction, disease is simultaneously depicted as a foreign entity requiring "attack" or treatments that render the body a collection of parts—some of which are "self" and some of which are "other". As this section concludes, such mental heuristics, while understandable, may extrapolate erroneously beyond the sickbed.

In Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*, Alex states "All chemotherapy's poison",[140] a sentiment reflected by Katie in *Talking to Adam*, who plays with the paradoxical nature of

[139] Andrew Cunningham, "Introduction: Deadly Medicine", in *It All Depends on the Dose: Poisons and Medicines in European History*, ed. by O. P. Grell, A. Cunningham and J. Arrizabalaga (Oxford: Routledge, 2018, Taylor and Francis eBooks Complete), pp. 1-8 (p. 1).

[140] Merriman, p. 22.

medicine that kills in order to heal, utilising a military metaphor to discuss her sense of "normalisation" over what amounts to an invasive, ongoing bodily attack:

> My treatment plan at this stage involves cycles of chemotherapy, which means I am regularly given large doses of drugs which are supposed to rush around the body killing the naughty cancer cells; plus radiation therapy which involves nuking the affected lymph nodes with a concentrated beam of radioactive particles. Cool, eh? I feel like an enemy of the United States sometimes, with all these weapons of mass (cellular) destruction being aimed at me.[141]

Given America's militaristic tendencies, by citing the United States within her military metaphor, Ell heightens the war scenario. Further, she emphasises the sense of foreignness experienced by her protagonist, both towards cells that have become invasive, and towards "the body" itself, which has become inadvertently globalised and militarised through its harbouring of cancer: a borderless enemy feared by all, which leaves Katie feeling like the enemy, or a "ticking time bomb" due to the treatments she must endure.[142] This metaphor further conjures associations of US territoriality. Katie describes "the naughty cancer cells", as though they are distinct from her sense of self, and in relation to *the* cancer cells, her body becomes *the* body—a depersonalisation that sets the scene for a battle that takes place inside her, but is not quite *of* her. This subtle distinction between "self" (i.e. non-cancerous cells) versus "other" (i.e. cancerous cells) is interesting, given the biological reality of cancer, according to virologist and science writer, Justine Alford, who states that any cell has the potential to become cancerous if:

- it can divide;

[141] Ell, pp. 176-177.
[142] Ell, p. 145.

- it builds up mistakes in certain genes; and
- these faults cause it to grow out of control.[143]

According to Alford, human cells contain internal systems which usually protect DNA from damage and eliminate cancer growth; however, each time a cell divides, it must copy three billion "DNA 'letters'", and errors inevitably occur.[144] Damage is sustained when the corrective processes inside cells become overwhelmed, for example, by carcinogens, and though human cells have evolved systems to recognise and filter out damaged DNA, these systems can malfunction. Cells damaged beyond repair self-destruct, and when this mechanism fails, the immune system is primed to detect and eliminate abnormal cells; however, cancer cells have "evolved their own ways to defend from immune attack, such as dressing up in molecules that form an invisibility cloak".[145] In effect, this disguise can enable damaged cells to "evade destruction", spread and progress into what we call cancer.

Essentially, cancer cells hide evidence of their own damage—damage which occurs due to a complex, and not entirely understood, interplay of internal and external factors, and which ultimately allows for the disease state to perpetuate itself in a manner that is unsustainable for the organism. The perception of cancer as a foreign entity, then, appears to reflect societal prejudice towards outsiders, rather than the nature of the disease itself, and while such cognitive heuristics are understandable, the cancer-as-foreigner metaphor, if extrapolated beyond medicine, may reinforce harmful assumptions, especially if applied to the dis-eased or dis-easing Other. Cancer treatments cause harm in order to heal. "Normal" growth is protected through the strategic elimination of growth deemed undesirable—a

[143] Justine Alford, "Science Surgery: 'Do we all have potentially cancerous cells in our bodies?'", *Cancer Research UK*, 18 April 2018 <https://news.cancerresearchuk.org/2018/04/18/science-surgery-do-we-all-have-potentially-cancerous-cells-in-our-bodies/#comments> [accessed 4 April 2025]
[144] Alford, para 8 of 14.
[145] Alford, paras 6-12 of 14.

practice that could be said to extend beyond the sick-bed, to the soil; or to the community, where certain people are pushed out, contained within prisons, or left to fall through the cracks. A neglect that is evident further outwards still, at the level of international borders, where strategies of exclusion favour the growth of certain populations over others, allowing death of the outsider in order to maintain a perceived status quo for insiders.

In "Sustainable Stories: Managing Climate Change With Literature", Gesa Mackenthun cites Cory Doctorow's notion of "'Elite panic' – the belief in the inhumanity of our neighbors and in particular, the inhumanity of neighbors who are poorer and browner than us";[146] a concept that ties into Sontag's notion of "risk groups". According to Mackenthun,

> Elite panic and the fictions that both represent and reproduce it prevent acceptance of solutions suggested for the global recovery from environmental degradation. The fantasies they produce – of corrupt state power or heroic self-sacrifice and white (masculine) victimization – aggravate conflicts rather than working toward solving them.[147]

Similarly, I argue the Pākehā disease narrative, through its individualistic focus, reproduces fantasies of "heroic self-sacrifice", or miraculous recovery that serve to validate or invisibilise destructive Western assumptions, rather than "working toward solving them". In Ell's *Talking to Adam*, Katie's cancer-colonised physicality embodies the passivity of the colonised Aotearoa New Zealand she purportedly lives on, and through this narrative passivity, both Katie's body and her broader environment—along with all its myriad systems, politics,

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[146] Gesa Mackenthun, "Sustainable Stories: Managing Climate Change with Literature", *Sustainability*, 13.7 (2021), 1-22 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/slqndl/cdi_crossref_primary_10_3390_su13074049> [accessed 12 October 2025] (pp. 5-6.)

[147] Ibid.

histories, dis-eases, and, indeed, carcinogens—are shrouded in an air of innocence; neither the human body, nor the land, are implicated as perpetrators of disease, but rather as victims of a war that has become necessary for the survival of the diseased individual. I point this out, not to suggest that people with cancer ought to be blamed for their disease, but rather to observe how inaccurate perceptions of disease—when reinforced via popular narrative—may serve to further obscure the origins of accountability for broader diseased states.

Ell's Katie informs the reader that people receiving treatment for cancer eventually "get so used to bad or unpleasant or inappropriate things that they become almost normal".[148] Through the process of normalisation, Katie accepts the transformation of her body into a warzone on which foreign entities take aim, and attempt to "nuke" a common—supposedly separable—enemy without killing her in the process. This normalisation, whereby death and destruction (partially of the self, and wholly of the perceived outsider) become acceptable strategies in the quest for personal healing, reflects, I argue, the West's treatment of those deemed diseased or dis-easing. Practices as overt as genocide, or as insidious as the bio-piracy of Indigenous biological data in the name of the greater good, demonstrate the grim potential of this normalisation taken to its extreme, and ought to raise questions regarding how members of privileged or dominant groups reinforce perceptions surrounding disease. Though consumption of alcohol and tobacco is criticised in Ell's disease narrative, the corporations that profit from addiction are rendered innocent by omission.

By turning the militaristic eye of the United States onto a teenage girl in Aotearoa New Zealand, Ell also speaks to the permeability of an isolated country in the Pacific, which,

[148] Ell, p. 173.

despite its geographical distance, is not immune to the boundary-crossing nature of global forces. Open any local young adult fiction and you will likely find American influence; likewise, pollution in the United States does not stay within its borders, but travels via the air and the sea to the Pacific, along with imported culture wars. Ultimately, though, it is not societal practices and their byproducts that are shown to be responsible for the conditions that lead to the development of disease or dis-ease in Ell or Merriman's sick-lit texts, instead, focus is directed towards seemingly random conditions with mysterious origins, and in the absence of a clear origin, the diseased state itself is positioned as the villain.

In *Talking to Adam*, Katie's sense of self is also reduced to her illness via the male gaze, first when she equates attractiveness with a narrow set of rules—weight, and breast-evenness, for example—and then, after cancer breaks some of those rules, by suggesting her love interest has stopped liking her because "I'm not interesting and pretty and good at sailing any more. I'm just sick".[149] Likewise, in *Catch Me When You Fall*, Merriman's Alex equates sickness with a loss of femininity, and indeed, humanity when she contemplates herself in relation to the imagined male gaze:

> I couldn't stop staring at the thick plastic tubing sticking out of the top of my chest, just below my collarbone. I imagined Jamie and I making out, and his hand getting stuck when he went to touch my breasts. Maybe he wouldn't want to make out with me anymore, though. Not once I become a bald, androgynous thing with a plastic tube sticking out of her chest. That was when it hit me. *Wham, you've got cancer. Wham, soon you'll resemble everyone else on this ward*.[150]

[149] Ell, p. 179.
[150] Merriman, p. 97.

Alex's perception of her altered physical state, which has rendered her a kind of human-machine hybrid, is further exacerbated by her sense of lost personhood. Not only is her femininity called into question, but so is her humanity. She refers to her body as a "thing" which will supposedly resemble everyone else on the cancer ward, much like how Ell's protagonist talks about "the body" in *Talking to Adam*. This reduction of the female-identifying self to a particular aesthetic, and correlating that aesthetic with her intrinsic value, harks back to the counter-feminist and queerphobic themes of 1980s American sick-lit. However, both Ell and Merriman's narratives move somewhat contrarily to that of their forebears in that Adam and Jamie do not represent able-bodied, traditional masculinity. Adam is a better companion to Katie than her able-bodied crush, and though he dies before romance occurs, Katie implies their friendship was moving in that direction. Jamie is bipolar and queer-adjacent, with his painted nails and somewhat effeminate performativity. In contrast to those earlier texts which Elman critiqued for equating health with straight, able-bodiedness, Ell and Merriman position health as something that is found through embracing sickness and queerness. This is particularly true for Merriman's Alex, who, while lying on the sand with Jamie, tells the reader she can rediscover kissing now that she has white cells, and though it has been months since she was "released from [her] sterile, HEPA-filtered room", she still feels like her "senses [are] about to explode" and like she's a "newborn baby, rediscovering the world".[151] Alex declares she does not care if their public affection is a crime, because she "could be dead tomorrow, and so could he":

> If I learnt nothing else this year, I learnt there are no guarantees. But I can live with that, because for now I'm alive. Because at this moment it feels as our hearts are

[151] Merriman, p. 316.

spinning into the Milky Way, Jamie's heart beating strong enough for the both of us. That's all I want. This moment.[152]

Thus, Alex is reborn, via Western medicine and heterosexual romance, into a state where she feels satisfied with "this moment", and the idea that survival comes down to chance. As such, Merriman's disease script begins and ends with young, white, middle class bodies experiencing disease as an individualistic, self-contained phenomenon, that is naturally resolved through individualistic healing (or death).

In conclusion, this chapter found Pākehā sick-lit positions disease inside the bodies of individuals, within the institution of Western medicine. I argued the resulting disease script makes the following assumptions: 1. Survival of the (white, middle class) individual is always prioritised by trustworthy Pākehā/Tauiwi doctors; 2. Within medicine, the ends always justify the means, therefore, when it comes to protecting the Self from the Other, practices that would otherwise be considered inhumane are normalised; 3. Destruction is a necessary step towards recovery, often involving medicine that poisons in order to heal; and 4. The onset of disease and healing ultimately comes down to a combination of luck and personal choice. While these mechanisms of Western medical science have obvious validity given their efficacy in identifying and treating disease, the framing of Western medical institutions as inherently neutral and objective is problematised, for example, by a Māori world view, which I discuss next.

[152] Merriman, pp. 316-317.

Chapter 2: Māori Sick-lit

"For Māori . . . health is a more holistic state of being", Leonie Pihama and Linda Tuhiwai Smith observe in *Ora: Healing Ourselves: Indigenous Knowledge, Healing and Wellbeing* (2024), and these "holistic understandings are nuanced by the experiences, realities and the contexts in which they live . . . illustrated and communicated through metaphors that emphasise an inter-related view of health".[153] They go on to argue, "Such an approach shifts the lens from focusing on fragmented individual components and is instead conceptualised in a broader context of relationships where the whole is more than the sum of its parts".[154]

True to the sentiments above, the texts I categorise under "Māori sick-lit" would likely be classified as eco-fictions, given their broader sociopolitical environmental focus, contrasting with the individualistic-medicalised disease script typical of Pākehā sick-lit. Rather than centralising Tania's cancer, the plot in Stacy Gregg's *Nine Girls* focuses on Māori disease and dis-ease as a whole. So, while Gregg's illness narrative is thematically similar to Ell's *Talking to Adam* and Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*, it differs from these Pākehā sick-lit texts in a similar way to the other Māori-authored narratives studied in this chapter, demonstrating differing cultural perceptions surrounding the body and where bodily limits lie.

While the English word "health" shares an etymological connection with the concept of "wholeness",[155] the reality is that Western medicine focuses on discrete "natural" phenomena; and rather than treating the body as a whole person within a broader context, this naturistic approach attempts to isolate and treat disease, or its symptoms, and in doing

[153] Pihama and Tuhiwai Smith, p. 320.
[154] Pihama and Tuhiwai Smith, p. 320.
[155] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, (Oxford University Press, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4491609923> [accessed 21 October 2025] s.v. health, n.

so, effectively approaches the individual as a separable entity.[156] Brendan Hokowhitu (Ngāti Pūkenga) refers to an Indigenous "non-compartmentalisation of the 'physical'" as "Indigenous subjectivities and their consequent bodily practices were often communally defined". [157] According to Hokowhitu:

> the distinction can be made with the Western individual subject (who has prevailed in Western thought since the Enlightenment), whose person is comprised of a central and unique core, which determines their distinct identity. The dissimilarity is important because, as opposed to a singular self, it indicates an Indigenous existentialism that incorporates multiple identities across time, including genealogical and spiritual associations, and communally defined bodily practices.[158]

According to Māori literature, disease and healing appear to be "communally defined" states, or states that occupy "multiple identities across time", including human and other-than-human bodies. Sir Mason Durie (Rangitāne, Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Raukawa) formulated the most well-known contemporary Māori model of health, *Te Whare Tapa Whā*, which is structured around the image of a house with four sides, representing physical, mental, spiritual, and relational health, which extends to community and the land.[159]

Māori young adult fiction reflects this interplay, with climate crisis and environmental degradation narrativised to occur not just on the outside, but also within and

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[156] Havi Carel, *Phenomenology of Illness* (Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 15-17.

[157] Brendan Hokowhitu, "Indigenous Existentialism and the Body", *Cultural Studies Review*, 15.2 (2009), 101–118 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_rmit_collectionsjats_10_3316_ielapa_699408190761816> [accessed 29 April 2025] (p. 109).

[158] Hokowhitu, p. 109.

[159] Nikki Kiyimba, and Reona Anderson, "Reflecting on Cultural Meanings of Spirituality/Wairuatanga in Post-Traumatic Growth Using the Māori Wellbeing Model of Te Whare Tapa Whā", *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25.3 (2022), 345–361 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_informaworld_taylorfrancis_310_1080_13674676_2022_2028750> [accessed 4 October 2024] (p. 346).

between people and their myriad structures, both physical and perceptual. For example, in Steph Matuku's (Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Mutunga) *Falling into Rarohenga*, a portal opens in a Māori woman's bedroom, and her son suggests the "little shakes"—which remind him of the Christchurch earthquake aftershocks—are a relatively normal part of his family's experience, thus acknowledging both the geological, and the spiritual-emotional-psychological disturbances that come from living on unstable ground.[160] As such, I view narratives like Matuku's *Falling into Rarohenga* as "creative" rather than "magical" realism, given the latter implies an element of assumed fantasy—or, in other words, something that is not real: a diminishing of a Māori world view often raised in Māori-authored fiction (see Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*; or Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*). Given that Pākehā-authored fiction is afforded metaphorical description without being relegated to the fantastical, I use "creative realism" in respect to Māori authors who take on the complex task of describing a subjective experience in relation to the rules and perceptions of Māori *and* Pākehā worlds, whereby the rules and assumptions of the latter are generally taken for granted in the public sphere, while those of the prior are given so little space for interpretation, imagery that contrasts with a Pākehā world view is automatically perceived as adjacent to reality.

While the compartmentalisation observed in the previous chapter raises the question of what Pākehā authors miss when they zoom-in on the "central, unique core" of disease as an individualistic physiological state with an internal origin, this chapter considers what may be gained (and potentially lost) when narrative focus zooms-out from the individual and renders disease and healing a communal enterprise.

[160] Steph Matuku, *Falling into Rarohenga* (New Zealand: Huia Publishers, 2021, ebook), p. 28.

In Section One, I demonstrate how in Māori narratives, all characters are affected by disease and dis-ease to some extent, resulting, this section argues, in a sense of unboundaried, multi-directional pathology that moves between human and other-than-human characters, including the land. Section Two finds hospitals are not always trusted places of healing in Māori fiction, and "healers" come in many shapes and forms. In fact, the characters typically portrayed as doctors in Pākehā teen sick-lit—middle-aged white men—are often the harbingers of disease and dis-ease in Māori-authored fiction; while dis-eased or diseased youth—the characters who need saving in Pākehā sick-lit—are the catalysts for collective healing in Māori fiction. In Section Three, I find the "help" or "medicine" offered Māori is often treated with suspicion. This ambivalence is not restricted to the Pākehā world and Western medicine; however, the narratives studied here do suggest current Western approaches are either harmful, insufficient or unnecessary for Māori.

Origin of Disease

> "Your mum was pretty as! Not saying she isn't now . . . she just looks old, aye. How come she never comes out of the house? Haven't seen Aunty in forever." [. . .]
>
> "Well, how come your dad's locked up?"
>
> [. . .] "The effects of colonisation."
>
> "Aye? Do you even know what that means?"
>
> "Na." We both crack up.
>
> "That's what my dad says. That the Pākehā colonised us, and now our people are all locked up".[161]

[161] Shilo Kino, *The Pōrangi Boy* (New Zealand: Huia Publishing, 2020, BorrowBox eBook), p. 37.

In *The Pōrangi Boy*, Shilo Kino's (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Maniapoto, Ngāti Te Ata) protagonist jumps off a bridge into "freezing" water. Were this a Pākehā sick-lit text, Niko's suicidal ideation would likely drive the plot; however, as can be gleaned from the citation above, there is nothing extraordinary about one boy's dis-ease in a context in which "all" of his people are diseased, dis-eased or "locked up". In this section, I demonstrate how Māori authors position Māori disease, first and foremost, as a sociopolitical process that must be perceived using a *macro*scopic rather than a microscopic lens. While Gregg's Titch in *Nine Girls* is reassured that Tania's cancer is due to "sickness, not tapu",[162] implying human error is not to blame—Māori disease and dis-ease is contextualised within the historical and ongoing mechanisms of colonisation. Thus, according to *Nine Girls*, and the other Māori-authored texts discussed here, the origin of disease—at least, as it pertains to ongoing collective struggle—is of no great mystery to Māori.

I begin with a study of Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, where I find the origin of disease can be traced back from dis-ease in the protagonist's microcosms to the oppression of te ao Māori via colonisation and the imposition of Pākehā world views and systems that still play out through incidents of casual and calculated racism that undermine or exploit Māori. Here, the perpetration of dis-ease is shown to be committed by Māori and Pākehā characters who pathologise Indigenous world views, while exploiting the land. Bringing Matuku's *Falling into Rarohenga*, and Ngarewa's *The Bone Tree* into discussion, I find the Māori mother's bedroom is both implicitly and explicitly portrayed as a place of near-death and destruction: a fractalized or microcosmic "in-a-nutshell" exemplar of the disease that permeates Māori human and other-than-human environments, spreading inwards and

[162] Stacy Gregg, *Nine Girls* (New Zealand: Penguin, 2024), pp. 294-295/399.

outwards from the wahine's body, to her family, her community, her people and the whenua.

Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy* begins with Niko's head being shoved down a school toilet and urinated on; an assault with an added layer of insult, given that within te ao Māori, "the head is seen as 'the most *tapu*' of all body parts".[163] While humiliating his younger cousin, Tū asks: "'How does it feel to have no one liking you, pōrangi boy?'"[164] The physiological consequences of Māori-on-Māori violence are visible throughout Kino's narrative: bodies are bruised and stained with excrement, and one Māori man's rage is passed down to his son, who then passes it on to a younger boy, who must confront his own "poisonous" anger.[165] Kino shows how overt violence cannot be untangled from the invisible violences Māori have been subjected to since the initial brutalities of colonisation gave way to more covert forms of oppression. In the Māori-authored texts studied here, Māori victimisation is perpetrated within Pākehā and Māori communities, and as such, the perception of "no one liking you" takes on a larger meaning than perhaps was intended by Niko's cousin (although intentional by Kino). Initially, Kino's young male characters appear not to like themselves or each other—a dis-ease symptomatic of the hostility, suspicion and lack of care they are shown to experience within the Pākehā world. While making reference to historical land-theft and the oppression of Māori culture, Kino also exemplifies how prejudice against Māori occurs in a multitude of ways, compiling over a person's life, contributing to a general dis-ease that impacts how young characters perceive themselves and each other. Pihama and Tuhiwai Smith discuss how "generational grief" interacts with Māori trauma, stating:

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[163] Courtney Sullivan, *Mahunga, Pakihiwi, Puku, Hope, Waewae: The Importance of the Human Body to Indigenous Māori Knowledge* (*Ngā Pae O Te Māramatanga*, 2017), p. 11.
[164] Kino, p. 14/420.
[165] Kino, p. 102/420.

"[a] lack of recognition is said to be linked to unresolved grief that can lead to internalised oppression, acted out in ways that include violent behaviour, and drug and alcohol abuse", which is exacerbated by present-day racism and disparity.[166]

Niko recalls that he and his grandfather (Koro) were referred to as "dirty little/bloody Mowrees" by a Pākehā shop keeper and accused of theft while shopping for a bicycle for his fifth birthday.[167] Through Niko's eyes, we see the condescension and animosity directed towards his gentle grandfather, for example, when Koro responds cheerfully to a Pākehā baby in a supermarket, and the baby's mother "gasps [and] moves the trolley away";[168] or when his passive resistance is maligned to appear violent by the Pākehā news media.[169] Niko's sadness and confusion eventually turns to anger—a reaction that, while explicitly discouraged by Koro, is understandable, given he is regularly subjected to unchecked racial prejudice. Niko's teacher, Mrs Wobberly, is critical of Māori in class, and allows Māori students to attack each other. When Tu urinates on Niko's head, he essentially acts out, in bodily form, the impact Mrs Wobberly has on her Māori students' self-esteem:

> "Kaore … did your five-year-old sister write this? Hohepa, I'm assuming you want to be in my class next year, since you have failed again. Tui, do you want to join your dad in jail? Well, then. Try harder. Tu, you spend too much time dancing in that skirt of yours and not enough time reading."[170]

Mrs Wobberly suggests studying the Treaty of Waitangi is a waste of time, and everyone should just move on. When a Māori child disagrees, Mrs Wobberly denigrates the girl, her

[166] Pihama and Tuhiwai Smith, pp. 22-23.
[167] Kino, pp. 105-106/420.
[168] Kino, p. 58/420.
[169] Kino, p. 222.
[170] Kino, pp. 76-77.

family, and her people in one breath, before claiming personal victimhood from Māori disease:

> "My taxes are paying for your mothers' beneficiary wages and for the new prison where some of your whanau will enjoy three cooked meals a day and even a gymnasium."
>
> "But Miss?" Anaru asks. "Isn't the prison on Māori land?"
>
> "Goodness, who told you that? There's no such thing as Māori land!"
>
> "But the taniwha of Pohe Bay lives there," Hohepa calls out, trying not to laugh. He points at Tu and me. "The taniwha is real! Ask their koro, he tells every Māori and their dog about the great Taukere."
>
> The whole class cracks up laughing. Tu clears his throat and everyone shuts up real fast.
>
> "He's Niko's koro. Can't you see the resemblance?" And then he pretends to cough, but I hear what he's saying, *Pōrangi-cough! Pōrangi-cough!* [171]

Here, we see how Mrs Wobberly's attitude serves as antecedent for Māori boys to debase each other, and therefore, themselves. Tu and Niko are cousins; a relationship traditionally considered equivalent to siblings in te ao Māori, and, as such, their animosity moves contrarily to the tuakana-teina dynamic one might expect to see between brothers, whereby a great deal of care and learning is fostered between older and younger siblings of the same gender.[172] Rather than showing reverence towards his older male role models,

[171] Kino, pp. 79-81.

[172] John G. Oetzel, Stacey Mariu Ruru, Yingsha Zhang, Mary Louisa Simpson, Sophie Nock, Pare Meha, Kath Holmes, Marama Clark, Hariata Adams, Ngapera Akapita, Kawarau Ngaia, Shane Murphy, Reuben Moses, Rangimahora Reddy and Brendan Hokowhitu, "Enhancing Well-Being and Social Connectedness for Maori Elders through a Peer Education (Tuakana-Teina) Programme: A Cross-Sectional Baseline Study", *Frontiers Media SA*, 9 (2021), 1-9 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/10hutka/alma9917791240603401> [accessed 11 July 2025] (p. 2)

and, in turn, taking pride in his power to influence, Tu is ashamed of his familial ties to his cousin, and their grandfather—a corrosion of intergenerational relationships that amplifies the dis-ease felt by all. Niko is considered "pōrangi" or "crazy" by his peers, having inherited the title from Koro, who is perceived to be "always talking to himself" when, in fact, he is talking with his pounamu, or his ancestral taniwha, Taukere.[173]

In the scene above, Niko's teacher invalidates a te ao Māori relationship with other-than-human nature, relegating taniwha to the realm of the "fictitious", "mythical" and "illogical".[174] Here, we see how the narrowed perceptions of schoolboys who snicker at Koro's relationship with other-than-human nature become the narrowed perceptions of adults who shake their heads when Koro takes action to protect their ancestral land from "development"—in both instances, the kaumatua's sensibilities are energetically bulldozed by Māori characters wielding Pākehā "logic". Here, internalised racism shows up the festering wounds of Niko and Koro's community, for ultimately it is their sickness—the people's alienation from the knowledges of their Indigenous cultural heritage—that has lead them to perceive the wisdom of their ancestors as "crazy" or invalid. If it is the forced disconnect from the land that represents the root-cause of the myriad diseases affecting Māori in Kino's narrative, then the manmade diseases of the land—climate crisis and environmental degradation, for example—reflect this pathology. Yet, Māori characters who communicate with other-than-human nature are made to feel crazy for perceiving and challenging the destruction that is killing their people.

Similar references to "craziness" are observable in Roxborogh's (Ngāti Porou, Mutunga o Wharekauri) *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea*, when protagonist

[173] Kino, p. 46/420.
[174] Kino, p. 82.

Charlie talks about his grandfather's response to the extreme weather threatening his community:

> At that moment, I seriously did believe [Grandad had] gone just a little bit crazy. Maybe Mum *was* right: he was an old fool. […]. He says it's his job to stay on the land and protect it. From what, he never said. Also, even if he wasn't crazy, the idea that I, Charlie Tangaroa, could actually go and speak to the gods. Me: a one-legged, skinny teen from the backblocks. I was no Māui or Batman.[175]

Charlie imagines the Pākehā and white American characters he interacts with will think he is crazy when he engages with the Māori world. In Whiti Hereaka's *Bugs* (2013), Hereaka's Māori protagonist assumes the wealthy white girl will look down on her lifestyle. In Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, adult protagonist Rawiri suspects his white colonist friends do not perceive him as fully human.

I found Māori-authored sick-lit conversely normalises the "abnormal", demonstrating, I argue, a healthier, more "holistic"[176] engagement with illness than we typically see in Pākehā narratives, which tend to dramatise, stigmatise or "Other" disease. However, the ever-present nature of disease and dis-ease in Māori narratives could also reflect the reality that Māori are more likely to be ill as a result of systemic injustice. I suggest both considerations have merit, and both likely contribute to the nuanced approach this thesis claims Māori authors demonstrate towards diseases in which the afflicted are perceived in the Pākehā world, first and foremost, as perpetrators of dis-ease. For example, in *The Pōrangi Boy*, Kino contextualises domestic violence, while illuminating how abusive behaviour tends to look. Similarly, while Kino implies that Niko's mother (Hine) is a drug

[175] Roxborogh, pp. 139-140/318.
[176] See Pihama and Tuhiwai Smith, for example.

addict, her addiction is not shown to be the root cause of disease, but rather a symptom of it. That is not to say Kino excuses parental violence or neglect, but rather that she refrains from dramatising dis-eased states solely as a plot device. Kino handles Hine's illness with a sensitivity that contrasts with the stigmatising approach we see in Pākehā texts which conflate addiction with evil (for example, see the dehumanised villains in Des Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay*).

In *The Pōrangi Boy*, the exploitation of Māori land moves in parallel with the exploitation of Niko's mother's body, to the extent her character could be interpreted as a characterisation of Papatūānuku in human form, embodying Māori life and death simultaneously. This character shares part of her name with Hine(-ahu-one), the first woman according to te ao Māori creation stories, carved from the earth; and also Hine(-nui-te-pō), the goddess of death, and the guardian of Rarohenga, the Māori underworld. [177] Kino's Hine spends the majority of the narrative asleep or intoxicated. Her dis-eased state may extend to sex work, as implied when Niko returns to find men's shoes sitting by the door, and states, "I ain't ever seen shoes like that in Pohe Bay", then sends his young cousin outside, presumably to shield her from what is taking place inside. From Niko's response, it appears he has encountered strange men in his house before, and though he jokes about the naked Pākehā man who walks from his mother's bedroom into the kitchen, the Pākehā man's procurement of sexual intercourse from a Māori woman who appears emotionally, spiritually and energetically deceased is jarring. When Niko enters his mother's bedroom following the naked stranger's swift exit, he finds her seemingly unconscious, "stretched out on the bed, her face squashed into the pillows". The words Niko uses to describe the

[177] Kelli Te Maihāroa and Adrian Woodhouse, *Indigenous Autoethnography: Illuminating Māori Voices* (Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 2023), p. 14.

appearance of the Pākehā man—"pin", "vampire", "flea"—connote penetration; and a variety of consumption in which one being sates their hunger by crossing intimate boundaries to take the lifeblood of another.[178] Disregard for the humanity of Māori in this exchange is mirrored by town meetings, whereby Pākehā businessmen encourage impoverished iwi to relinquish their land, "for their own good".

In Gregg's *Nine Girls*, Titch is alienated from her Māori mother's culture as a result of urbanisation and assimilation. This alienation is exacerbated by her mother's marriage to Titch's Pākehā father who talks scathingly about "the Māoris", in front of his wife and daughters, and insists colonisation is "ancient history". When contradicted, he says, "Well, *I* didn't take their land. I'm not being held responsible for the past. I've worked hard for everything I've got—I haven't looked for a handout".[179] In a style reminiscent of Kino's Mrs Wobberly character, Titch's father dismisses all arguments that challenge his prejudice towards Māori, first, suggesting, "[Māori] signed the Treaty; they need to live with the consequences", and that if "Waikato land isn't even part of the Treaty" then it was "won fair and square", and it probably wasn't much land anyway, and if it was as much land as his wife and daughter claim, then "What are they going to do with it, eh? They've got no money to develop it".[180] I found all Māori-authored Māori mother characters are either single or partnered with abusive men. The relationship between the diseased/dis-eased wahine and the diseased/dis-eased family home is particularly pertinent, given how wāhine are

[178] Kino, pp. 207-208/420.
[179] Gregg, p. 154/399.
[180] Gregg, p. 154/399.

considered “whare tangata”, a title of great esteem also bestowed upon the womb.[181] Ngahuia Mereana Dixon states:

> In human physiological terms ‘whare tangata’ means ‘the house of humans’ as defined by Hirini Moko Mead (2003) and Pareaute Herangi-Panapa (1998) [. . .] It is a ‘water home’ where all the ‘home comforts’ are provided [. . .] In essence it is [. . .] a house to nurture, to sustain, to shelter humankind. [182]

This concept, according to Dixon, “can be likened to female ancestral meeting houses, where whānau members are supported and nurtured, in physical and emotional terms”. She goes on to argue, “This interpretation of our tupuna-wahine wharenui, (those with ancestral female names) is an embodiment of our femaleness, and our bodies, where the whare tangata concept of nurturing and support continues”. [183] Here, we see the concept of the Māori woman’s physicality merge with concepts of architecture (the “house”); and other-than-human nature (water); as well as associated concepts such as “support”, “nurturance” and “sustainability”. It follows, then, that Māori narratives illuminate the interconnectedness between human (female) characters, “manmade” structures, and other-than-human nature (bearing in mind that the human body is comprised of natural elements, including water); and it follows that these aspects may become damaged and destabilised in parallel. The sustainability trait traditionally afforded women in te ao Māori is shown to be under threat in Māori-authored fiction, as Māori mother characters are consistently portrayed as having to weather colonial forces, in a battle of the body, mind and spirit, as

[181] Ani Mikaere, “Māori Women: Caught in the Contradictions of a Colonised Reality”, in *Mana Wahine Reader: A Collection of Writings*, ed. by L. Pihama, L. T. Smith, N. Simmonds, J. Seed-Pihama and K. Gabel (New Zealand: Te Tākupu, Te Wānanga O Raukawa, 2022), pp. 125-150.

[182] Ngahuia Mereana Dixon, “Ngā Wai e Rere Nei: The Physical and Symbolic Representations of Embodied Waters of Birth and Mourning” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, 2013), pp. 81-82.

[183] Dixon, p. 8.

energies are either commandeered by the relentless capitalist machine, or they are shown to implode, exposing the "dysfunctional" or "underperforming" body of the Māori mother character to societal judgement and ridicule. In the first instance, time and energy is directed outside the home; and in the second instance, self-medicating leads to another variety of absence. In both cases, the nurturance aspect traditionally afforded wāhine inverts, and parental neglect is narrativised, even if only through the eyes of well cared-for tamariki who want more time with parents consumed by work or illness (for example, in Hereaka's narrative, Bugs resents her mother's long shifts).

If the dis-eased Māori body is inseparable from politics in Māori fiction, so too is the Māori household. According to Cassandra Louise Terauhina Lewis, Adele N. Norris, Waimirirangi Heta-Cooper, and Juan Marcellus Tauri, the housing system in Aotearoa New Zealand "intersects with stratification and exclusion in complicated ways that are rooted in modern capitalism, racial control, setter-colonialism, and White supremacy".[184] They cite, for example, land appropriation following the 1860s Settler Wars—with land confiscation continuing into the twentieth century; educational and political reforms that served to normalise Pākehā/European cultural supremacy over te ao Māori; the encouraged urbanisation of Māori as a means of assimilation, effectively reshaping traditional family structures, reducing support within households, while channelling Māori into "unskilled" labour with lower pay and poor job security; the establishment of neo-liberal social and economic policy in the 1980s, which disproportionately affected Māori, leading to overrepresentation in a range of negative social statistics relating to crime, child welfare,

[184] Cassandra Louise Terauhina Lewis, Adele N. Norris, Waimirirangi Heta-Cooper and Juan Marcellus Tauri, "Stigmatising Gang Narratives, Housing, and the Social Policing of Māori Women", in *Neo-colonial Injustice and the Mass Imprisonment of Indigenous Women*, ed. by L. George, A. N. Norris, A. Deckert, & J. Tauri (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 13-33 (p. 15).

education, home ownership and homelessness—all dis-eases exacerbated by neo-liberal reform of the welfare state and privatisation of social housing in the 1990s and 2000s.[185] Lewis et al suggest single Māori mothers are particularly vulnerable to insecure housing; a finding reflected by the Māori fiction studied here.

Matuku's *Falling Into Rarohenga* contains a vivid portrayal of the parallel destruction of the material/relational household, when protagonists Tui and Kae find their mother gone, and a gaping, swirling hole in the floor of her bedroom, leading to the Māori underworld. Through the perspectives of Tui and Kae, the reader is given insight into that which is usually concealed behind closed doors, or behind a façade of wellness:

> Hanging next to the calendar is a collage photo board, all pictures of us smiling and being happy. Not showing the truth, really. Still, most pictures don't, do they? They say a picture tells a thousand words, but I reckon most of the time they tell a thousand lies. The only picture on the board that comes halfway to showing our true feelings is the one where Dad has been cut off with angry scissors.[186]

Similarly, a picture of a normal house with four walls and solid flooring would also "tell a thousand lies" within this narrative. Instead, we see a de-construction synonymous with the dis-eases taking place inside each character, which, in turn, are exemplary of a people who have been destabilised from the foundations up. When Matuku's narrative begins, Kae has been suspended from school, and Tui has been socially isolated since their mother's depression following the departure of their abusive father. The pair are in conflict when they find a portal in their mother's bedroom, revealing an underworld that contains not just people, but also places, objects and Māori-Pākehā histories, all coexisting in a surreal

[185] Lewis et al, pp. 15-16.
[186] Matuku, p. 22.

conglomerate of pasts that continue below the surface of the present. In Matuku's Rarohenga, architecture contains its own character traits—the corporate building attached to the father character is, along with the Māori man himself, a living entity, symbolic of consumer-capitalism's shadow side—and, it would appear, even other-than-human entities are capable of passing away. However, the deceased are still shown to exist and exert influence on the living present, contradicting the assumption made by characters such as Kino's Mrs Wobberly that colonisation can be confined to past-tense, or that the past is well-contained. Instead, Matuku demonstrates the boundary-crossing nature of the diseases and dis-eases of colonisation Māori still face in the twenty-first century.

Matuku utilises metaphors of other-than-human nature to describe the experience of the portal opening between the world of the living and dead. This conceptual space has parallels with Kino's depiction of Niko's mother, Hine. Both Kino and Matuku's wāhine characters are stuck between life and death, seemingly unable to detach from the "medicine" poisoning them. Tui and Kae's Māori mother is said to have been seduced into Rarohenga by their father, who "came in through the back way: dodged the pōwhiri, ignored all the protocol".[187] Similarly, Airana Ngarewa (Ngāti Ruanui, Ngā Rauru, Ngāruahine) speaks to a relentless struggle for survival in *The Bone Tree*, when young protagonist Kauri watches his diseased brother oscillate between recovery and death:

> It was gonna happen eventually, I reckoned, fella fighting back for his place beside Papa. Whether this was it or not, our world was never built to last. The legs of Tāne could never keep the raging heart of his old man away from the one he loved. Fucken toxic though it all was. Husband and wife and child forever fighting.[188]

[187] Matuku, p. 43.
[188] Airana Ngarewa, *The Bone Tree* (New Zealand: Moa Press, 2023), p. 280.

While Ngarewa's Kauri references his family's situation, his words also echo Māori origin stories, whereby the suffocating embrace of Rangi and Papa, sky father and earth mother, is forced apart by their offspring, Tāne Mahuta, god of the forest. In Ngarewa's rendition of the primordial separation, the Māori child is born into an enmeshment almost incompatible with life. In the beginning of their family story, Black's Pākehā (non-biological) father is "forever fighting" to hold on to his partner in the only way he knows how, through violence, oppression and isolation. Meanwhile, his Māori mother is stuck "forever fighting" to survive the abusive relationship she feels unable to walk away from; a fight that ends with cancer, after a Pākehā doctor ignores her concerns and malignancy spreads throughout her centre. At the beginning of Ngarewa's narrative, Kauri and Black's mother is already dead and buried, having received no palliative support, and their father is terminally ill, though not in the sanitised, medicalised sense. Rather, this Pākehā character is observed by his young Māori sons as he drinks himself to death in the middle of his family's dilapidated living space, where disease seeps through his clothes, furniture and all the fabrics of a "normal" life wracked with a dis-ease that stains everyone.

Both *The Mountain* (film) and *Nine Girls* (novel) deliver the young diseased Māori body to Western medicine, and while neither of these narratives critique the institution, ultimately both young girls die of their diseases. Gregg's protagonist, Titch describes Tania's treatments, and mentions her appearance during illness, remission, relapse and death. These scenes are more didactic than explorative, and take place towards the end. The philosophical romanticism we see in Pākehā sick-lit, whereby Pākehā girls are brought through death by Western science, is notably absent. Though neither *Nine Girls* nor *The Mountain* attribute early mortality to environmental factors, the texts place terminal disease alongside the dis-eased Māori state, which is positioned in direct relationship to

cultural issues and other-than-human nature. Further, the death outcome appears significant in relationship to macrosystem-level politics, particularly in Gregg's *Nine Girls*. Tania's cancer "battle" is shown in proximity to recollections of literal war, and like Kino demonstrates contemporary underhanded dealings in *The Pōrangi Boy* while referencing historical deception by the Crown, Gregg gives insight into how bad-faith tactics have played out differently over time. While a Pākehā world view may forget or refuse to see the origins of Māori dis-ease and disease, the physical space remembers. Gregg's Māori eel character tells Titch, "the way us Māori fight, we keep our families close", informing her that wāhine and tamariki initially fought in the trenches alongside men during the Land Wars; however, when Māori women and children were slaughtered by the Crown during the invasion of Rangiriri in November 1863, Governor Grey "turned the blame back onto Māori for fighting this way", and King Taawhiao agreed to keep them out of future battles. The following month, Māori sent their women and children to Rangiaowhia during the invasion of Ngāruawāhia, where they had been promised refuge, but were instead massacred by the Crown. Gregg's Māori eel character tells of tamariki standing below the surface of a swamp, breathing through reeds, listening to "the cries of [their] family being murdered by the Pākehā hand", as smoke filled the lungs of their people "choking them to death".[189]

This description parallels Tania's inability to breathe in a scene following Pan's history lesson. Though the context differs—a school sports field, rather than a battle field—the disease that exists below the surface for Tania's character mirrors, I suggest, the life-limiting diseases marginalised Māori have endured since colonisation. Titch tells the reader that she expected high-achieving Tania to win everything that day, "[yet] she came in dead last. After

[189] Gregg, p. 225/399.

the race, she stayed hunched over for ages, breathing real hard, her hands on her knees as she tried to get air into her lungs".[190] Although Imperial soldiers no longer burn Māori women and children alive in their homes and churches, harm is still committed on the minds, bodies and spirits of marginalised Māori through slow violence, combined with the ripple effects of intergenerational trauma. Gregg demonstrates how Māori can do all the right things according to prejudiced narratives and still come "dead last". Tania excels in school, sport, weaving and tikanga, despite her impoverished beginnings, and a near-fatal illness in early childhood that could be attributed to her living conditions. Yet, when Titch's father learns of her intention to study law, he suggests Tania will get special treatment "because she's Māori".[191] The disconnect between Pākehā perceptions and Māori realities is a prevalent theme in Māori-authored fiction, I found, exemplifying how Māori disease and dis-ease is ignored by Pākehā who refuse to assume any accountability for the historical injustices inflicted on Māori, or for the disparate systems Pākehā continue to perpetuate and benefit from.

This section found the origin of disease in Māori-authored sick-lit is located in colonial macrosystems, contrasting with the internal containment and compartmentalisation found in Pākehā teen sick-lit texts. Further, healing is largely removed from the institution of Western medicine, both in terms of locale, and the agents of healing, which is the concern of the next section.

[190] Gregg, p. 230/399.
[191] Gregg, p. 335/399.

Who is the Doctor?

In Māori sick-lit, the Western doctor's ability to heal diseased Māori is shown to be extremely limited, and where help is provided, relationships between patients and practitioners are not explored. I begin this section by returning to Roxborogh's *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea*, an eco-fiction in which depictions of Western medicine are neutral-to-positive in tone. In contrast to the paternalistic relationships we see in Ell's *Talking to Adam* and Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*, the patient-doctor relationship is de-emphasised, and medical care is relegated to the background, while mātauranga Māori is brought to the fore, as a complimentary, though equally vital approach to human health and well-being, particularly in relation to other-than-human nature. In Māori narratives, I found life-sustaining knowledge is often passed down so that the role of healer shifts from ancestor (either human or other-than-human), to Māori elder, to young Māori protagonist: a progression this section goes on to exemplify through discussion of Kino's taniwha character (Taukere) in *The Pōrangi Boy*. Taukere could be considered Koro's "doctor", given he is the confidante Koro turns to when distressed, while Koro, in turn, plays the role of healer for Niko, who then becomes the catalyst for his community's healing. Finally, I return to Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, and Ngarewa's *The Bone Tree*, two Māori-authored texts that depict the explicit rejection of Western therapeutics by Māori. I argue both novels appear to justify this rejection, even in cases of adolescent suicidality, and sepsis—leading me to question where the line is between representing a community's anxieties and perpetuating those anxieties.

In Roxborogh's *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea*, Western healthcare is accepted by Māori characters without critique, yet the reader is shown little of the hospital experience in relation to medical staff or procedures. In effect, the relational

aspects most salient in Ell and Merriman's medicalised environments fall into the background. Roxborogh's Charlie mentions he passed his time recuperating from surgery learning Māori songs and chants from his grandfather.[192] Later, this tikanga enables Charlie to save his community when the Māori gods of the sea and forest go into battle, symbolising humanity's manmade climate crisis. Through positioning mātauranga Māori in close proximity to Western medical science, Roxborogh demonstrates how both aspects contribute to wellbeing individually and in conjunction with each other. Charlie's prosthetic leg affords greater mobility, while his Māori-world knowledge prepares him for addressing environmental disease, first and foremost by contextualising other-than-human nature as a plurality of living entities that can, and should, be treated with respect.

Both Roxborogh's Charlie and Kino's Niko struggle to comprehend their relationship with the land, initially. In *The Pōrangi Boy*, this relationship begins with a body of water, which becomes narratively synonymous with Niko's taniwha ancestor, Taukere. Niko and his cousin Moki are both saved by Taukere after entering the murky space between worlds: Moki, in a moment of infantile curiosity, and Niko, in a moment of adolescent suicidality. It is ultimately the children's openness to the existence of their tūpuna that enables them to resurface. Both tamariki look into the eyes of Taukere before they are saved: a moment that could symbolise the awakening of perceptions not typically understood or encouraged in Pākehā worlds, but which signify a relationship with other-than-human nature that is normal within te ao Māori. Moki's connection with Taukere is instantaneous, and she perceives her ancestor without fear or hesitation. Whereas Niko, who has been schooled by

[192] Tania Roxborogh, *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea* (New Zealand: Huia Publishers, 2020), p. 275.

the likes of Mrs Wobberly, takes longer to trust his instincts, and as such, Taukere's presence eludes him at first.

Taniwha assume various roles in Māori fiction: some are benevolent, as is shown in *The Pōrangi Boy*, others appear vicious (see, for example, Ataria Sharman's *Hine and the Tohunga Portal*, 2021); or, indeed, they may embody a combination of traits, as is shown in Matuku's *Falling into Rarohenga*. Kino's Taukere is bubbly and playful, yet, his power is tremendous, and he must be treated with respect if humans are to continue benefiting from his benevolence, much like water itself. The ability to perceive other-than-human nature as consisting of living entities that exist in vital relationship with human beings is arguably a prerequisite for the kind of legislation we are starting to see in Aotearoa New Zealand, with the granting of legal personhood to other-than-human landscapes, such as Taranaki Moanga, and the Whanganui river—a legal recognition of other-than-human rights that enables greater protections over natural environments, that will ultimately benefit all.[193] Through undermining Māori environmental knowledge, Pākehā hamper sustainability development, as "legal and policy frameworks routinely include only tokenistic acknowledgements of Indigenous water 'values', while ongoing injustices related to the allocation and governance of water resources remain unresolved". [194]

These "tokenistic acknowledgements" may stem from the same narrowmindedness we see depicted in Kino's classroom scene in *The Pōrangi Boy*, whereby Pākehā-world narratives frame Māori perceptions of other-than-human nature as "illogical" or a fiction

[193] Whaanga et al, p. 488.

[194] Elizabeth Macpherson and Hayden Turoa, "Untapping the Potential of Indigenous Water Jurisdiction: Perspectives from Whanganui and Aotearoa New Zealand", *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 12.1 (2025), pp. 1-9 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_doaj_primary_oai_doaj_org_article_43f2226539ab4117b60985525104ce89> [accessed 10 July 2025] (p.1)

that holds no real sway in reality. However, as alluded to, not all taniwha can be trusted by everyone. In Matuku's *Falling into Rarohenga*, Kae ponders, "if it's not from our river, then it's not my guardian. And how can you trust something that belongs to someone else?"[195] Kae's question is also pertinent for Māori characters in the Pākehā world, particularly, it would seem, in relation to Western institutions.

In Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, we see outright rejection of Western psychotherapeutics when Niko's favourite Pākehā teacher, Miss Martin, suggests counselling after a particularly bad beating and Niko's aunt replies: "we don't do that; that's the Pākehā way. Talk to another Pākehā about their made-up problems. Now, boy, you don't need that, aye? You be okay".[196] Further, Niko's Koro is shown to die suddenly from heart-failure, after experiencing various physiological symptoms throughout the narrative which he does not appear to seek medical treatment for. It is unclear whether Koro's life could have been extended via the Western medical route, and there is no commentary on this, as Kino's narrative voice regarding physiological disease is more observational than it is critical.

Ngarewa's *The Bone Tree* depicts extreme distrust between 19-year-old protagonist, Kauri, and Western institutions in general, though it is through Kauri's avoidance of hospitals that his nine-year-old brother (Black) nearly dies of sepsis. The immediate lead-up to Black's near-death involves weeks of neglect, then several days of intensive-care from his estranged Māori maternal grandmother. Prior to delivering his brother into her care, Kauri states:

> We sterilised the kid's cut with Tea's vodka then I set off to the city to fetch Nan's rongoā. Bent asked to stay behind and pray for Black, his own brand of medicine.

[195] Matuku, p. 114.
[196] Kino, pp. 228-229.

> After that, we had to get the kid to a doctor. Bent reckoned he knew one from the church. Pākehā lady but Māori tūturu. Heartie. Went off to study like her old man then came across the statistics on Māori health. Thought it a blight on the whole goddamn country. Turned her whole life around afterwards, apparently: learned the reo while she got her quals then set up a mobile clinic and now does most of her work on pā and in the wops. The white women's Māui Pōmare, Bent called her and chuckled.[197]

Here, Ngarewa describes a Pākehā doctor character who is said to be "faithful" or "dedicated" to Māori and the Māori world, as implied by the word "tūturu".[198] A dedication further evidenced by her learning of te reo and tikanga Māori. Before speaking more to this character, it is worth noting that Sir Māui Wiremu Piti Naera Pōmare was the first Māori doctor trained in Western medicine. Pōmare was appointed the role of Māori health officer at the turn of the nineteenth century, when fears of a bubonic plague outbreak hitting Aotearoa New Zealand were high, and the Department of Public health was established due to a lack of confidence that local health boards would respond adequately.[199] At this time, Māori health was already in an "alarming state", according to Durie, but from the time Pōmare was appointed "population decline was halted, mortality rates began to decrease and slowly life expectancy increased. […] Māori were beginning to throw off the mantle of despair and oppression.[200]

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[197] Ngarewa, p. 260.

[198] John C. Moorfield, *Te Aka Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index* (Pearson, 2011, online), Te Aka Māori Dictionary <https://shorturl.at/n5HI1> [accessed 25 April 2025] s.v. tūturu, v.

[199] Mason Durie, "Maui Pomare: First Māori Doctor", in *Nga Kahui Pou*, ed. by M. Durie (United Kingdom: Huia Publishers, 2003), pp. 43-53 (p. 46).

[200] Durie, p. 46, 47.

Ngarewa's reference to Pōmare is interesting, given his Māori protagonist, whose family are struggling to "throw off the mantle of despair and oppression" over a century later, has no idea who the prominent historical Māori figure is. In *The Bone Tree* excerpt cited above, Kauri's commentary is somewhat ironic, considering how the narrative plays out from this point in regard to Black's care. The scenes depicting Nan's Rongoā require, I feel, a greater understanding of te ao Māori than I possess in order to fully interpret what is happening. Nan appears to follow Black to the brink of death, where something within him passes away and something remains, at which point, his disease is no longer critical. Here, Western medicine is called on as a precaution, via the aforementioned "white women's Māui Pōmare":

> [the doctor] had a look at him and ran some tests but had no clue what was going on, figured if he was getting better then he was probably over the worst of it. Said she'd call if something came up in his bloods and to give it some time and if anything changed to bring him back with a quickness. She wasn't a whole lot of help, to be honest, but at least she wasn't a know-it-all.[201]

Here, the Pākehā doctor's taking of "tests" and "bloods" demonstrates the Western compartmentalisation of disease, which—through its contained microscopic focus—fails to reveal any helpful information regarding Black's illness. An illness with multiple external "invisible" origins, which the reader will hopefully, by this point in the narrative, have come to perceive as existing first outside Black's body in the diseased and dis-eased human and other-than-human environments he has been born into. Nan's Rongoā ultimately saves Black through a combination of medicinal tinctures, and close human-to-human care of the

[201] Ngarewa, p. 285.

whole body—as captured in Durie's *Te Whare Tapa Whā* model—including the re-establishment of familial connections.

Though I do not question Ngarewa's validation of Rongoā, his protagonist's rejection of Western medicine is so extreme, I am uncertain whether Kauri is meant to be an unreliable narrator, or whether he is intended to highlight the inadequacies of the institution regarding the convoluted diseases of marginalised Māori. However, the fact that Black nearly dies from a condition that Māori disproportionately die from makes this commentary troubling. Even if Black's infected foot is symbolic of a people whose standing has been compromised by a privileged, domineering other—Black swims in polluted water "owned" by his racist Pākehā neighbour, leading to infection of the injury he sustained while left home alone by his likewise neglected adolescent brother—the author's discrediting of Western medicine's usefulness in a situation whereby acute care would likely be life-saving takes any such metaphor into dangerous territory. Surely antibiotics have a place, particularly in relation to sepsis.

Further, Ngarewa's commentary left me questioning whether his implication is that Pākehā ought to leave Māori disease-care entirely in the hands of Māori, given that a Pākehā doctor who works with Māori in a culturally informed manner is still "not a whole lot of help". A sentiment that appears to contradict Mason Durie's argument that:

> Most health programmes that are done with a kaupapa Māori approach essentially aren't too different from conventional health services. You wouldn't want them to be, actually. If you know that a particular drug is good for high blood pressure, you wouldn't want to deny someone that. So I think there is a place for more than one

approach, and being aware of which approach you are using at one time and for what purpose.[202]

In this section, I found the "doctor" in Māori-authored fiction is not restricted to the realm of Western medicine, in fact, the healers elevated most are dis-eased people themselves, particularly young protagonists. I argued the responsibility for collective healing falls on the shoulders of young Māori, contradicting the "neutrality" and "innocence" of young protagonists in Pākehā sick-lit. When diseased or dis-eased Māori bodies are delivered to Western medicine, the results are mixed. The "cure" for Māori is not shown to reside in the institution, nor in the isolated dis-eased individual—a complexity I extrapolate on now, in the final section of this chapter.

What is the Poison/Medicine?

According to Matuku's *Falling Into Rarohenga*, healing comes, first, from entities and properties that cannot be entirely trusted. A common theme, I found across Māori-authored fiction. While medicine is delivered from Western science, Rongoā Māori, or a combination of the two, healing is multifaceted, involving rediscovery of vital relationships with self and other, while drawing on practices rooted in pre-colonial understandings of holistic health and wellbeing. In Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, baby Kahu's preference for traditional kai, including fermented foods and fresh water, as opposed to fizzy drinks and lollies, is depicted as an indicator of health, and is narrativised in parallel with her connection to whales: a relationship that signifies collective healing for her human and other-than-human

[202] Mason Durie, Te Kawehau Hoskins and Alison Jones, "Interview: Kaupapa Maori: Shifting the Social", *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 47.2 (2012), 21–29 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_journals_1316203522> [accessed 3 October 2024] (p. 26).

whānau.[203] At the same time, Koro Apirana's insistence on upholding traditional gendered roles almost leads to the death of his granddaughter—and, symbolically, perhaps—the death of his iwi and their culture. In *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea*, other-than-human entities have the power to sustain life and cause death and destruction.

In Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, anger is portrayed as a kind of medicine, in that it can become a catalyst for action; however, it can also become "poisonous", as Māori characters inflict damage on themselves and each other. Ngarewa's *The Bone Tree* demonstrates healing through the application of Rongoā, which begins as a bottle of "tonic" which Kauri states is "from our tūpuna".[204] The liquid itself is distilled by Kauri's Māori grandmother, and the medicine is only effective when delivered in conjunction with wrap-around care. The aspect that is, perhaps, missing from the Western approach to disease—an approach which, as Ngarewa highlights, can be unhelpful or deadly when the narrow focus of the microscope, or the narrow focus of the Pākehā doctor, fails to perceive the broader realities of Māori disease and dis-ease as communicated by Māori. While drawing on these texts, I demonstrate how "medicine" becomes "poison" in a way that contrasts with Pākehā sick-lit depictions, which I found tend to portray destruction as a necessary evil in the eradication of disease. This section argues that the poison-potential of medicine complicates healing in Māori narratives, given that luck does not fall in the diseased Māori character's favour. Consequently, young Māori protagonists must learn to navigate the fine line between healing and destruction of the self.

In *Falling Into Rarohenga*, water is shown to heal Tui's broken skin:

[203] Witi Ihimaera, *The Whale Rider* (New Zealand: Reed Publishing, 1987), p. 35.
[204] Ngarewa, p. 253.

> Rākau dips a cupped hand into the pool and carefully dribbles water on my cut leg. I brace myself for a sting, but it doesn't come. Surprised, I peer down at my leg and watch the blood turn to steam, the wound knitting and closing. Rākau rubs a firm hand against my flesh and my skin is unbroken and new again. [. . .]
>
> 'The water has healing powers,' she says. 'And the steam too.'
>
> She takes a deep breath, holds it, releases it and smiles. 'But only at night.'[205]

Yet, the longer Tui remains in the hot pools, the less she feels like herself, until she loses all memories of her life, including her name. The medicine that first brought about healing becomes hazardous. I suggest the wāhine in Matuku's hot pools symbolise the properties or active ingredients found in drugs or medicines that become dangerous when restrictions are ignored:

> "I have a brother," I tell her, and I frown, because I can't . . . I can't quite remember his name. It's there, a short name, an easy name, just dancing on the tip of my tongue. I breathe in deep and feel the steam cleansing my lungs, wiping away a little more of the bad feeling inside me: the feelings I have toward my brother, the hurt, the resentment, the anger. I breathe until there is nothing left to feel. [206]

Here, Matuku demonstrates the seductive power of substances that "wipe away" hurt, anger and resentment, but also the price Māori may pay for numbing their "bad feelings". Tui loses her worries, until she has also forgotten who she is and where she has come from. Similar warnings are visible in Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, after Niko uses the "tapu – sacred" waters of his local thermal pools to heal after his cousin's assault, and finds, "The water makes me sleepy and I start to drift off". Niko is soon woken by his Aunty Rangi's warning,

[205] Matuku, pp. 138-139.
[206] Matuku, p. 141.

"don't get too comfortable!"[207] Kino's characterisation of Niko's mother Hine further reinforces this point, as the drug-addicted/self-medicating wahine struggles to remain conscious for long.

In these novels, Māori must recognise poisonous behaviours before they themselves are able to serve as medicine for their people. Regardless of background, the choices a character makes determines which end of the poison/medicine spectrum they occupy. Though child characters are often shown to represent the "medicine" for their people, as Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* demonstrates, the individual hero is de-emphasised, in that they only become powerful agents of healing by inspiring their whānau to move back into alignment with Māori culture and other-than-human nature. Kahu's story is told by her uncle Rawiri, and is woven through a context of te ao Māori past-present-future, emphasising the human-other-than-human collective:

> *Then from the backwash of Time came the voice of the old mother whale. "Child, your people await you. Return to the Kingdom of Tane and fulfil your destiny."* . . . Kahu looked at Koro Apirana, her eyes shining. "[…] Oh, Paka, and the whales are still singing," she said.
>
> *Haumi e, hui e, taiki e.* Let it be done.[208]

While Ihimaera's Kahu does fulfil her destiny by assuming her role as whale rider—a sacred relationship that harks back to her ancestors' arrival to The Land of the Long White Cloud—this reads more as a "letting be done" of that which was set in motion centuries before her birth, rather than a spur-of-the-moment act of individualistic heroism. Kahu is a "throw-back" according to her Nanny Flowers, and is elevated in the narrative to bear characteristics

[207] Kino, p. 308/420.
[208] Ihimaera, p. 150.

thrown forth by her ancestors.[209] Similarly, Roxborogh's Charlie is said to be the "chosen one", and as such, is fated by his particular genetic inheritance to mediate conflicts between human and other-than-human nature, though, ultimately, Charlie is acting on behalf of his community.

While the collectivist, political focus of these disease narratives appears to reflect a Kaupapa Māori approach to engagement with the Māori world in that intended outcomes are beneficial to the people studied,[210] this tendency to "stay with the trouble" is not without critique. In his discussion surrounding the choices, freedoms and responsibilities of contemporary Māori as individuals belonging to a living culture that exists within the present and future, not just a "pure", "romanticised" past—Hokowhitu argues, "[T]he situation colonised Indigenous peoples face [may well impose] the colonial condition upon us, but certainly I desire for myself and my children a future where entry into political conflict is a choice, not a preordainment".[211] I question whether young Māori readers are afforded this choice when it comes to Māori narratives, and whether there is room for stories of self-centred Māori healing, given the wellbeing of the collective is a weighty, ongoing pursuit, and the health of Māori youth is in crisis. The findings of this thesis suggest it is unlikely rangatahi can avoid politics or opt for (relatable) individualistic narratives to the same extent Pākehā readers can.

In conclusion, this chapter found disease and dis-ease is omnipresent in Māori sick-lit, and while it is medical doctors who stand behind the microscope in Pākehā sick-lit, it is

[209] Ihimaera, p. 35.

[210] Anna Rolleston, Robert N. Doughty and Katrina Poppe, "Integration of Kaupapa Māori Concepts in Health Research: A Way Forward for Māori Cardiovascular Health?", *Journal of Primary Health Care*, 8.1 (2016), 60–66 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_nlnz_indexnz_998778653602837> [accessed 4 October 2024]

[211] Hokowhitu, "Indigenous Existentialism and the Body", p. 104.

characters wielding mātauranga Māori who guide the macroscope in Māori sick-lit. Though some narratives depict Māori characters receiving Western medical treatment, hospitalisation is not shown to result in miraculous outcomes for Māori, particularly those with cancer.

I questioned the apparent wholesale rejection of Western approaches to disease found in some narratives (see Kino and Ngarewa, for example), arguing that the validation of Rongoā ought not require the invalidation of Western medicine, given both modes are surely important to Māori health. Further, as the distrust of institutions and their methodologies extrapolates to the people who operate them, I critiqued the implication that only Māori can be helpful to Māori.

I found that in contrast to the white patriarchs of Pākehā sick-lit, the most prominent "healers" in Māori sick-lit are normal (Māori) people, or other-than-human entities, who utilise Indigenous knowledges to reconnect the past with the present, and human characters with their other-than-human whānau. Furthermore, while Pākehā-authored teen sick-lit texts typically offset the painful physicality of bodily disease with the pleasures of romantic love, romance is virtually absent from Māori-authored young adult narratives. While sex is depicted as a kind of parallel medicine within Pākehā texts, Māori-authored young adult texts tend to portray (cis-hetero)sexual intercourse as a contributing factor to the diseased and dis-eased Māori state, with exploitation of the land and Māori bodies shown to occur in parallel. Finally, I found the medicine-as-poison paradox is so prevalent in Māori sick-lit, all entities and substances that serve to ease Māori suffering are brought into question, including Western medicine, with the implication being, that to heal in earnest, Māori must tackle the underlying cause of their diseases and dis-eases, as numbing symptoms leads to more illness or loss of life.

While I found the dis-eased or dying young Pākehā character is depicted as a catalyst for the growth of loved ones, the young Māori protagonist is always caught up in the tentacles of intersectionality, not only in respect to human social categories, but also across life forms and planes of being. As such, the dis-eased Māori protagonist must untangle "medicine" from "poison" and prompt their entire community into active healing by reflecting their dis-eased behaviours back to them. This responsibility directed at the young Māori reader is further amplified, I argue, by the treatment of te ao Māori in Pākehā texts—a discourse I broach in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Māori and Pākehā: Self and the Other

During my literature search, I did not find a single negative personality trait depicted in a Pākehā-authored Māori-identified character. While the positive tone demonstrated towards te ao Māori by these Pākehā authors ought not be discouraged, I argue characterisations can become limited by goodness. Further, "goodness" may be used to conceal or erase dis-ease. In this chapter, I discuss how Pākehā authors incorporate te ao Māori within their young adult fiction, and how these depictions contrast with Māori-authored narratives.

In Section One, I analyse Kate De Goldi's *Eddy, Eddy* (2022), a realist fiction with illness and ecological themes that incorporates Te Reo, but excludes Māori-identified characters. Though the ethnicities of De Goldi's characters are not stated, and political commentary pertaining to biculturalism is absent, I argue insights into Māori-Pākehā relations can be observed via the Pākehā psyche as derived from the Pākehā narrative voice—a form of speculation I return to throughout this thesis, in response to the minimalist style of engagement with the Māori world typical of Pākehā authors. For example, though *Eddy, Eddy* is set in a white-coded post-earthquake Christchurch, De Goldi's dis-eased protagonist (Eddy), and his deceased companion (Thos) energetically tear down the foundations of their Western/European colonial heritage, from heteronormative gender binaries, to religious paternalism, to the nuclear-family-ideal: all institutions that are shown in their various stages of decay and disrepair, alongside broken roads and churches.

Echoing Māori narratives, Thos's death embodies the wasting that accompanies twenty-first-century late-stage capitalism, "his flesh and energy [. . .] fallen away" after months of disordered eating following a bout of salmonella, while his parents holiday

abroad.[212] The paradoxical deficiencies of material wealth—starvation in a house full of food—are similarly emphasised in Whiti Hereaka's (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Te Arawa, Tūhourangi, Ngāti Whakaue, Ngāti Tumatawera, Tainui, Pākehā) *Bugs*, when her under-nourished Pākehā character throws good kai out the window. In comparing texts, I then challenge the (typically Pākehā) practice of writing culturally ambiguous characters, arguing, in accordance with the literature, that these characterisations are likely to be read as white.

Section Two argues that when Pākehā-authored characters *are* explicitly identified as Māori, their characterisations are remarkably similar. I begin this section with a discussion of Mandy Hager's *Singing Home the Whale* (2014), and Kate S. Richards' *Call Me Madeliene* (2021), two Pākehā eco-fictions with illness themes that demonstrate how dis-eased Pākehā characters often take up narrative space to grow and heal, meanwhile, Pākehā-authored Māori characters often appear fully formed. Consequently, these characters have nowhere to go, and are liable to fade into the margins, where they are at risk of becoming, I argue, "herbal supplements" for Pākehā: a medicine that is taken when convenient, while Māori disease and dis-ease goes untreated. In contrast, Section Three, demonstrates how Māori authors explore dis-ease in the Māori Self *and* the Pākehā other, allowing for more complex character arcs in both.

Te Reo and Te Ao Māori in Pākehā Texts

Pākehā-authored texts often gesture to the Māori world, even when Māori characters are absent. We see this occur, for example, in Ell's *Talking to Adam*, Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall*, and Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay*, through the naming of schools, streets and towns. I suggest these inclusions can be read as a symbol of solidarity, particularly in regard to Māori

[212] De Goldi, p. 292.

language, which is still under threat.[213] I begin this section by examining De Goldi's *Eddy, Eddy*, a Pākehā-authored text that normalises and celebrates te ao Māori within Pākehā worlds, particularly in relation to other-than-human nature. While discussing these inclusions, I consider subtexts of Pākehā dis-ease. Finally, I argue that while De Goldi's characters could technically be read as Māori, it is unlikely that ambiguity within white-authored texts leads to imagined diversity.

In De Goldi's *Eddy, Eddy*, Māori words and phrases roll unobtrusively from her characters' tongues: "'Tēnā koe, Eddy,'";[214] "'Mercy Buttercup. Kia ora, homies'";[215] "Adieu. Auf Wiedersehen. Haere rā".[216] Notably, the second and third examples contain te reo Māori alongside English, an approximation of French, and German—the implication being, perhaps, that Te Reo holds its own place in a broader context of globalised languages.[217] I suggest the fluidity with which De Goldi employs seemingly random moments of multilingualism serves to naturalise the presence of Te Reo in Pākehā worlds, while simultaneously role-modelling its utilisation by Pākehā without appearing contrived: they "batted back and forth facts and opinions and preferences: the points of recycling . . . totalitarianism or democracy, kōwhai or pōhutukawa . . . the ludicrousness of ballet, institutional religion, kererū or tūī".[218] Here, De Goldi positions the Māori world alongside Western culture, religion and politics, with Eddy's reference to Te Reo classes suggesting

[213] Jenny Rankine, Angela Moewaka Barnes, Belinda Borell, Hector Kaiwai, Raymond Nairn, Timothy McCreanor and Amanda Gregory, "Intentional Use of Te Reo Maori in New Zealand Newspapers in 2007", *Pacific Journalism Review*, 15.2 (2009), 174–190 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_openaire_primary_doi_dedup_37fe36de38030857e3d6732bea799da7> [accessed 26 February 2024]

[214] Kate De Goldi, Eddy, Eddy (New Zealand: Allen and Unwin, 2022), p. 72.

[215] De Goldi, p. 43.

[216] De Goldi, p. 108.

[217] Emma Andrews, "'A win for all Indigenous languages': Te reo Māori enters the Ivy League", *RNZ*, 25 March 2025, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/547473/a-win-for-all-indigenous-languages-te-reo-maori-enters-the-ivy-league> [accessed 26 March 2025].

[218] De Goldi, p. 295.

they are a step towards self-improvement, as unquestionable in merit as attending a book club. Thus, rather than framing the inclusion of Te Reo as a debatable issue, De Goldi skips straight to its utilisation, with the subtle implication being that intelligent people value Māori language, and, by natural extension, te ao Māori, itself.

In another instance, Eddy labels the pair of clay skinks he made by their Indigenous name: "NIHO TANIWHA/KINGDOM: ANIMALIA/PHYLUM: CHORDATA/CLASS: REPTILIA".[219] His father-figure, "Brain" is thrilled with "Eddy's Ark", an "as-yet-imaginary Ark, which would memorialise in miniature the fauna of Aotearoa when the ice caps melted and the seas rose".[220] Eddy tells the reader the clay sculptures have been a Christmas gift-giving tradition to Brain since his "first clumsy effort, the tuatara pair (*Sphenodon punctatus*), through to last year's moa (*Diornis robustus*)".[221]

Through partnering Te Reo with scientific Latin, De Goldi not only grounds the Indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand with the land through reference to Indigenous flora and fauna, she also conceptualises te ao Māori alongside the world at large: while Latin serves as the universal language of science, it is Te Reo that De Goldi's young Pākehā protagonist employs to translate the globalised to the specific, thus presenting Te Reo as a living language utilised daily, and as a scientific language on equal footing to Latin. Though Eddy's (presumably Pākehā) identity is never explored explicitly in relation to te ao Māori, these moments of plurality acknowledge not only the existence of a relationship, but also the subtle ways in which Pākehā may live and interact with the Māori

[219] De Goldi, p. 322.
Note: "Niho Taniwha" is not attributed to "skink" in Te Aka Māori Dictionary online, however, it does show up in other places, for example: Department of Conservation, Chevron Skink, DOC < https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/native-animals/reptiles-and-frogs/lizards/skinks/chevron-skink> [accessed 11 June 2024]
[220] De Goldi, p. 198, 202.
[221] De Goldi, p. 202.

world. For example, New Zealanders are more likely to use “moa” and “tuatara” over their Latinate scientific counterparts, as is true for many Te Reo words which have been adopted by Pākehā and Tauiwi. Eddy’s clay replicas of Indigenous fauna are, “spread across the living room bookshelves”, and, as such, they are both ornaments to be revered, and a part of day-to-day life, particularly when in interaction with human characters.[222] The cray critters inspire the reclusive boy Eddy babysits to leave his computer and participate in the gift-making ritual. Through altering the moods and behaviours of human characters, they demonstrate, perhaps, the concept of wairua, or non-physical spirit, believed by some to exist within all animate and supposedly “inanimate” objects.[223]

While Eddy’s creations are not explicitly infused with their own vis vitalis, the function they are shown to serve is similar to Māori-authored representations of “inanimate” objects, in that they directly interact with human self-esteem or mana (For example, see Koro’s taiaha in Kino’s *The Pōrangi Boy*; or the stolen patu in Tim Tipene’s *Patu: A Novel*; or Kae’s guitar in Steph Matuku’s *Falling Into Rarohenga*). De Goldi shows the reader how care and attention channelled towards an object generates its own potency, which may extend to how humans care for themselves, each other, and other-than-human nature. The clay creatures’ resting proximity to books also places different knowledge forms and different types of recording in conversation; furthermore, I suggest it is symbolic of their suspension between palpable and imagined worlds, adding to the sense of timelessness—or of time that overlaps, as can be found within Māori narratives that reflect

[222] De Goldi, p. 202.

[223] Moorfield, *Te Aka Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index* (Pearson, 2011, online), Te Aka Māori Dictionary <https://shorturl.at/n5HI1> [accessed 12 June 2024] s.v. wairua, n.

a non-linear perspective of time—an effect that is enhanced by Eddy's inclusion of extinct species.[224]

In *Eddy, Eddy*, the complex relationship between the living and the dead, the past and the present is further exemplified through the layered nature of the protagonist's internal dialogue, as memories are entangled with current perceptions, so the reader only realises towards the end of the narrative that Eddy's best friend, Thos, has been dead all along. Thos's presence is similar to non-linear Māori representations of the dead existing alongside the living (see Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*, and Matuku's *Falling into Rarohenga*, for example). Like with the extinct moa—though through memory rather than clay—Thos's form is vividly rendered by Eddy, and his relevance to the narrative is equal to that of Eddy's living companions. In recounting Thos's illness, Eddy also compares his sick friend to the weather, further intertwining themes of dis-ease, disease and climate: "'How long's he been sick?' [. . .] Eddy had been shocked to realise it was nearly a year". Eddy agreed it seemed odd, but "he'd become accustomed to it somehow, the warped standard of an invalid Thos. 'Very common,' said Sue. 'You adjust little by little to the changing norm. You accept the rising temperature'".[225] This observation, made by a character who greets Eddy in Te Reo, could equally describe human behaviours regarding climate crisis. In the lead up to Thos's unexpected death, Eddy states, "Thos was like a southerly. Battering. He left you feeling exhausted. Head down against the wind, and rain [. . .] The southerly blew [Eddy] back to [Thos's] sleep-out".[226] Despite being under piles of

[224] Paula Toko King, Donna Cormack, Ricci Harris, Sarah-Jane Paine and Melissa McLeod, "'Never-Ending Beginnings': A Qualitative Literature Review of Māori Temporal Ontologies", *Kōtuitui*, 18.3 (2023), 252–267 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_doaj_primary_oai_doaj_org_article_5f2ee70700814814b808d7d116c49e50>[accessed 10 June 2025]

[225] De Goldi, p. 298.

[226] De Goldi, p. 299.

bedding with the heaters on high, Thos demands Eddy' body heat. "Thos's back softened against Eddy's", while Eddy tried to breathe air "less composty".[227] The next morning, "It was absolutely quiet in the sleep-out [. . .] Eddy was listening for breathing and couldn't hear it".[228] It is the quality and movement of the air that Eddy associates with Thos's dying and death: an atmospheric conglomeration of the natural (wind), the artificial (heat pump), and the personal (body heat). In the moments before noticing Thos is dead, Eddy states he felt his diseased friend's porridge-only diet was "willed, rather than a consequence of a delicate system",[229] reflecting the Pākehā habit of assigning individual responsibility for health degradation, even within a context of broader environmental disease.

De Goldi's choice of medium—clay—further fortifies the cultural integrations between te ao Māori and Pākehā worlds, as clay is the substance from which Adam (the first man) and Hineahuone (the first wāhine) were fashioned, according to Christian and pre-colonial Māori creation stories. The ark, a biblical symbol of salvation built in anticipation of a cataclysmic flood, serves as metaphor, both in regard to global environmental issues at large, and Aotearoa New Zealand-specific concerns regarding Indigenous taonga, in particular.

Through shaping each gift, Eddy recalibrates his love for Brain, the man who has served as his most significant "other". It takes the entire narrative to uncover the events responsible for troubling Eddy's relationship with his father figure, but we learn that his irritation stems from his own guilt and grief over his past actions and inactions, further exacerbated by the push-pull struggle of looming adulthood and his desire to self-actualise, which has been further complicated by death and environmental destruction (a condition

[227] De Goldi, p. 300.
[228] De Goldi, p. 302.
[229] De Goldi, p. 302.

that could parallel the state of an ”adolescent” colony sprouting as a product of the ruin it was seeded within). Eddy’s arc and Eddy’s Ark reach their climactic heights in parallel when De Goldi’s young protagonist presents his clay niho taniwha to Brain, then emotionally unravels. Interestingly, the character Eddy confides in is Sue, his elder friend who, though not explicitly identified as Māori, first greets him with the reo, “Tēnā koe, Eddy”.[230] Thus, De Goldi positions Eddy’s unburdening in relation to a character who is either Māori, or who aligns herself to Aotearoa New Zealand’s biculturalism. Either way, te ao Māori is connected to Eddy’s healing, which begins with acknowledgement of the myriad losses he has been party to, but has hitherto refused to face.

On the one hand, the clay niho taniwha could symbolise the pinnacle of Eddy’s ability to construct, both in regard to the objects themselves, and the found-family he has pieced together amidst his own brokenness and the brokenness of post-earthquake Christchurch city. On the other hand, the pinnacle of Eddy’s personal growth is located in the destruction of his façade; a kind of faux maturity that conflates cynicism with evolution, when in fact, for all his intelligences, Eddy has been stuck, it would seem, judging “the speck of sawdust” in the eye of the other, while “pay[ing] no attention to the plank” in his own.[231]

It may be a stretch to suggest Eddy’s gift-making ritual could be read as a metaphor for Pākehā-Māori relations, whereby the Pākehā protagonist can no longer, in Eddy’s words, “rinse and soothe” the complex feelings he harbours in relation to his most significant Other and therefore must acknowledge his part in the dis-ease that extends beyond himself but to which he is inextricably entangled (though, there *is* plenty of reference to colonists and

[230] De Goldi, p. 72.

[231] Phillip J. Long, “The Speck in Your Own Eye – Matthew 7:3-5”, < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_2254024757> [accessed 5 November 2025]

capitalists). Perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that the narrative harbours a complex and, at times, contradictory gathering of eclectic worlds that echo, reiterate and reintegrate the ancient and the so-called "modern", the old and the young, the past and the present, the extinct and the threatened, the human and the other-than-human, the Indigenous and the settler-colonial—much like Matuku's underworld in *Falling into Rarohenga*.

Though ethnicity is not assigned to the misfits that populate Eddy's world, the presence of characters perceived to exist on the margins of what is considered typical in the Pākehā world, namely, strange/queer girls, reclusive boys, single older women, and gay men—could feasibly signify the presence of other marginalised groups, including Māori. Further, the inclusion of te ao Māori within the narrative could serve to prime the reader to extrapolate in this way. However, in the absence of Māori-identified characters, or explicit reference to Māori-Pākehā relations, the above analysis relies on speculation, and would require readers to connect the dots before utilising the narrative as a means to unpack Pākehā identity. Likewise, in order to perceive De Goldi's characters as Māori, the reader would have to work against cognitive biases, and accept the unspoken assumption that Māori and Pākehā experience identical struggles.

While it is true that there is not one way of being Brown and/or Indigenous, it is also true that people of colour are less likely than whites to experience race as an invisible trait.[232] In "'This Is Not Us': But Actually, It Is. Talking About When to Raise The Issue Of Colonisation", Waikaremoana Waitoki discusses her experience of being Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand, citing racial prejudice and discrimination as ongoing concerns, to the point her

[232] Veronica A. Newton, "Hypervisibility and Invisibility: Black Women's Experiences with Gendered Racial Microaggressions on a White Campus", *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 9.2 (2023), 164–178 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_sage_journals_10_1177_23326492221138222> [accessed 13 June 2024] (p. 164).

whānau "do not really ever feel safe in [their] own country".[233] According to Waitoki, the so-called "unprecedented" 2019 Christchurch terrorist attacks did not come as a surprise to many New Zealanders, particularly those belonging to Māori and Muslim communities, who, "live in a culture that has othered them" while "[t]he portrayal of Muslim and Māori as savage, misogynistic, undeserving, troublesome and uncultured is a narrative we have lived with since colonisation stepped on to our foreshore".[234] Waitoki states, "[white] New Zealanders should know that everyday acts of casual racism towards Māori, Pacific, Asians and Muslims is endemic and often silenced".[235] While I have found Māori-authored narratives always depict this dis-ease through their Māori characterisations to some extent, the same is not true for racially nondescript characters in Pākehā-authored fiction, who typically reflect privileges that contribute to these characters always *sounding* white.

In "'Have You to This Point Assumed That I Am White?' Narrative Withholding since *Playing in the Dark*", Paul Ardoin writes that "white authors assume white readers, and those assumed-white readers are expected to assume that all characters are white unless the narrative explicitly indicates otherwise".[236] He gives the example of Toni Morrison's reading of one of Ernest Hemingway's characters: "Eddy is white, and we know he is because nobody says so".[237] Along with the global implications of whiteness being treated as a "universal default", this thesis argues that "unnarrated race" by Pākehā authors has

[233] Waikaremoana Waitoki, "'This Is Not Us': But Actually, It Is. Talking about When to Raise the Issue of Colonisation", *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 48.1 (2019), 140–145 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_gale_infotracacademiconefile_A630170780> [accessed 13 June 2024] (p. 140).

[234] Ibid.

[235] Waitoki, p. 141.

[236] Paul Ardoin, "'Have You to This Point Assumed That I Am White?' Narrative Withholding since Playing in the Dark", *Melus*, 44.1 (2019), 160-180 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_oup_primary_10_1093_melus_mly058> [accessed 13 June 2024] (p. 163).

[237] Ibid.

implications that are specific to the Aotearoa New Zealand context. For example, I found the exclusion of markers identifying Māori or Pākehā identity tends to be paired with the exclusion of engagement with Aotearoa New Zealand-specific issues, in general, so, while Māori readers may hypothetically project themselves onto racially ambiguous characters, in order to do so, they would have to cognitively relinquish certain aspects of their cultural subjectivity in ways Pākehā readers would not. In effect, the common struggles likely to affect Māori readers are left unacknowledged, while the cultural dominance of Pākehā readers is implicitly confirmed through characters that read white, but never confront the privileges of their whiteness, or the consequences of what this privilege means for the marginalised Other.

In contrast, I found Māori-authored characters *seem* Māori (or non-Māori), both in regard to what they say and how they say it. In *Bugs*, Hereaka's young protagonist tells the reader that she and her best friend Jez are Māori, but Hereaka also shows the Māori identity of these characters through their voices and actions. Likewise, the new girl (Stone Cold) has a distinctive voice, and way she tramples over basic cultural boundaries suggests she has been raised outside the Māori world. Stone Cold's whiteness is also heavily implied when her father aggressively refers to Bugs and her Māori mother as "you people" after the girls are caught smoking marijuana and he immediately assumes his daughter's Māori friend is to blame.[238] As with the majority of Māori-authored texts studied, Hereaka's narrative exemplifies how difficult it is for Māori to forget they are Māori in a "Pākehā world", demonstrating how unlikely it is that any character may equally be perceived as Māori. Shilo Kino writes of the dissonance she experienced participating in the Auckland Writers Festival,

[238] Whiti Hereaka, *Bugs* (New Zealand: Huia Publishers, 2013, BorrowBox eBook), p. 315.

which she claims is dominated by Pākehā audiences, even during sessions presented by Māori and Pasifika authors.[239] Recalling one such event, Kino observes how the wellbeing of Māori and Indigenous peoples can swiftly fade into the background within the Pākehā world:

> The audience gasped when Fili Fepulea'i-Tapua'i came on, then gasped again when she spoke of women in Kiribati tying one end of a rope from their waist to a bucket where babies were tucked inside when the floods came. But then the gasps turned to chatter and laughter as soon as Fili left the stage and I thought about how it had taken an 18-year-old to bring the audience down to earth but her message was lost somewhere in between the privilege and the sea of whiteness.[240]

The privilege Kino references here, which seemingly enables white audiences to consume Indigenous and environmental dis-ease in such a way that discomfort is momentary and entertainment is paramount, has parallels with earlier discussions of environmental dis-ease in Pākehā teen sick-lit. Further, I argue, the idea of the young activist's message being lost in a "sea of whiteness" reflects the fates of the majority of Māori-identified side-characters I found in Pākehā eco-fiction, which I elaborate on next.

Māori Characters in Pākehā Fiction

I begin this section with a discussion of Hager's *Singing Home the Whale*, an outstanding example of a Pākehā-authored text that includes multiple characters who, to this Pākehā reader, at least, read convincingly as Māori. First, I compare Hager's Māori side-characters with those in Kate S. Richards' *Call Me Madeleine*, one of the few Pākehā-authored young

[239] Shilo Kino, "Wanted: A Writers Festival Beyond the White and Privileged", *Newsroom*, 19 May 2021, <https://newsroom.co.nz/2021/05/19/wanted-a-writers-festival-beyond-white-privilege/>[accessed 17 June 2024] (para 11).
[240] Kino, para 2-3.

adult texts I located that includes more than one Māori character, and contextualises these characters within the Māori world. I argue that Hager's Pania and Richards' Tui exemplify the Pākehā author's tendency to keep Māori characters in a positive, uncomplicated light, and while this framing of Māori by Pākehā is valid, it also has the potential to limit Māori characterisations, as evidenced, I suggest, by discrepancies in visibility, or the absence of diverse character arcs. Though Pākehā authors tend not to write Māori protagonists, and the side-(or background-)character role is limited by design, this section demonstrates how Pākehā-authored Māori side-characters diverge from their non-Māori counterparts, before returning to Hereaka's *Bugs* to show how the side-character role is not necessarily one-dimensional.

In *Singing Home the Whale*, Hager's central Māori side-character Pania shares notable similarities with Richards' Tui from *Call Me Madeleine*: both young wāhine are depicted as conscientious high achievers with an affinity for other-than-human nature. Pania is said to have familial connections to Min, the baby orca who Hager positions as an alternating narrative voice to that of her Pākehā protagonist, Will. While Hager's Pania is given considerably more page-time in *Singing Home The Whale* than Richards' Tui, who all but disappears into the background in *Call Me Madeleine*, her role is primarily to support her Pākehā protagonist. This fate is not uncommon for side-characters, but it ought to be challenged, I argue, when discrepancies show up between Māori- versus Pākehā-identified side-characters. In *Singing Home the Whale*, Will's uncle Dean, his friend Hunter, and his antagonist Gabby all occupy supporting roles, yet these Pākehā side-characters are not necessarily helpful or likable in the beginning of the narrative, and their personalities undergo obvious transformations. Gabby bullies Will and compromises Min's safety, but her character is eventually redeemed, and her behaviour contextualised. Likewise, Hunter's

problematic language is narratively linked to poor role-modelling by his abusive father. Of these three fallible Pākehā side-characters, Uncle Dean has the most visible arc when he finally takes a stand against his abusive boss Bruce.

Though Pania's whānau are grieving the recent death of her brother, killed by "friendly fire" in Afghanistan, they never express their loss in a way that warrants criticism or requires personal development.[241] Pania is sad her brother is dead; however, her grief never complicates her character to the extent her dis-ease—or Māori disease and dis-ease, in general—requires anything from the Pākehā protagonist or, indeed, the reader. Further, their loss is distanced to a foreign (American) war. Richards' Tui in *Call Me Madeleine* likewise appears flawless and uncomplicated compared to her morally grey Pākehā side-characters. Despite reference to Tui's "outrage" over environmental issues, the reader is never given the opportunity to dwell on this Māori side-character's concerns from her own perspective. Tui is "passionate about the environment" and "says Māori are losing their cultural practices as their sacred areas are developed". We are told her "passion is contagious", that she "is a painter, a poet and a songwriter" and has "uninhibited freedom in her brushstrokes and a poetic written voice".[242] Richards tells rather than shows the reader who Tui's character is, offering a list of positive attributes which are never fleshed out; further, Richards' attribution of "uninhibited freedom" comes dangerously close to narratives that conflate Indigeneity with "instinct".

In *Singing Home the Whale*, Māori "outrage" is similarly channelled towards the treatment of other-than-human nature, and while Hager does hint at a broader antagonism between Māori and Pākehā side-characters, Hager's Māori characters are shown to express

[241] Hager, p. 59.
[242] Kate S. Richards, *Call Me Madeleine* (New Zealand: Green Room House, 2021), p. 2.

their dis-ease through playful banter.[243] While Hager's adult Pākehā side-character, Dean, is allowed to exhibit "boiling anger", Hager's wahine Māori side-character, Viv Reihana comports her dis-ease with good humour; a trait characteristic of all the Pākehā-authored Māori characters studied in this thesis. If Viv suffers dis-ease as an ongoing symptom of colonisation, her struggle never overpowers her ability to function well. In fact, as with Pania, Viv's functioning far outshines that of her Pākehā peers. While Pākehā side-characters cause disease and dis-ease, either through tolerating or perpetrating violence against women, children, and other-than-human nature, the dis-eases of Māori side-characters are only discernible through their environmental activism. Not only is this activism indicative of high moral aptitude, it is in full alignment with the goals of Pākehā protagonists, positioning Māori as hero-adjacent and ultimately well-served by the same narrative outcomes.

When framed in this way, I suggest Māori disease and dis-ease appears almost whimsical, particularly when compared to the aforementioned Māori-authored portrayals of multifactorial environmental illness. For example, while Kino's Niko in *The Pōrangi Boy* cannot help but see Māori girls and women in various states of dis-ease and disease—their imperfections revealing the severity of a collective Māori struggle, as well as the complexity of morally grey Māori characters—Hager's Will only sees Māori girls and women in a healthful and flattering light. While Niko is forced to notice how marginalisation has dis-eased the girls and women he loves, Will's gaze is unburdened by Pania's Māori status, and by his own Pākehā (settler-colonial) status. In fact, Will's love for wāhine equates to a personal *un*burdening, as his found connection to the Māori world, including other-than-human nature, ultimately enables him to heal from his physical and psychological wounds.

[243] Mandy Hager, *Singing Home the Whale* (Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2014), p. 100.

Will observes his love-interest, Pania, in the water with his beloved whale-friend: "It was electrifying to see the two connecting – as amazing to Will as singing with Min himself. The look on Pania's face could only be described as orgasmic – or what he figured that would look like – softened, dewy, glowing from the inside out".[244]

Hager's Pania is beautiful, and this beauty transcends the physical when situated alongside other-than-human nature—a quality that, I found, does not appear in Māori-authored depictions of Māori female characters. If anything, I found sexuality and romanticism is downplayed in Māori young adult narratives. Further, Māori authors often complicate relational dynamics, to the extent that no singular character appears perfect or unburdened by dis-ease, whether identified as Māori or Pākehā, human or other-than-human. From the start of *Singing Home the Whale*, Hager's Pania moves in parallel with the goals of her Pākehā protagonist, and, therefore, all obstacles are shown to exist in front of them, rather than between (or behind) them. On the one hand, this positioning is important, as it demonstrates a positive partnership between Māori and Pākehā; on the other, I question what is lost, or downplayed, when young Pākehā protagonists and Māori side-characters have no opportunity to unpack or resolve conflict between them. When Will does look at the Māori girl at his side, he perceives her as down-to-earth and "orgasmic" in both her self-containment and her ability to connect across human and other-than-human realms. While a brain injury has left Will somewhat prickly, Pania's presence is a balm that soothes both the dis-eased protagonist and the reader. Pania's likable characterisation is not necessarily an issue, nor should an awareness of objectification imply that romantic connections between characters cannot also be sexual, but considering the gravity of Māori-

[244] Hager, p. 183.

Pākehā relations, particularly in regard to the land and other-than-human nature, I caution that wāhine Māori are at risk of being reduced to "dewy", "caramel-sweet" non-confrontational subjects, or victims of the Pākehā sublime. For example, though Hager never uses the word exotic, the nature of Pania's appeal to Will could be read as such, putting her within the territory of the dusky maiden trope.[245]

In the 1990s, Pākehā authors Joy Cowley and David Hill both included Māori characters in their fictions, however, Māori identification was superficial and lacked the cultural grounding we are starting to see from Pākehā authors like Hager and, to a lesser extent, Richards. In Cowley's *The Shadrach Trilogy*, the children's father is said to have Māori ancestry, yet, this is never elaborated on, nor is the Māori world referenced. Similarly, in *See Ya, Simon*, Hill's sole Māori character is identified by name alone and is never shown in relation to his family or culture. Two decades on, Hill's sole Māori character in *Below* (2023), Sonny Ngatai, is contextualised beyond his name. To earn his living in Aotearoa New Zealand, Sonny Ngatai contributes to the destruction of the natural environment—a behaviour seemingly at odds with his tāngata whenua status, though Hill does not explore this conflict narratively.

In *Echo* (2022), Arlo Kelly's Māori-identified character, Nikau, is a friendly civil servant working at a refuse station, who embodies the principle of manaakitanga, welcoming the young disabled Pākehā boy with generosity and respect. While Eric feels undermined by his own father, whom he perceives as ableist and out-of-touch, Nikau empowers and uplifts Eric throughout their encounter, ultimately fixing a broken cassette player for him, free of charge. On the one hand, these depictions of manaakitanga by Kelly,

[245] Jo Smith, "The Many Different Faces of the Dusky Maiden: A Context for Understanding Maiden Aotearoa", in *Navigating Art and Literature in the Pacific*, ed. by J. Carroll, B. Nālani McDougall and G. Nordstrom (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014, JSTOR Ebook), pp. 144-159 (p. 146).

Hager, and Richards ring true, and reinforce a positive counternarrative to the prejudice called out by Māori authors. On the other hand, as I have argued, the exclusion of troubled and troubling Māori characters in Pākehā fiction may reinforce the assumption that "good" Māori contain their dis-eases and naturally play unchallenging side-characters within Pākehā worlds without complaint.

On the Pākehā page, tāngata whenua lose their right to be defensive, self-centred, unhelpful, anti-social or moving in opposition to Pākehā. Likewise, they are robbed of their ability to experience illness, and to conceptualise health and disease in ways not sanctioned by Pākehā protagonists. Instead, I argue, Māori personhood is shrunken down and smoothed over in easy-to-swallow pills, infused with cherry-picked aspects of te ao Māori that can conveniently be presented as a natural remedy to Aotearoa New Zealand's ills, but one that works as a herbal supplement, that is, supplementary to Pākehā. Yes, Pākehā are depicted as the illness, but they are also depicted as human beings who can themselves experience illness, and therefore they have the potential for healing and redemption. In contrast, Māori characters are dehumanised to the point they only represent a mode of cure in relation to Pākehā: a pill cannot cure itself, but it can become a cure when taken by (white) people. This observation becomes particularly pertinent when held up against contemporary Pākehā depictions of medicine, illness and disease in Aotearoa-based young adult fiction, as previously discussed.

I suspect the fear of causing harm is a strong factor behind the absence or simplification of Māori characters in Pākehā texts, and this fear is not without merit. One of the points Patricia Grace makes regarding the dangers to Indigenous readers of non-Indigenous writers is that, "[T]hey are writing about us but saying negative and insensitive

things which tell us that we are not good".[246] The exclusive "goodness" of Māori side-characters in contemporary Pākehā young adult fiction may indeed reflect a caution and sensitivity that is vital after centuries of negative stereotyping; however, it is also important to reflect on the observation Grace made early in her career that Māori characters are not always "depicted credibly" by Pākehā authors.[247]

Māori and Pākehā Characters in Māori Fiction

In regard to the credibility of Māori characterisations, the logical method of interrogation would be to compare Pākehā-authored Māori characters with Māori-authored Māori characters; however, given the nature of the texts studied, this would require comparing side-characters with protagonists, and while I do engage in this approach to an extent, the more accurate comparison can be found by comparing side-characters. It is worth noting that regardless of protagonist status or not, I made the following observations while studying Māori-authored texts:

- Māori characters tend to demonstrate a full spectrum of temperamentalities.
- Novels usually contain at least one Pākehā character, but often more.
- Pākehā characters are typically more disagreeable than their Pākehā-authored Māori counterparts, though this disagreeability may be shown across multiple background characters.

I begin this section with an exploration of Hereaka's *Bugs*, an outstanding example of a Māori-authored fiction in which a Pākehā side-character is afforded relatively equitable complexity and relevance to the Māori protagonist. Drawing on Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, and

[246] Tuhiwai Smith, p. 39.
[247] Charlotte Graham-McLay, "Patricia Grace's Literary Legacy: Giving Māori Characters Their 'Natural' Voice", *The Guardian*, 23 February 2020, <https://rb.gy/d9d27s> [accessed 4 January 2024].

Gregg's *Nine Girls*, I exemplify how Māori authors write imperfect Māori characters with room to grow, while also creating space for imperfect Pākehā characters to unpack and process their Pākehā status; a service to the Pākehā reader which this section argues is particularly visible in Tipene's *Patu: A Novel*.

Though Bugs is Hereaka's protagonist, there are three main characters who interact throughout her narrative: Bugs and Jez are said to be Māori, while Stone Cold appears to be Pākehā/European. Stone Cold is more comparable to Hager's Pania than she is to Richards' Tui, given Stone Cold and Pania are prominent side-characters (and love-interests) throughout their respective narratives. While Pania makes a positive first impression on Hager's Pākehā protagonist, Stone Cold is immediately antagonistic to Hereaka's Māori protagonist. According to Bugs, Stone Cold lives in a "frickin' castle" and has no perception of Jez's reality: "Can you imagine Stone Cold here? She'd snap her neck from looking down at us all: *the filth! The squalor! The people!* [. . .] But this is how people live – not like the magazine life she's stuck in".[248] As the narrative progresses, Bugs realises she too has been ignorant of the privileges her single-mother's work ethic has afforded her, and she acknowledges her own self-centredness prevented her from perceiving Jez's full reality. As such, the reader is shown Bugs's imperfections in a way that is not visible in Pākehā-authored characterisations of Māori—though Bugs *is* the protagonist in Hereaka's narrative. Still, differences can be observed in side-characters, I argue, most significantly in regard to the room afforded to express and process dis-ease in a flawed manner.

Towards the end of the narrative, Stone Cold shifts in Bugs's eyes from a magazine cut-out—shiny and trashy and fake—to a real person suffering a kind of dis-ease that, up

[248] Hereaka, p. 109.

until that point, had been overshadowed by material privilege. Stone Cold lacks the belonging Bugs has taken for granted, which goes beyond the material and geographical, and is deeply rooted in relationship with the self and the familial other. Stone Cold's parents are absent or laissez-faire when she needs them, and paradoxically controlling and infantilising when she needs to self-actualise. In response, Stone Cold undereats and self-medicates with alcohol. When her parents go out of town after confiscating her "stuff" as a consequence for smoking marijuana, Stone Cold drinks a bottle of whisky, then texts Bugs for help. Bugs not only supports her friend physically, but also emotionally and, I suggest, spiritually. Like with Ngarewa's grandmother character providing Rongoā to the gravely ill Black, it is the energy behind care that demonstrates the "non-physical" aspect. According to Bugs, "[T]he whisky has robbed [Stone Cold] of her motion but gifted her with *e*-motion".[249] Bugs feels she must feed her friend, "Something a bit stodgy, to soak up her *sorry*".[250] As Bugs prepares a cooked meal, the contents of Stone Cold's "sorry" are gradually revealed: her parents care more about protecting her image than they do her personhood. Stone Cold mentions how Bugs's mother genuinely cares for her wellbeing; a care also reflected in the nature of the boundaries she upholds when Bugs misbehaves, indicating that her intention is not to preserve her daughter's status as an extension of herself, but rather to help her understand that adult choices have adult consequences. Stone Cold feels objectified and commodified by her parents, and after witnessing Bugs's relationship with her family, she finds her own experience all the more intolerable, and, in her state of dis-ease, hacks off her hair, which she says her father refers to as his princess's "crowning

[249] Hereaka, p. 425/561.
[250] Hereaka, p. 427/561.

glory", and Stone Cold tells Bugs, "That's all I am – long dresses and hair, waiting for someone to save me".[251]

Bugs realises that the "drunk, emotional, loud-mouth bitch" *is* in fact her "mate", and proceeds to give Stone Cold the care she craves, which begins with showing up, then continues with a plate of potatoes cooked with butter and "love". When Stone Cold asks if Bugs will stay, Bugs looks into her eyes and says "Yeah", then Stone Cold leans over and kisses Bugs, "full on the mouth", but "it is not full of sex or want; it is just full of need".[252] Here, I argue Hereaka exemplifies the crux of Pākehā dis-ease as narrativised by Pākehā authors such as Hunt, Broadbent, Kelly, De Goldi, and Hager, namely a profound sense of alienation from the self and/or other. The awhi Hereaka's protagonist offers her Pākehā friend in these moments demonstrates a kind of love that differs from the romantic, sexual or platonic love we see in Pākehā sick-lit texts—or indeed, the kind of fairytale kiss Bugs disparages in her private ruminations on Western princess tropes. However, in these moments I argue Bugs is more than a herbal supplement taken by a Pākehā character to feel better. Hereaka's Māori protagonist is aware of what she is giving, and it appears the exchange is empowering for her, too. By nourishing her friend, Bugs also absorbs the richness of the love she is giving, and has been given by her mother and family, but which she has perhaps has taken for granted. Prior to this moment, Bugs compares her material limitations to Stone Cold's over-abundance, and finds herself lacking. Now realigning with her values, she realises she has what she needs—ethically and socially—to self-actualise, and that is *because* of who she is and where she has come from, not in spite of it. At the same time, Bugs takes her future in her own hands, knowing full well the battles her mother

[251] Hereaka, p. 358.
[252] Hereaka, pp. 364-369.

fought as a young Māori woman raising a child in neoliberal Aotearoa New Zealand. While Bugs is shown to appreciate her mother's complexity as an imperfect, multifaceted person, the reader is likewise encouraged to perceive the complexity of Hereaka's imperfect adult Pākehā characters.

The most flattering Māori-authored Pākehā character I located is Kino's Miss Martin in *The Pōrangi Boy*. While this character is similar to Pākehā representations of one-dimensional Māori characters in that she is entirely sympathetic to the plight of the protagonist, there are some notable contrasts. To begin with, Miss Martin is one of many Pākehā who show up throughout Kino's text—though the majority admittedly play minor roles and are afforded minimal page-time. Miss Martin is declared "one of the good ones" by Niko's Māori aunt, meanwhile, the majority of Kino's Pākehā background characters seemingly depict the "bad" ones.[253] However, the majority of Kino's Māori characters are also flawed.

While Miss Martin consistently responds to Niko with empathy, there are moments when she does not notice what is happening to him. For example, when Niko is about to be assaulted on school grounds, Miss Martin is in the vicinity, but she looks in the wrong direction, thus demonstrating how even "good" Pākehā may only provide assistance when the dis-eased are already bruised and battered. I argue this moment of unseen or unnoticed violence, whereby Miss Martin is visible to Niko, but Niko is not visible to Miss Martin, speaks to a Pākehā imperceptibility of a Māori reality; or to an outright unwillingness to look, as is the case when Niko's least favourite teacher, Mrs Wobberly, has the opportunity to stop a fight, but instead huffs and walks away as though she cannot be bothered with the

[253] Kino, p. 309.

Māori boys she already has low expectations of. Finally, Miss Martin demonstrates her complexity through her own voice, in particular when she offers Niko a newspaper clipping of Koro protesting the construction of a prison on his iwi's land. When Niko notices Koro has been portrayed as "angry", while a smiling Pākehā politician is said to be "absolutely delighted" at the old man's arrest, Miss Martin informs Niko that, "sometimes the media do this," and shares a quote she attributes to African American human rights activist, Malcolm X: "If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed and loving the people who are doing the oppressing".[254] When Niko replies that he does not know what that means, Miss Martin gives an impromptu history lesson that incorporates her own experiences "[growing] up in a very Pākehā community" where parents "were racist as could be" and "the kind of people who pulled me out of te reo class because they thought it was a waste of time".[255] After telling Niko the media often encouraged this attitude, suggesting "you only ever saw Māori in the news when it had something to do with crime, or being activists", Miss Martin talks about her education on Aotearoa New Zealand's colonial history:

> "I read about the Treaty of Waitangi and how Māori used to own sixty-six million acres of land. But the Pākehā took most of that. You know, I just felt so guilty. [. . .] I guess what I'm saying, Niko, is that I support you and your whanau. The prison doesn't belong here. This is your land." [256]

Here, we see a rare example of a Pākehā-identified character in young adult fiction who acknowledges a relationship between Pākehā actions (or inactions) and Māori disease/dis-ease. Further, she speaks to Pākehā dis-ease regarding our colonial history. In contrast to the

[254] Kino, p. 222.
[255] Kino, pp. 224-225.
[256] Kino, pp. 225-226.

defensiveness we see in Kino's Mrs Wobberly, or Titch's father character in Gregg's *Nine Girls*, Miss Martin utilises her position to empower Niko with knowledge pertaining to his Māori identity. When he says, "'Miss, I know that! But man, I'm just a kid. I don't know what I'm supposed to do'", Miss Martin asks if he has heard of Ngā Tamatoa, then shows him a black and white picture of "some Māori kids" outside the Beehive, who fought and won for te reo to be brought into schools.[257]

The text I located with the most in-depth exploration of Pākehā settler-colonial guilt was Tim Tipene's (Pākehā, Ngāti Kurī, Te Uri-o-Hau, Ngāti Whātua) *Patu: A Novel*. Pākehā protagonist Jahnine purposefully enters the Māori world with the intention of returning the patu her grandfather stole during the Land Wars—an action she hopes will lift the curse that supposedly plagues her family, and which she believes is causing her mother's cancer.[258] This is a meaty tension if ever there was one, given the premise appears to imply that Pākehā are to blame for their own diseases: an implication that spurs, for this reader at least, images of Susan Sontag rolling in her grave.[259] However, making amends does not result in a miraculous cure. Though Jahnine's mother dies, the Pākehā protagonist experiences spiritual and emotional healing—an outcome that reflects *The Mountain* film's narrative, whereby Sam finds peace of mind within te ao Māori before she dies. Jahnine's grief is figuratively and literally held by Māori, as she weeps for her dying mother during the tangi of a stranger. And like with Hereaka's Bugs, Ngarewa's Nan, and Pākehā-authored Māori characters—such as Hager's Pania or Kelly's Nikau—the wāhine in Tipene's tangi scene hold the dis-eased Pākehā girl beyond physical touch. Further, Jahnine finds a sense of family,

[257] Kino, pp. 226-227.
[258] Tim Tipene, *Patu: A Novel* (New Zealand: Oratia Media, 2020)
[259] Susan Sontag was an American writer and critic who argued disease metaphors are harmful to the diseased, given that they often blame the victim, reinforce stigma, or generate unrealistic expectations through the romanticisation of the ill that add to the burden of chronic or terminal illness.

after losing most of her own, symbolising, perhaps, how many Pākehā—including those who have been cut off from their ancestral roots—have become whānau to Māori.

In conclusion, this chapter discussed depictions of the Māori world in Pākehā young adult fiction, demonstrating that where te ao Māori is visible through the presence of Te Reo, tikanga, or, indeed, through characterisations of Māori people themselves, portrayals differ from Māori characterisations of Māori, and from Māori and Pākehā characterisations of Pākehā. While it is the fate of the side-character to play second fiddle to the protagonist, I found that Māori and non-Māori characters typically embody a spectrum of positive and negative traits in Māori-authored fiction, contrasting with Pākehā-authored Māori side-characters, who always appear agreeable, and content to support Pākehā protagonists. While positive representation of Māori by Pākehā ought not be discouraged, this chapter argues these representations often accompany the reduction of Māori disease and dis-ease, leaving Māori characters at risk of becoming herbal supplements to Pākehā. Further, I argued Māori authors bear the brunt of narrativising Māori-Pākehā relations, Māori struggles in settler-colonial Aotearoa New Zealand, and also Pākehā dis-ease over colonial trauma. I suggest these findings may be useful in informing more diverse and complex Māori characterisations, though this will inevitably require Pākehā authors to be willing to hold multiple realities at once, given that Pākehā engagement with te ao Māori is, by nature, problematic. However, this thesis argues that outright avoidance is more detrimental to Māori, given that Pākehā New Zealanders represent the majority both on the page and on the land, and our silence effectively reinforces a vocal minority who would rather punish diseased and dis-eased Māori than see any reparation efforts. Finally, this chapter calls for more in-depth representations of Pākehā identity by Pākehā authors, grounded in our settler-colonial history, including our country's bicultural agreement within a multicultural

context. By bringing the Pākehā/New Zealand European story into the contemporary psyche, I argue we can do more to address issues that affect all New Zealanders, particularly regarding disease of the environment we rely on for survival, which is the concern of the final chapter.

Chapter 4: Whales

In te ao Māori, brothers Kauri (*Agatha australis*) and Tohorā (Southern right whale, *Eubalaena australis*) have a shared history that extends beyond colonisation.[260] Following the arrival of the industrial revolution to Aotearoa New Zealand, mass exportation saw kauri and whale populations fall by 96%.[261] While farming and fishing have superseded logging and whaling in the twenty-first century, the story remains the same: the economic survival of this land supposedly depends on a destructive and exploitative relationship with the whenua. "Enter Tīwaiwaka," Donna Kerridge (Ngāti Tahinga, Ngāti Mahuta) argues, "the tiny fantail bird that first challenged Kupe on his arrival to Aotearoa – the small but fearless warrior, messenger and protector who challenges the motives of those that enter the realms of Tāne Mahuta".[262] According to Kerridge, Tīwaiwaka serves both as a warning and a beacon of hope to Papatūānuku's youngest offspring—human beings—who will inevitably suffer the illnesses of the land that sustains them. Other-than-human nature has been driven into a diseased state as a consequence of prolonged detachment, but humans have an opportunity to notice what is happening, and take action.

Within te ao Māori, other-than-human nature has the ability to communicate, and the overarching message in young adult fiction appears to be that humans need to re-learn how to listen. Within Māori-authored narratives, we see other-than-human nature embody a multitude of forms. Tāne Mahuta, for example, is both the atua of the forest: a god belonging to the Māori world, and he is Aotearoa New Zealand's largest kauri tree, now

[260] Donna Kerridge, What We Can Learn From the Stories of Kauri, Tohorā and Tīwaiwaka, *Tiwaiwaka* <https://tiwaiwaka.nz/news/what-we-can-learn-from-the-stories-of-kauri-tohor-and-tiwaiwaka> [accessed 17 February 2025]

[261] Kerridge, para 6.

[262] Kerridge, para 8.

under threat from waterborne pathogen, *Phytophthora agathidicida*. Dieback represents one barrier to survival for kauri, along with "predation from introduced animal life, destruction of habitat, air and water born pollutants and accelerated climate change".[263] Kerridge states, "[Unless] action is taken now, on all levels to restore our natural world as much as is humanly possible, the cascade of environmental destruction and species annihilation will hasten and we will not be immune to its breaking point".[264]

Kerridge's message, delivered on the metaphorical wing of a fantail messenger, reflects the manner in which eco-fictions from te ao Māori approach human and environmental disease: as two sides of the same coin. And in the case of Tāne Mahuta, we have a salient example of how degradation of environment and Indigenous issues interrelate—a consideration I explore in the creative component of this thesis. This chapter argues that while Pākehā authors tend to avoid Indigenous issues, they are increasingly narrativising human disease in parallel with broader environmental disease. This reciprocal or reciprocating human/other-than-human pathology is observable both through plot and metaphor. In De Goldi's *Eddy, Eddy*, Merriman's *Invisibly Breathing*, and Hill's *Below*, we find "comatose" cities,[265] buildings with "open wounds" and "vomited stone"; [266] bruises like thunderclouds and blood running through tissue "like water through moss";[267] "unforgiving" mountains, rocks that scream, and a seemingly sentient earth that breathes on the necks of dis-eased children.[268] Between texts, I also found a scattering of needles: a symbol of penetration—of crossing barriers—that further implies infiltration and spillage between

[263] Kerridge, para 12.
[264] Ibid.
[265] De Goldi, *Eddy, Eddy*, p. 5.
[266] De Goldi, p. 32; p. 46.
[267] Eileen Merriman, *Invisibly Breathing* (New Zealand: Penguin Random House, 2019), p. 237.
[268] David Hill, *Below* (New Zealand: Penguin Random House, 2023), pp. 85-87; 112.

internal and external worlds. Grass prickles Eric's legs "like a thousand needles" in Kellys *Echo*, [269] and grit stings Liam's face "like dozens of needles" in Hill's *Below*. [270] De Goldi's Eddy has "pins-and-needles", and watches his dog get "the needle".[271] In Merriman's *Catch a Falling Star* Jaimie likens the Auckland Sky Tower to a needle,[272] then wakes up in hospital to someone "sticking a needle in [his] arm".[273] In her post-earthquake Christchurch dystopia, *Glimpse* (2023), Jane Higgins even names one of her characters Needle. This literal and metaphorical jabbing is inflicted on young male Pākehā protagonists, who all receive (and are positioned to serve) an authorial inoculation against toxic masculinity—the "poison" I found narratively linked to all manner of violences committed against women, children and other-than-human nature in Aotearoa New Zealand young adult eco-fiction by Māori and Pākehā authors.

In this chapter, I compare Māori- and Pākehā-authored eco-fiction with illness themes. Of the four whale narratives I located published by Pākehā authors since Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, only Hager's *Singing Home the Whale* explicitly acknowledges the connection between whales and te ao Māori, and includes in-depth depictions of relationships between Māori, Pākehā and other-than-human nature. While Kelly's *Echo* contains one Māori-identified character, and implicitly acknowledges a relationship between whales and te ao Māori, neither Broadbent's *If Only* nor Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay* show the Māori world beyond Māori place names. Despite this, and in alignment with Tuhiwai Smith's argument that, "Indigenous peoples, people 'of colour', the Other [. . .] have a presence in the Western imagination, in its fibre and texture, in its sense of itself, in its

[269] Kelly, p. 17.
[270] Hill, p. 34.
[271] De Goldi, p. 166.
[272] Eileen Merriman, *Catch a Falling Star* (New Zealand: Penguin Random House, 2023), p. 104.
[273] Merriman, p. 112.

language, in its silences and shadows, its margins and intersections",[274] I argue the exclusion of Māori characters within a Pākehā eco-narrative "says" something about te ao Māori. Further, the inclusion of whales—even when no mention is made regarding their connection to tāngata whenua—is still an inclusion of Aotearoa New Zealand's Indigenous peoples, even if their presence amounts to the proverbial elephant in the room, or perhaps, the whale in the book.

Section One returns to Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, demonstrating how this Māori narrative utilises other-than-human nature to "stay with the trouble" of Indigenous and settler-colonial dis-ease. Bringing Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay* into focus, I demonstrate how exclusion of Māori characters from a text does not necessarily protect the narrative from troubling engagement with te ao Māori. Further, I argue the dominance of "charismatic mega-carnivores"[275] in eco-fiction may signal an avoidance of more controversial local environmental issues. At the same time, in centralising the whale, this chapter argues Pākehā authors gesture towards Pākehā guilt and accountability, as dis-eased characters are shown to find healing as they help the diseased Other. I elaborate on this argument in Section Two, which demonstrates how Pākehā authors problematise Western compartmentalisation, in particular through their depictions of isolated Pākehā boys and men, who are cured of alienation via the same "medicine" depicted by Māori authors: respectful (re)connection with the human and other-than-human Other.

[274] Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, p. 15.

[275] Sonam Mahalwal, and Asmita Kabra, "The Slow Violence of Fortress Conservation Creates Conditions for Socially Unjust 'Voluntary' Relocation", *Biological Conservation*, 286 (2023), 1-12 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_elsevier_sciencedirect_doi_10_1016_j_biocon_2023_110264> [accessed 22 August 2025] (p. 1)

Pākehā Eco-Fiction

In Broadbent's *If Only*, a sign reads: "ACT LOCAL – THINK GLOBAL".[276] This thesis asks, if Aotearoa New Zealand-based eco-fiction excludes reference to colonisation and Indigeneity, is it, in fact, acting local?[277] According to Broadbent's eco-centre manager, New Zealanders used to be more concerned with "preventing nuclear testing and stopping whaling around the world, than worm farms and fluoridated water".[278] During the same conversation, this character informs Kayla, "It's only when [the public's] guilt kicks in that they suddenly think a worm farm will let them off the hook''.[279] In this context, the worm farm symbolises the relatively benign acts of environmentalism that people perform, first and foremost—Broadbent's narrative implies—to assuage guilt. Reflecting on this idea, Kayla admits, "I pictured Auntie Mae's whales and books in my bedroom. My whale research. Were they *my* worm farm? *My* way of letting myself off the hook?"[280] This is an interesting contemplation within an Aotearoa New Zealand-based eco-fiction text that, aside from a few Māori place-names, excludes mention of te ao Māori and Māori-Pākehā relations altogether. I begin this section with a discussion of the disease themes present in COVID-era Pākehā-authored eco-fiction, which I further elaborate on via Hill's *Below*, and Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay*, highlighting contrasts with pre-COVID Pākehā texts.

Contagion is a salient theme in post-pandemic Pākehā young adult eco-fiction and illness narratives. The air in De Goldi's *Eddy, Eddy* is hazy and "full of spores"[281]; while

[276] Adele Broadbent, *If Only* (New Zealand: One Tree House, 2020), p. 141.
[277] Stefanie Fishel, Christine J. Winter, and Anthony Burke, "Between Ecology and Indigeneity: Intersections of Earth, Country and Power", *Borderlands e-journal*, 20.1 (2021), 1–10 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_journals_2812002340> [accessed 22 August 2025]
[278] Broadbent, p. 143.
[279] Broadbent, p. 146.
[280] Ibid.
[281] De Goldi, p. 5.

thinking makes Eddy sick, and the space above his grandmother's head "[shimmers] a malign aura, emanating toxins".[282] In Merriman's *Catch a Falling Star*, Jaimie's girlfriend is "brimming with germs".[283] Though set prior to COVID and foregrounding psychiatric disease, communicable disease is repeatedly referenced, and emphasis given to pro-social behaviour regarding contagion; an aspect that is most explicitly explored in Merriman's young adult science-fiction series *The Black Spiral Trilogy* (2021-2022), which is plotted around a fictional viral pandemic, and depicts numerous unscrupulous adult characters, including murderous Western doctors and scientists, and a group of anti-vax "terrorists", contradicting the trustworthiness of parents and Western medical professionals observable in her pre-COVID sick-lit texts. Further, the series contains a Māori-identified character (Rawiri) who helps save the day. In Merriman's realist psychiatric sick-lit, *Catch a Falling Star*, laughter is infectious,[284] sleep deprivation impairs the immune system,[285] strep throat is referred to as "the plague",[286] and leprosy and tuberculosis are mentioned, despite the most serious ailment in the narrative amounts to a sore throat with fever. Merriman's young protagonist is brought to tears thinking about children "dying of treatable illnesses . . . and starvation because they happened to be born in the wrong part of the world".[287] This impassioned emphasis on macroscopic illness contrasts, I suggest, with the "innocence" and "neutrality" of earlier sick-lit depictions.

Jamie relates the severity of his headache to an earthquake.[288] Merriman's *Double Helix* incorporates "the worst storm in five years", putting one of her protagonists in direct

[282] De Goldi, pp. 14-15.
[283] Merriman, p. 85.
[284] Merriman, p. 66.
[285] Merriman, p. 95.
[286] Merriman, p. 85.
[287] Merriman, p. 174.
[288] Merriman, p. 157.

danger;[289] a depiction that contrasts with the relentless blue, azure or "tangerine-dappled sky" casting ever romantic lights over Merriman's young lovers in *Catch Me When You Fall*,[290] or her river sanctuary in *Invisibly Breathing*. Along with an afflicted Mother Nature, I found the Pākehā family home is increasingly imbued with malignancy. Bailey is confronted with domestic violence, alcoholism, and poverty in *Invisibly Breathing*. Even privileged Felix uses pathological language to express his dis-ease, after his parents separate over infidelity: "Now I know why homesickness is called a sickness. I'm homesick for Auckland. I'm sick of home".[291]

Within these late-twenty-tens/post-pandemic Pākehā texts that combine human and environmental illness, "alien" is a recurring theme. The word is used multiple times in Merriman's *Invisibly Breathing*, "[I'm] an alien, a changeling [. . .] a solitary moon orbiting a distant planet I'd never truly be able to call home";[292] "an alien on an inhospitable planet".[293] Human alienation appears throughout De Goldi's *Eddy, Eddy*, and the word "alien" describes Eddy's perception of women.[294] The disconnect between male Pākehā protagonists, the bodily self and the Other is also observable in Hill's *Below*, though it is the earth that constitutes the other-than-human subject in this case: "Liam could believe the black hole in the mountainside was an entrance to a world where humans were tiny and alien", and until both ends of his father's tunnel met in the middle, "the depths of the mountain remained an unknown world".[295] Liam leads his eco-conscious antagonist Imogen towards this "unknown world" in an attempt to justify the construction of his father's tunnel. When the tunnel

[289] Merriman, *Double Helix*, p. 64.
[290] Merriman, *Catch Me When You Fall*, p. 12.
[291] (p. 135)
[292] Merriman, *Invisibly Breathing*, p. 15.
[293] Merriman, *Invisibly Breathing*, p. 192.
[294] Hill, *Below*, p. 8.
[295] Ibid.

collapses, a prolonged entrapment forces Hill's young male Pākehā protagonist to come up against the limitations of his boundaries. Stuck below the earth's "skin", Liam's own skin is at risk of invasion, while his mental block against Imogen's point of view threatens their individual and collective wellbeing when he tries to resist antiseptic cream for his cuts.[296]

Having crossed environmental boundaries, Liam's trespass renders him a microorganism in relation to the "unforgiving" body of the earth. As such, his relationship to other-than-human nature is, symbolically, put under the microscope, and Liam is simultaneously diagnosed a risk, and *at* risk: a dilemma which plays out through his political conflict with Imogen. While Liam symbolises the white men who "got us into this mess"—at least, according to Imogen and the majority of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand-based eco-fiction, by Māori and Pākehā authors alike—this character is not vilified for his stance, rather, Hill's message appears to be that we need to lower perceptual barriers between polarised perspectives and utilise diverse strengths. Respectful communication becomes the "antiseptic" that turns Liam and Imogen's antagonism into life-sustaining productivity: a form of social medicine, framed around environmental issues, which is shown to generate outward spread, with both young characters going on to inspire discussion between their politically opposed parents.

It is significant that *Below* gestures towards Māori-Pākehā relations without including them. Hill's Māori-identified character, Sonny Ngatai, is on conservative Liam's "side"; and conflicting world views are only explored between Pākehā characters. Further, a relationship between the land and Indigenous people is hinted at, but only in relation to other countries. Liam tells Imogen he read, "Ancient people believed caves and natural tunnels were places

[296] Hill, p. 72.

where gods and spirts dwelled" and therefore, by drilling into a mountain, "you were wounding the body of some incredibly old, enormous creature".[297] The word "ancient" carries a sense of the past that removes Indigeneity from the present, and implies a generic origin:

> "The books I've read talk about how you can feel a sort of power in caves and tunnels – like a force, something old and slow and quiet." [. . .]
>
> "Mum and Dad are like that about the bush." Imogen wiped a hand across her face. "They say when you get in among the trees, really deep in and away from things, and if you just stand and listen, you can almost feel them growing. Trees sort of talk to one another."[298]

Though Hill avoids mention of te ao Māori, this is the moment Liam and Imogen find common ground, and they do so while discussing other-than-human nature's ability to communicate. Then, during their rescue, it is Sonny Ngatai who communicates the true nature of the children's predicament. When Liam catches himself lying to Imogen, he stops and reflects, "Sonny had said to tell Imogen [the truth], and he was right: they were equals in all this".[299] Thus, despite avoiding Māori-Pākehā relations, and Māori relationships to the land, Hill heals his Pākehā characters' conflict within a "sacred" mountain called Puketapu, whereby a Māori man encourages the Pākehā protagonist to treat the other as an equal, worthy of respect. This indirect approach to race-relations contrasts with Māori narratives.

In *The Whale Rider*, Ihimaera's adult narrator Rawiri tells the reader he only really understands himself "as a Maori [sic]" once he leaves Aotearoa New Zealand and observes the parallels between Māori and Indigenous Papua New Guineans, suggesting: "our journey

[297] Hill, *Below*, p. 7.
[298] Hill, pp. 86-87.
[299] Hill, p. 203.

[as Māori] was possibly more difficult because it had to be undertaken within European terms of acceptability. We were a minority and much of our progress was dependent on European goodwill".[300] Rawiri is prompted to return home after his white colonist friend (Jeff) kills an Indigenous Papua New Guinean man with his car. Rawiri tells the reader he will "never forget Jeff's white face, so pallid, so fearful", and though we are not given access to Jeff's thoughts, this character is shown to follow his parents' lead, retreating into defensiveness and hiding behind the colonial institutions which ultimately relieve him of accountability, deeming Bernard's death accidental, caused by his own risky behaviour. [301] Rawiri admits to the reader he saw Bernard walking along the road that night, and incorrectly assumed Jeff had too: a detail that is comparable to the "not seeing" or "looking away" moments in Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, whereby white characters, either by choice or circumstance, fail to see what is happening to the Indigenous Other, implying that Māori characters only exist in the minds of Pākehā characters when they are in direct view, but even then, visibility is often limited by prejudice. Rawiri's passivity could be interpreted to symbolise Māori-Pākehā dynamics, whereby Pākehā have assumed the "driver's seat" for so long, Māori may experience a false sense of security, leading to complacency. Here, Ihimaera utilises the car-object as a vehicle to carry two peoples, the Indigenous and the settler-colonial, towards a crisis point. The damage sustained is unequal: metal smashes into flesh, leaving one man "pallid" and dis-eased, while the other is left for dead, then blamed for his fatal injuries.

According to Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*—and Gregg's *Nine Girls*—the fear of Indigenous retaliation is imagined: Bernard's family do not react to his death with violence,

[300] Ihimaera, p. 70.
[301] Ihimaera, p. 75.

and though Rawiri does not condone his friend's actions, he understands, or at least tries to understand, how Jeff got to where he is. The empathy depicted here is similar to the awhi Hereaka's Māori protagonist shows her Pākehā antagonist in *Bugs*; while the colonial fear Jeff's parents nurture in him reflects the attitudes of Pākehā characters we see depicted in Gregg's *Nine Girls* and Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, for example, who imply that acknowledgement of Māori dis-ease and advocation of equity measures will necessarily lead to grievous Pākehā loss. In all three instances, it is Māori authors who acknowledge and address this concern. I argue, when Pākehā authors avoid mention of settler-colonial and Indigenous dis-ease within their eco-fiction, they not only sidestep discussion that could lead to personal growth and improved Māori-Pākehā relations, they also risk creating an incomplete picture that distorts a Māori reality.

Though Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay* avoids Māori issues, his narrative contains a wealthy British pop-star (Milt) who has built a home "like a castle"[302] in remote Aotearoa New Zealand, overlooking a private beach, from which he flies the Union Jack.[303] The fictional Whale Pot Bay is said to harbour historical artefacts, including a two-hundred-year-old whale pot used by early whalers to heat blubber over a fire, producing an oil "ready to be shipped back to Europe where it was used for candles and lamps".[304] Tāngata whenua are conspicuously absent from this aspect of Aotearoa New Zealand's past, resulting in a story that follows British/Pākehā characters as they interact with Aotearoa New Zealand's land, history, and other-than-human wildlife, while employing Western science to cut open the bodies of the earth and sea in search of "important" information, uncomplicated by a te ao Māori perspective. The same is true of Broadbent's *If Only*, which centralises Project Jonah,

[302] Des Hunt, *Whale Pot Bay* (HarperCollins, 2009, revised 2023), p. 247/298.
[303] Hunt, p. 131.
[304] Hunt, p. 120.

a real environmental group which provides education on how to respond during strandings.[305]

In *Whale Pot Bay* Hunt's young protagonist Jake befriends his British celebrity neighbour Milt, resulting in the publication of fake news by Vermin and Scatworm—a pair of photo-journalists who will do anything to sell a story. Vermin is a *Home-Alone*-esque variety of criminal, who is supposedly addicted to methamphetamine. It is unclear whether Hunt's positioning of a British man in his "castle", who must be protected from the local "Vermin" was intentional, but Milt is positioned as an innocent victim of exploitation, while no commentary is made regarding his acquisition of colonised—possibly stolen—Indigenous land. Further, while no ethnicity is assigned to Vermin, he is othered as a dangerous addict within an Aotearoa New Zealand context, where Māori disproportionately suffer from poverty and addiction, with recent surveys suggesting methamphetamine use is three times higher in Māori versus non-Māori populations.[306] Though Vermin appears white, readers are likely to know which group his negative attributes are typically associated with, and if not, Vermin's character reinforces a one-dimensional, discompassionate perception of addiction, whereby punitive responses are justifiable and sufficient.[307]

[305] See Project Jonah at https://www.projectjonah.org.nz.

[306] Paul J. Robertson, Tracey N. Haitana, Suzanne G. Pitama and Terry T. Huriwai, "A Review of Work-Force Development Literature for the Māori Addiction Treatment Field in Aotearoa/New Zealand", *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 25.3 (2006), 233–39 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_scopus_primary_2_s2_0_33744918274> [accessed 10 October 2024] (p. 233); Yvonne Gordon, and Christine Stephens, "Cessation Strategies Used Successfully by Individuals in Recovery from Methamphetamine Addiction", *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 33.2 (2021), 32–44 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_gale_infotracmisc_A681309777> [accessed 30 July 2025] (p. 33).

[307] Erik Monasterio, "It Is Unethical to Incarcerate People with Disabling Mental Disorders. Is It Also Unlawful?", *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 137 (2024), 9–14 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_2918198618> [accessed 31 July 2025]

When Jake informs Scatworm that Vermin was washed out to sea, Scatworm replies, "The world doesn't have to worry about him any more . . . Remember that horrible comment he made about that whale of yours keeping the sharks well fed? In the end she didn't, but I suspect he has", before adding, "Maybe that's the way it was always destined to be".[308] Though Scatworm makes this remark with a "humourless chuckle", Hunt's set-up of Vermin's character, down to his dehumanising nickname and caricaturised personality, primes the reader to find humour in his death. Further, the idea that addicts are destined to become shark food plays into the just-world fallacy.[309] Vermin meets the end he apparently deserves, while no insight is given into the complexities of his disease. Vermin's addiction is emphasised only insofar as it represents a threat to the well-to-do—an emphasis that reflects earlier discussions of "risk groups" and the perception that harm flows in one direction: the privileged see themselves as hypothetical victims, first and foremost, and fail to perceive how their actions or inactions cause ongoing harm to the marginalised, which may indeed come back to bite them.

Hunt's narrative reinforces Vermin's lethal nature through his wielding of deadly weaponry, while his unsettling appearance pairs mannerisms often seen in people with disabilities and divergences with creepiness, playing into the abnormal villain trope.[310] The reader is told Vermin says, "'Yesss,' dragging the S out into a hissy whistle," and looks at the protagonist with: "wild, unsettling eyes—this guy was far from normal".[311] Hunt's

[308] Hunt, p. 280.

[309] Casey Jo Humbyrd, "Virtue Ethics in a Value-Driven World: The Just-World Fallacy", *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, 479.9 (2021), 1904–1905 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_pubmed_primary_34180872 > [accessed 29 July 2025]

[310] Em Dewhurst, "Narrative 2: Evil: Disabled Villains in Media", in *Research Handbook on Disability Policy*, ed. by E. Dewhurst, K. R. Fisher, and S. Robinson (United Kingdom: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2023), pp. 65–66 (p. 65)

[311] Hunt, p. 155.

caricaturisation of the abnormal, dangerous drug addict—which further conflates unattractiveness with evil—contrasts with Kino's humane portrayal of Hine in *The Pōrangi Boy*; and also with the characters in Māori-authored young adult fiction who harm others. I found Māori-authored villains are regular or charismatic people: they smile, shake hands and say the right thing—or the wrong thing in a confident tone—then perpetrate invisible violences behind closed doors. While Hunt's Vermin reinforces the perception that the most dangerous people are easy to visually identify, and that these "abnormal" individuals are relatively few and far between—Māori-authors conversely demonstrate how the slow violences behind Māori dis-ease and disease are part of the fabric of society, and harmful behaviours are perpetuated as the rule, rather than the exception, to varying degrees, by the majority of characters, as opposed to singular monsters.

While opting for a more nuanced portrayal of drug addiction in *The Pōrangi Boy*, Kino also highlights how being perceived as "crazy", and the stigma surrounding mental illness within marginalised Māori communities, adds insult to the injuries inflicted on those tāngata whenua who have been forced into a state that is not only detrimental to their well-being, but which also encourages the vilification of diseased Māori within Māori and Pākehā worlds. Hunt's intention may be to dissuade youth from becoming like Vermin, given methamphetamine use has consistently risen in Aotearoa New Zealand since the 1990s, and is purportedly highest in early adulthood.[312] According to a recent study by Yvonne Gordon and Christine Stephens, familial support and self-confidence are strong indicators of successful recovery, particularly for youth who do not have access to rehabilitation facilities due to cost, or limited availability, which the authors identify as an ongoing local issue.[313]

[312] Gordon and Stephens, p. 33.
[313] Gordon and Stephens, p. 42.

Considering the growing rates of mental illness and drug addiction amongst rangatahi, the stigma attached to these comorbidities, and the general lack of rehabilitation services—I question what is gained by vilifying, through fiction, those who are already maligned in society, beyond, perhaps, validation for societal structures that essentially generate "food for sharks".

Interestingly, Scatworm's heart condition garners sympathy while Vermin's addiction does not. When Scatworm experiences heart failure, his victims help save his life, then he is redeemed through a figurative change of heart. Essentially, Scatworm is allowed to live, while the "world doesn't have to worry" about Vermin's death. Within a Western medical framework, Scatworm's condition—which can be isolated to the physiological—is more curable via the zoomed-in, microscopic approach than Vermin's is; therefore, perhaps, his social-self is also more curable. Hunt's narrative moves from that which can be managed with medication and surgery to one who is socially manageable. Vermin's addiction is portrayed as a personal failing, or an abnormality of character that exists beyond the jurisdiction of Western medicine, given that healing is contingent on the choices of the diseased individual. In order for Hunt's story to be cleansed of disease, Vermin is literally washed away, while, Scatworm, who is treatable according to a Western medical understanding, is cured. The solution for Vermin is eradication, while the solution for Scatworm is rehabilitation, implying that disease or dis-ease located outside a Western medical framework can be justifiably wiped out of the narrative, and attributed to the dictates of fate or natural justice. Hunt's young protagonist, Jake explicitly articulates this

mentality earlier in the narrative, suggesting, "some wild animals were pests and needed to die".[314]

At the same time, Hunt's extermination of human and other-than-human "pests" occurs alongside depictions of male characters who isolate or remove themselves from their social contexts, exemplifying how dominant groups are not necessarily immune to the dis-eases of the culture that has privileged them (a sentiment I have found is often acknowledged in Māori-authored fiction, see Hereaka's *Bugs*, Kino's *The Pōrangi Boy*, or Tipene's *Patu: A Novel*). Milt retreats to his impenetrable castle on the other side of the world from his homeland; while Jake's father has opted to live with his son in relative isolation prior to remarrying; and Jake completes his redemption arc by removing himself to boarding school, in part to compensate for the dis-ease he caused his family. Essentially, all the male characters in *Whale Pot Bay* are dis-eased, and their dis-eases are either cured or solved—through death or redemption—in relation to diseased other-than-human nature. I found similar themes across all recent Pākehā-authored eco-fiction studied, demonstrating a closer alignment with Māori narratives.

If Hunt's Pākehā/British characters, through their care for whales, demonstrate symbolic empathy for the people of the land, responsibility involves putting the diseased Other under the lens of Western science. When Hunt's vet character cuts open a dead whale "to remove samples", young Stephanie objects, and is told, "It's important that we do this, Steph. It's one of the few ways we can find out about them". When Stephanie asks, "Why do we have to find out about them? Why can't we just leave them alone?", the vet responds, "[whales] get killed all around New Zealand [. . .] The industry calls it bycatch, but they really

[314] Hunt, pp. 95-96.

should call it murder", before going on to state, "Worldwide, we kill about a thousand a day as bycatch. But we probably kill a whole lot more because we're removing the food that they eat. And that's why I need to cut open this calf. To get evidence of what is happening".[315] This observation comes painfully close to acknowledging what colonisation has meant, in part, for Indigenous peoples: mass murder, perceived by some settler-colonists as an unfortunate "byproduct" of so-called progress, if perceived at all.

Though the vet character's intentions differ from that of early whalers and present-day hunters, his behaviours appear similar. The vet opens the whale—not to procure oil to illuminate the darkness for European eyes, in this instance, but to gain insight for the West, nonetheless—an approach that reinforces and is validated by one world view, while neglecting to acknowledge another entirely. Hunt's avoidance of a te ao Māori perspective here exemplifies, I argue, the very mechanisms that divorce colonial behaviours from their myriad consequences. In *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples,* Linda Tuhiwai Smith cites pioneering Māori film maker, Merata Mita's observation that "*We have a history of people putting Māori under a microscope in the same way a scientist looks at an insect*".[316] Tuhiwai Smith points out that the benefit of such intrusions to Indigenous peoples is not always clear: "Researchers enter communities armed with goodwill in their front pockets and patents in their back pockets; they bring medicine into villages and extract blood for genetic analysis".[317]

In much the same way that Hunt gives Vermin characteristics that could be associated with dis-eased Māori, his decision to have a young "emotional" female character challenge Western science—"Why do we have to find out about them? Why can't we just

[315] Hunt, pp. 100-101.
[316] Tuhiwai Smith, p. 67.
[317] Tuhiwai Smith, p. 27.

leave them alone?"—could inadvertently undermine a te ao Māori perspective, by coding such objections as juvenile, or irrational. This perception is further reinforced when Hunt's older male characters humour Stephanie's claim that the whale spoke to her and self-identified as "Pimi". Hunt's male characters indulge what they seemingly perceive to be harmless little-girl-nonsense, and label the whale: "Pimi Hauruanui; *Kogia breviceps* (pygmy sperm whale)" on their online tracking platform.[318] Though "Pimi" does not appear to be a Māori word, the sound is similar enough to give that impression, especially when placed next to "Hauruanui", the Māori name of Hunt's fictional town. While I suspect Hunt intended to acknowledge a relationship between whales and the Māori world with this use of Te Reo, it is unfortunate that in doing so, he has inadvertently positioned Pākehā condescension next to Indigenous relationships with other-than-human nature. However, while the indirect use of stereotypes may inadvertently reinforce harmful narratives about Māori, it is non-Māori characters who are explicitly shown to cause disease/dis-ease in Pākehā eco-fictions, including *Whale Pot Bay*, while the Indigenous Other is innocent through omission. Alternatively, they join the other-than-human Other as a catalyst for Pākehā healing, which I discuss next.

Whale Eyes

If the Pākehā author's tendency is to divide human and other-than-human nature into discrete parts, then it is the eye of the whale that they dwell on the most. Every whale-themed fiction I located lingers here. In this section, I revisit Hunt's *Whale Pot Bay*, Broadbent's *If Only*, and Kelly's *Echo*, demonstrating how alienation problematises the containment and compartmentalisation observed in early Pākehā sick-lit, while recent

[318] Hunt, p. 115.

narratives by both Māori and Pākehā authors show resolution through relationship with the Other.

Hunt's whale eye is a lens through which white male characters are perceived, or perceive themselves and each other. British pop-star (Milt) displays a photo "taken from some distance out at sea, looking back towards the house [. . .] In the foreground was a giant whale", and, Jake tells the reader, "the most remarkable thing about the animal was the eye [. . .] It was open and clearly focused on the photographer".[319] Milt is the photographer who captures himself being observed by the whale, with his "castle" in the background. The giant creature perceives the man, who, in turn, looks back over his own "giant" impact on the world, perhaps, as he captures and compartmentalises the other-than-human subject reflecting his own subjectivity. In this moment, both man and whale are rendered individual, and made remarkable in their singularity. At one point in the narrative, Milt opens his home to characters conducting scientific research, and through their computer monitor, we are given a visual of Hunt's narrative homing-in on isolated individuals.[320] Here, the whale is shrunken to the size of a dot on a screen. While this technology is celebrated, Hunt also demonstrates how well-intentioned research can lead to harm for the research subject, when Vermin steals Pimi's identification information, and tracks her for his own nefarious purposes.

In Broadbent's *If Only*, Kayla imagines a stranded whale's perspective as "an eye stared up", prompting her to wonder what it might see: "Lots of strange creatures scurrying around it, and dozens more staring back? Did it know we were trying to help? We. Yeah right. I was standing gawping uselessly like everyone else".[321] Later, Kayla recalls "that sad

[319] Hunt, pp. 62-63.
[320] Hunt, pp. 116-117.
[321] Broadbent, p. 53.

eye staring" at her "from the foreign place it had found itself in".[322] The "foreign place" she refers to is obviously the land, but at the same time, it could symbolise Kayla's grief following her Aunt Mae's death. Further, while the land may be thought of as "foreign" in relation to the whale, Broadbent's meaning could extend to the "foreignness" of Pākehā. In contrast, the Māori-authored whale is not considered foreign to the shores of Aotearoa New Zealand, and the stranding of whales represents a kind of return.[323] The supposed alienation of the Pākehā-authored whale, then, may reflect settler-colonial dis-ease, including, perhaps, the anxiety of not truly belonging here.

In Kelly's *Echo*, the whale eye reflects the disabled Pākehā protagonist's alienation. When Eric first looks into Echo's eye, he says, "I felt a connection flow between us, something that no one else would understand".[324] Eric reiterates the importance of this eye-contact, and states how prior to encountering Echo, he had never been able to "actually look into an eye" before.[325] Despite being visually impaired since birth, Eric experiences dis-ease over his condition, and muses, "In my dreams, things weren't all fuzzy, in fact they were clear".[326] He refers to not being able to see "properly" more than once; however, this is of more concern to his parents—in particular his father, who "hadn't properly accepted it, even after twelve years".[327] Eric's perspective is invalidated by his parents, who see the world differently to him, literally and also figuratively. As such, his blindness could also be read as metaphorical. Eric, states there is something blurry or incomplete about his vision, still he argues that his way of seeing, though different, does not equate to incompetence. In turn,

[322] Broadbent, pp. 110-111.
[323] Kerridge, para 2.
[324] Kelly, p. 25.
[325] Kelly, p. 25.
[326] Kelly, p. 79.
[327] Arlo Kelly, *Echo* (Wellington, New Zealand: Your Books, 2022), p. 21.

he rebels against restrictions imposed on his independence, and explores other-than-human nature alone, where he tells the reader he feels the most alive. Being in contact with the ground makes Eric feel "stronger and more secure"[328] and gives him a "better sense of direction".[329]

Eric's journey from the safety—or confinement—of his family home, is analogous to his metaphorical journey from the familiar towards the Other. Here, Kelly's Echo character may indeed represent more than a young person's relationship with a whale—or other-than-human nature—when Eric finds himself in "[a] magical place, tucked away behind the tall rocks and completely invisible from the beach [where] at the edge of the rocks the ocean floor dropped away so the water was really deep".[330] He tells the reader it felt like being on the "edge of the world", a notion that fits with the "coming-of-age" young adult genre. Eric is on the edge of childhood; however, a more Aotearoa New Zealand-specific reading could argue the boy is looking out from the edge of his limited Pākehā perspective, towards a world that extends beyond his parents' point of view. The whale and the ocean represent depths suddenly made visible: whale sees boy and boy sees whale, much like how Kelly's Māori-identified character, Nikau, perceives Eric with a clarity that outshines that of the Pākehā protagonist's own father. Further, Kelly subtextually connects his whale character with te ao Māori.

During Echo's stranding, he is approached by a Department of Conservation (DOC) worker, an "older man" who touches Echo as though he recognises the stripe on his fin, and calls him by another name.[331] Initially, Eric feels uncomfortable by this familiarity, but then,

[328] Kelly, p. 17.
[329] Kelly, p. 33.
[330] Kelly, p. 36.
[331] Kelly, pp. 38-39.

"Echo made a moaning [. . .] happy sound" and Eric deduces that the pair know each other.[332] The DOC worker calls the whale "Horo", which means "to flee, run, escape" in Te Reo, and also sounds like a diminutive of "tohorā", one Māori word for whale. This moment connects the whale with the Māori world, and though the DOC worker is not Māori-identified, the narrative implies Echo was known first by people who perceive a link between whales and te ao Māori. This link gains an added layer of complexity when Eric's defensiveness is overcome by the realisation that "Horo" existed in relationship to the Other first—an acknowledgement worthy of pause, given *Echo* was published when the Pākehā author was fifteen.

Essentially, I found the whale-object is utilised as a catalyst for dis-eased/grieving young Pākehā protagonists to heal. In Broadbent's *If Only*, rescuing distressed whales has a profound impact on Kayla's mental health, who states, "I felt better than I had in weeks".[333] Kayla is drawn to a calf she names Little One, and tells the reader, "Human eye to whale eye, I talked and hummed and even sang a little", prompting the nick-name, "whale whisperer".[334] This enmeshment between protagonists and animals in Pākehā eco-fiction differs, I argue, from Māori depictions, which do not infantilise other-than-human nature. The depiction of a parent-child-like attachment full of emotional intensity guarded with angst may reflect a Pākehā need to bridge the gap between human and other-than-human worlds, requiring, perhaps, more fantastical elements, given the connection between human and animal has to be more hyperbolic due to a lack of actual connections between Pākehā and the other-than-human world around them. Though, it is important to note that many

[332] Kelly, pp. 138-139.
[333] Broadbent, p. 332.
[334] Broadbent, p. 303.

Tauiwi retain their own culturally-informed relationships with other-than-human nature, so this connection is by no means exclusive to te ao Māori.

The first chapter of Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider* is spoken from the perspective of a pre-human Aotearoa New Zealand, giving voice to the earth and sea, who are said to have felt "the sharp pangs of need", as they waited for the "seeding . . . gifting . . . blessing to come,"[335] and in their desire, the forests "[sent out] sweet perfumes upon the eastern winds and garlands of *pohutukawa* upon the eastern tides, to seduce tangata close.[336] When the canoes finally came with their "dark bellies", the earth and sea "sighed with gladness".[337] Later, when Paikea arrived on the back of a whale, the "land and sea opened themselves to him, the gift long waited for [and with] great gladness and thanksgiving, the man cried out to the land, *Karanga mai, karanga mai, karanga mai*. /Call me".[338] Reciprocal communication is likewise depicted between whale and human:

> *His golden master had taught the whale to flex his muscles and sinews so that handholds in the skin would appear, enabling the rider to ascend to the whale's head. There, further muscle contractions would provide saddle and stirrups. […] In the space of time, his master needed only to caress his left fin, and the whale would respond.*[339]

Here, Ihimaera demonstrates a form of communication developed over time between beings; an interaction of bodies sensing and learning each other, of reaction and consequence that form a language of cooperation and mutual enjoyment. This dynamic differs significantly, I argue, from fairytale characterisations of anthropomorphised

[335] Ihimaera, p. 4.
[336] Ihimaera, p. 6.
[337] Witi Ihimaera, *The Whale Rider* (New Zealand: Reed Publishing, 1987), pp. 3-4.
[338] Ihimaera, p. 6.
[339] Ihimaera, p. 59.

animals—the kind I suspect people imagine when they disparage taniwha—in that it pertains to a real human-other-than-human potential. Human beings and other-than-human nature are capable of moving in sync; of "talking" and "listening" to each other, and co-existing in powerful, intertwined physicalities. In Māori narratives, the intimate and mutually respectful relationships shown to exist between human protagonists and animals or other other-than-human beings, are similar to those shown between humans and objects, reflecting Tuhiwai Smith's observation that for

> some cultures, categories such as animate and inanimate objects do not exist, as a rock or a thing 'can be animated' in the sense of having a life force or energy through the intervention of an expert knowledge holder. Similarly, mountains, waterways and different features of the land may be seen as living beings that possess their own agency.[340]

If we draw on the writing of Tuhiwai Smith, we see that the framing and positioning of lifeforce by Ihimaera, and other Māori authors studied here, renders material physicality interchangeable, or unnecessary altogether—as can be seen in Grace's *Baby No-Eyes*, whereby a deceased young character plays a significant role without requiring her own discrete bodily form. In these fictions, which I argue should be considered "realist", rather than "magical", humans take on qualities of the land, and land formations are given a voice, though, as Tuhiwai Smith argues, "It is not about humanizing the other-than-human but recognizing the agency of other-than-human entities for their own characteristics".[341] The awareness of an underlying relationship between humans and other-than-humans appears to make way for narrative shape-shifting between beings, however. In "Māori Writing:

[340] Tuhiwai Smith, pp. 191-92.
[341] Tuhiwai Smith, p. 206.

Speaking With Two Mouths", Tina Makereti (Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Rangatahi-Matakore, Pākehā) argues that the

> whakapapa of Māori literature does not work in only one direction: culture is always in flux, and colonisation—and the ongoing process of colonisation—shapes, limits, distorts and shifts how we know and tell our own stories. We are constantly spiralling back to reconnect and re-enact that whakapapa.[342]

In Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, we see this "spiralling back" through narrative shape-shifting, including through entities labelled gods, and other human-like beings, as well as through other-than-human nature and objects crafted from natural materials. Kahu, the young whale rider, is said to be the last of her ancestor's "little wooden spears"—specifically, the spear that, a millennia prior, refused to fly from her ancestor's hand. The other-than-human narrator recalls how the first of Paikea's spears turned into eels and pigeons, bringing diversity to an environment that felt an "emptiness" and a "yearning" for new life. But it was only after this ancestral whale rider uttered the prayer: "Let this spear be planted in the years to come . . . Let this be the one to flower when the people are troubled",[343] that the last spear "leaped from his hands with gladness and . . . flew across a thousand years. When it hit the earth, it did not change but waited for another hundred and fifty years to pass until it was needed".[344]

Ihimaera's spears lend their readily graspable form to a more complex notion of potency held dormant across time and space. This shape-shifting is visible early on, when

[342] Tina Makereti, "Māori Writing: Speaking with Two Mouths", *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, 26 (2018), 57–65 <https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/ cdi_crossref_primary_10_26686_jnzs_v0iNS26_4842> [accessed October 9 2024](p. 62).

[343] Ihimaera, p. 6.

[344] Ihimaera, pp. 6-7.

the narrator observes: “The dark shape rising . . . A whale, gigantic. A sea monster . . . [with a] sacred sign . . . a swirling tattoo imprinted on the forehead”.[345] Here, Ihimaera moves seamlessly from “shape” to “whale” to “sea monster” to “swirling tattoo”, demonstrating how a lifeforce, an intention—or indeed, an entire way of being—can manifest in te ao Māori through a myriad forms: from gods, to humans, to animals, to plants, to taniwha, to symbols, to carvings on the apex of a meetinghouse, to objects made from wood or stone; or, as Ngarewa, and Hereaka demonstrate in *The Bone Tree*, and *Bugs*, from an awareness of disease in the other, to personalised Rongoā, to close care and belonging, or from listening, to compassion to butter to love. And it is from this “thick present”[346], or this complex narrative layering of realities that meaning stems and blossoms into rich understandings, both in regard to the diseased Māori state, and also to how people got to where we are, and where healing begins.

As observed, it is not only Pākehā who Māori authors hold responsible for change. In fact, it is Māori who are primarily called to action. Ihimaera’s Koro states “man, beasts, and Gods [once] lived in close communion with one another . . . But then . . . man assumed a cloak of arrogance”.[347] Somewhat hypocritically, he informs his class of boys, “As [man] grew in his arrogance, he started to drive a wedge through the original oneness of the world”.[348] Koro continues:

> In the passing of Time [man] divided the world into that half he could believe in and that half he could not believe in. The real and the unreal. The natural and the supernatural. The present and the past. The scientific and the fantastic. He put a

[345] Ihimaera, p. 5.
[346] Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, p. 1.
[347] Ihimaera, p. 116.
[348] Ihimaera, p. 116.

> barrier between both worlds, and everything on his side was called rational and everything on the other side was called irrational. "Belief in our *Maori* Gods," he emphasized, "has often been considered irrational." [349]

Koro challenges the tamariki to identify which world the stranded bull whale belongs to: "You have all seen the sacred sign tattooed on its head. Is the tattoo there by accident or by design? Why did a whale of its appearance strand itself here and not at Wainui? Does it belong in the real world or the unreal world?" When they struggle to answer, Koro states, "[I]t is *both*. It is a reminder of the oneness that the world once had. It is the birth cord joining past and present, reality and fantasy. […] and if we have forgotten the communion then we have ceased to be Maori!"[350] By rejecting the "either-or" dichotomy imposed by British colonialism, Koro articulates that which is visible in Māori-authored narratives: namely, the "yes-and". Or what is referred to as the "and/and" in Bell's *Becoming Tangata Tiriti: Working with Māori, Honouring the Treaty*. As cited by Bell, the aim of the and/and approach to research is not to assimilate one world view into another, but rather, to work towards "alignments" between Māori and Pākehā worlds, valuing, respecting and utilising the strengths of both.[351]

Ihimaera's concept of "both" extends beyond perceptions of other-than-human nature to human nature, and the complexities of people, Māori, Pākehā and other. This "both" is demonstrated in narratives that show life exists beyond the human body, that there is more to disease than discrete biological processes, and that there is more to other-than-human nature than senseless objects to be exploited. This "both" is demonstrated in

[349] Ihimaera, p. 116.
[350] Ihimaera, p. 117.
[351] Avril Bell, *Becoming Tangata Tiriti: Working with Māori, Honouring the Treaty* (New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2024), p. 87.

Hall's film, *The Mountain*, when Sam and Mallory look at the world through Bronco's eyes, and suddenly nature becomes effervescent with life; or in Hereaka's *Bugs*, when the Māori protagonist holds her Pākehā mate in the way she is desperate to be held; or in *Singing Home the Whale* when Hager's Viv uses humour to manage emotionally under-regulated Pākehā men. We see this in *Echo*, when Nikau the Māori refuse-station assistant validates Eric's need to be perceived as competent, then holds space for the idea that broken things can be worked with, rather than discarded. This is demonstrated in *The Bone Tree*, when Black needs more than antibiotics to heal—he needs his mother's Indigenous culture to wrap around his body and spirit, building him up in all the ways Western medicine fails to perceive.

Conclusion

Māori authored illness narratives challenge the Pākehā tendency to reduce the world into discrete parts, and rightly so—when an individual entity is separated from its whole, it is easier to perceive as a lifeless object that can be taken, exploited, and discarded.[352] This perception has numerous ongoing detrimental consequences for Māori, from the isolation of people from their culture; to the theft or misplacement of bodily tissue; to the division of land for private ownership, which was an alien concept to pre-colonial tāngata whenua and has resulted in terrific loss for some iwi; to the ripple-effects of splitting the atom, including the impacts of atomic testing; to the framing of human beings as divorced from their many and varied relationships with other-than-human nature. Conversely, Pākehā authors appear to derive security from compartmentalisation—a problem broken down is easier to manage. This divide-and-conquer tactic is useful across the sciences, with the development of life-

[352] See Tuhiwai Smith, for example.

saving and enhancing technologies that address—with varying levels of efficacy—human and environmental disease. It is known within the field of psychology that an overdose of negative information can result in overwhelm and avoidance, therefore, reducing problems into manageable steps can be appropriate.

This is where the concept of "both" becomes important. In alignment with the literature, this thesis argues the zoomed-in, compartmentalised perspective and the zoomed-out, interconnected perspective are both vital to the story of disease. Māori authors may utilise a zoomed-in focus more to exemplify individual Māori experiences of Western medicine—both as it is currently, and as it could be improved through the Rongoā approach; while Pākehā authors have an opportunity to help young Pākehā readers process the complex human/environmental issues that we, through virtue of our colonial heritage, find ourselves accountable for.[353] As anthropologist Hans A. Baer argues, "it has become increasingly clear that [the current system] must be replaced by a 'next system' or an alternative world system oriented to social parity and justice, democratic processes, and environmental sustainability".[354] I found Pākehā authors are already problematising Western compartmentalisation through their young adult fiction, while also positioning te ao Māori as a place of healing; however, if we are to address our human and environmental diseases in earnest, Aotearoa New Zealand-based eco-fiction will need to engage with Indigenous concerns, and develop imaginations beyond a Pākehā world view.

[353] Damien Gayle, "Dark Laboratory: Groundbreaking Book Argues Climate Crisis Was Sparked by Colonisation", *The Guardian*, 28 March 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2025/mar/28/dark-laboratory-groundbreaking-book-argues-climate-crisis-was-sparked-by-colonisation> [accessed 2 April 2025]

[354] Hans A. Baer, "Toward Democratic Eco-Socialism as the Next World System: A Vision for the Future", in *The New Systems Reader: Alternatives to a Failed Economy*, ed. by J. G. Speth and K. Courrier (New York: Routledge, 2021, Taylor & Francis Ebooks Complete), pp. 157–72 (p. 157).

In “Mātauranga Māori, Tino Rangatiratanga and the Future of New Zealand Science”, D. Broughton (Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti, Taranaki, Ngāti Porou, Ngāpuhi) and K. McBreen (Waitaha, Kāti Māmoe, Ngāi Tahu) state that while Western science “incorporates knowledge from non-Western epistemologies”, the structures underpinning the institution, including “compartmentalisation into disciplines, the hierarchies organising knowledge within those disciplines, and the types of knowledge that are excluded or included—reflect Western philosophical traditions”.[355] As I discussed in relation to Western medicine, these traditions are far from neutral, however the Pākehā disease script implies objectivity, while Pākehā “paralysis” may prevent authors from exploring characters with perspectives that contradict the inherent assumptions of Western practice.

In *Becoming Tangata Tiriti* (2024), Avril Bell quotes “Shane”, a Pākehā scientist who works closely with both Māori and Pākehā, who, in his interview, “talked about the limitations of Western scientific approaches in the environmental areas that he has worked in – particularly the tendency to research something in isolation from the wider ecosystems of which it is a part”.[356] According to Shane, through the “experience of trusting and letting go of some of their assumptions” the Pākehā environmental specialists he works with have “started to get the [Māori] approach and to shift their own perceptions. Now they are saying that the te ao Pākehā approach is broken!” [357] Similarly, prominent Aotearoa New Zealand-based scientists are calling for more holistic approaches to ecological research; for example, in *Social–Ecological Connections Across Land, Water, and Sea Demand a*

[355] D. Broughton and K. McBreen, “Mātauranga Māori, Tino Rangatiratanga and the Future of New Zealand Science”, *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 45.2 (2015), 83–88 < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/slqndl/cdi_proquest_journals_1700972327> [accessed 16 October 2025] (p. 83)

[356] Bell, p. 86.

[357] Bell, p. 87.

Reprioritization of Environmental Management, Rebecca V. Gladstone-Gallagher and her co-authors (2022) argue that "Part of the problem is the fracturing of environmental management and social–ecological research into ecosystem domains (land, freshwater, and sea), each with different scales and resolution of data acquisition and distinct management approaches".[358] A more blended approach is "consistent with many Indigenous Peoples' worldview, knowledge and practice".[359] In "Pūtahitanga: The Intersection of Western Science and Mātauranga Māori in the Context of Aotearoa New Zealand's Physical Oceanography", Craig L. Stevens, Kura Paul-Burke (Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Whakahemo), and Peter Russell (Ngāpuhi) point out that the argument is not that there will be a "Māori replacement" for systems that already function well, nor that "mātauranga can provide silver bullets for present-day science challenges like climate", but rather that the goal of pūtahitanga is to clarify "what science is required in an Aotearoa New Zealand context", and "diversify access to evaluating and valuing evidence for critical components of both society and environment [while enhancing] participation".[360] However, Broughton and McBreen caution that, "Mātauranga is currently treated as knowledge to be exploited, but not supported".[361] Similarly, Haukapuanui and Sonny Vercoe (Te Arawa, Tūwharetoa, Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi, Ngāti Pāhauwera, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāi Tahu) found "marae often do

[358] Rebecca V. Gladstone-Gallagher, Jason M. Tylianakis, Johanna Yletyinen, Vasilis Dakos; Emily J. Douglas, Suzie Greenhalgh, Judi E. Hewitt, Daniel Hikuroa, Steven J. Lade, Richard Le Heron, Alf Norkko, George L. W. Perry, Conrad A. Pilditch, David Schiel, Ewa Siwicka, Helen Warburton and Simon F. Thrush, "Social-Ecological Connections across Land, Water, and Sea Demand a Reprioritization of Environmental Management", *Elementa*, 10. 1 (Washington, D.C., 2022), < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/1mpj7p3/cdi_swepub_primary_oai_DiVA_org_su_207440> [accessed 1 October 2024] (p.1).

[359] Gladstone-Gallagher, et al, p. 2.

[360] Ibid.

[361] Broughton and McBreen, p. 84.

not receive [governmental assistance] in return for the support they give to the community in times of crisis".[362]

This thesis demonstrated how Māori disease and dis-ease is downplayed to the extent Māori characters are at risk of becoming herbal supplements in Pākehā fiction. While issues like whale conservation are important, the narrativising of human relationships with "charismatic mega-carnivores" serves to humanise members of other-than-human nature that people are already likely to feel empathy towards, when it is arguably our relationship with microfauna—the less-perceivable members of our eco-system—that need greater attention, given the vital functions they perform.[363] Further, the focus on "charismatic" animals arguably diverts attention away from meatier environmental issues in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as those pertaining to land-back or re-Indigenisation efforts.

I argued Pākehā-authored narratives use avoidance as a form of protection, in that their young (white) protagonists are not exposed to uncomfortable truths concerning the Other, as though the young (white) reader is "absolutely vulnerable" and should be shielded from race-related issues, particularly those that relate to being Pākehā, or to being a beneficiary of colonisation and white privilege. Meanwhile, Māori-authored young (Māori) protagonists do not have the luxury of avoidance, as the health and futurity of tamariki Māori cannot be taken for granted.[364] As such, I argued young Māori readers are inoculated from dis-ease with information about racism, while young Pākehā readers, who are far more likely to be carriers of racist threat, are, like privileged groups of unvaccinated children,

[362] Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, para 11.

[363] Lin Roberts, Ann Brower and G. N. Kerr, *The Nature of Wellbeing: How Nature's Ecosystem Services Contribute to the Wellbeing of New Zealand and New Zealanders* (Wellington: Department of Conservation, 2015) < https://waikato.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/64WAIKATO_INST/10hutka/alma9917079333503401> [accessed 4 October 2024] (p. 5).

[364] Muñoz, p. 95.

being "protected" from engagement with the truth regarding their ability to spread disease and dis-ease. As a result, young Māori protagonists are shown to be under a lot of pressure—they are not just tasked with facing their own dis-ease but must also shoulder the diseases of Māoridom as a whole. When considered alongside the typically minimalistic Pākehā-authored depictions of Māori characters, I am concerned that when young Māori readers pick up a book in which they recognise themselves, they are either faced with an exceptionally heavy task; or a disappointingly uninspiring one.

Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown developed the term "Visionary fiction" to "distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power".[365] In the introduction to *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (2016), Imarisha writes:

> Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice. We believe this space is vital for any process of decolonization, because the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless.[366]

The international call for narratives depicting alternative futures will no doubt spark the continued publication of much-needed Visionary fiction (see, for example, *Afterglow: Climate Fiction for Future Ancestors* (2023); *Cities of Light: A Collection of Solar Futures* (2021); *Multispecies Cities* (2021); *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of indigenous Science Fiction* (2012)—the latter two anthologies feature Māori writing). My decision to set my

[365] Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland, California: AK Press, 2016, ProQuest), p. 13.
[366] Ibid.

novel in a present-day, “realist” Aotearoa New Zealand is in accordance with my argument that there is a need for more Pākehā narratives that explicitly name Pākehā identity, including our bicultural, and multicultural realities, as they currently stand. The creative component of my thesis *Tāne and the Invisibles* begins to explore this, and the other aspects of disease and dis-ease that my research found are under-represented in Aotearoa New Zealand-based young adult fiction, including anticipatory grief, and eco-anxiety. Further, I centralise characters who are typically invisible or marginalised within local young adult fiction, including my queer, Pākehā-identified, AFAB (assigned female at birth) protagonist and multiple Māori- and Tauiwi-identified characters living with chronic (and terminal) human and environmental illness. My intention is to supplement the “unshackled” “fantastical” imagination by role-modelling, without ambiguity, the beginnings of awareness regarding Pākehā colonial heritage, including the complex (and imperfect) thoughts, feelings and behaviours that may spur from this awareness. And, vitally, by crafting characters who role-model the tremendous power of relationship in the face of dis-ease, I hope to highlight the necessity of diversity within, between, and beyond human realms.

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Tāne and the Invisibles

Little~Fish~is~Born

The first wahine came to life with a sneeze.

It wasn't a sick one. Just billions of individual parts suddenly working together as human. On this land, so many different parts have come together to shape us, Little Fish.

I look from my heavy belly to the atua of the forest, still holding up the sky after all these years. Two thousand, maybe. That's a long time to hold—even when you've got thick kauri arms. A lot can change in two thousand years. A lot can change in just two, eh, Little Fish?

I stroke the pink marks stretching over the white of my belly like branches, and focus on the dark burls growing on Tāne Mahuta's trunk. His wrinkles criss-crossing like diamonds.

"You've seen a lot, e kare." I breathe through another wave. Stronger now.

Tāne Mahuta saw the first babies born here fresh from Hawaiki. Their bodies becoming one with this land they called Te Ika a Māui.

He saw the others toddle in from all over, claiming Māui's fish, calling it: New "from-the-sea" land. And as the people of the land interwove with more and more people from the sea, Tāne saw the first multicoloured babies born here. Their spirits settling or becoming restless as the bones of blurry-faced ancestors called from every curve of the planet.

And now he gets to see you, Little Fish. Made from aroha and science.

I close my eyes and sway. This pain can't be ignored anymore. Something has opened and there's no closing.

Your Auntie Kora will be furious I came here like this. To be honest, I'm not sure how I did. It's all a bit of a fog. But here we are. Right or wrong, there's no rewind. Time slows. Coils inwards. Lowers belly towards belly. Yours to mine. Mine to Papatūānuku's. The waves stitch then fray, pulling closer. Stretching further than possible. Life crawls beneath my crawl. Carries us over the dirt to the mighty god of the forest. Nose squishes into bark. Bark pushes against push. Roots holding firm, while I split in two. Space opens where space didn't exist. A sudden slip pulls in both directions at once, turns me inside out. I reach between my thighs and catch you, Little Fish, still wrapped in your waters.

Te ika a Mary!

Two dark eyes look through their egg-like bubble, cloudy white. Bubble bursts and feathery flesh becomes human.

"My daughter—" I hum the magic words over and over as time and space shrinks and expands all around us . . .

One~caterpillar

Two~caterpillar

Three~caterpillar

Four~caterpillar

Five~caterpillar

Six~caterpillar

Seven~caterpillar

Eight~caterpillar

Nine~caterpillar

Ten~caterpillar

Eleven~caterpillar

Little~Fish~~Turns~12~~

Rule number one: no saying Happy Birthday.

No singing Happy Birthday. No birthday cards. No birthday presents. No NOTHING about birthdays until I have saved the damsel in distress. Rule number two: no litter on the playground. There's a third new rule, but I don't even want to think about that.

Ugh. Not again. I tilt my head and pinch my nostrils so blood doesn't geyser out onto my galaxy bedspread and burn through all the innocent planets. Mars wouldn't be offended—she's red already—but Auntie would be.

I stretch my foot down the solar system, bulging my toes beneath Venus and Jupiter, feeling for the undies I rejected in the night. Auntie keeps shrinking my clothes, so now everything feels awkward. I toe the corner where the sheet is still tucked in. The rejects are there, bunched up in the cold. Hooking a frill with my nail, I yoink them to where my fingers can reach. It's knicker-hanky or nothing, because tissues are made from Pāpā's murdered relatives.

I fold the frilly rejects in half and half again. Their pink reminds me of Before, when the damsel could squish all of me onto her knee at once. The softness turns dank against my nostril. At least I can't smell bum or anything.

It takes 687 days for Mars to orbit the sun. Nearly twice as long as Earth. That means I'm not even six in Martian years. If I lived there, maybe my bones would also take twice as long to grow, so I wouldn't stretch too tall for my skin. Urgh. I'm sick of this nose. It's hard getting dressed while plugging it. First, I get stuck in my apricot tee, then I trip over my trackpants and plunge sideways into Uranus. My best friend Whekī laughs at me, while his

long green fingers scratch the window glass. The black hair all over his fronds reminds me I've got a big problem (((rule number three))).

I double-check the bathroom door's locked, then open the drawer under the sink that smells like pinetarsol.

Auntie's tweezers are cold. Mean. Silver with criss-crosses. Balancing them on the edge of the basin, I peel my t-shirt back over my face. The neck-hole gets stuck under my chin again. This time I pause in my apricot bubble, breathing my own hot air as I drag my bottom lip up over my top lip. There's no blood, just lots of tiny hairs.

What if I'm actually turning into Whekī?

I yank my tee over my ears so fast, static electricity buzzes my hair into spikes. The damsel liked it better when we both had ponytails down to our butts.

"Twinnies," she called us, even though her skin's paler than mine, and her eyes are lighter and closer together. Our faces are pretty much opposites. Hers is round and mine is pointy. Moon versus egg. Only our hair ~~is~~ *was* the same.

The damsel cried when she found my ponytail on the compost heap. That was at Home, just after she told me we had to leave. She didn't know I was watching her from behind the shed. I felt stink seeing her sad, but also secretly not-stink, because now I look more like me. I flex at the mirror. It's easier to see my muscles in this singlet. I wish Auntie would let me wear it by itself, but town-rules are different from country-rules. A strange feeling floats over my head as I scan my chest for forbidden bumps.

"Don't even think about it," I whisper to the invisible Evils disguised as dust. There's no dust here, Auntie makes sure of that. I hold warrior pose until nothing happens, then relax. The Evils know there's no point in attacking me, anyway. I poke the hole in my singlet near my bellybutton. That's an invisible wound. Got it while I was winning an invisible fight

for the gazillionth time. I always win, because I've got super-strength, and if I just follow all the rules, I'll be able to save the damsel in distress.

Rule number three drags a hook through my guts.

I lift my arm above my head and catch a whiff of onion weed. Bleurgh. But that's not my biggest problem. My biggest problem is standing in the middle of my armpit, curled over like an alfalfa sprout. Something sour slicks across my tongue. Biting down, I hover Auntie's tweezers above my new arch nemesis, then squeeze my thumb and finger, clamping down on its wonky tip. As I pull, my skin tents up. The sprout uncurls, then slips right through the metal beak of the tweezers. Bum. Feeling cross-eyed, I try using the mirror to aim closer to the skin. Pinch. The bite pinks and swells, but my arch nemesis is still standing in the middle of my armpit fine and dandy.

Swallowing my worst swear, I try again. Pluck. Finally it comes out at the root, covered in a bulb of jelly. Ugh. Did my skin actually turn into soil overnight? My pit jelly looks wrong stuck to the side of Auntie's basin which is always super-clean. No streaks on the tap. No specks on the mirror. First night I stayed here, I didn't know if I was allowed to mess the shiny silver drain, so I swallowed my toothpaste. Now I know the rules. Spit. Rinse. Wipe away water with a flannel. Put the flannel in the laundry basket, so Auntie can wash it with detergent that smells like fake flowers.

I squeeze back into my apricot tee. It's our favourite colour. Not Auntie's, though. Maybe that's why she keeps shrinking it. I stretch the front down as far as it will go, then yank my trackpants up over my invisible wound.

"Tani?"

"Just a sec."

Turning the tap to gush, I flick my sprout into the bubbling-white and watch it disappear to who-knows-where? Tangaroa's throat? Then, dropping the tweezers in my pocket, I open the bathroom door.

Auntie's wearing the flowery dress she bought the day she tried (and failed) to make me break one of my rules: only wear clothes from Before.

"You okay, bub?" The gold in her eyeshadow gleams when I nod. "Good girl," she says, as though there's something else on her tongue, but she won't spit it out, because that would be breaking a rule. "Will you be alright if I go out for a bit? June's in the garden."

"Yeah." I try not to sound too keen. June and I have an understanding. She does her thing (the gardening) and I do my thing (secret missions).

Auntie looks past me to the bathroom mirror, smoothing her hair. It's darker than mine and so long, she could throw it out her window and catch a prince.

"Are you sure you don't want to come and pick out a treat or something?"

"Can't. Video-chat—"

"Right, of course. So you'll be okay if I don't hurry back, then?" she says, trying not to sound too keen either.

When the front-door clicks shut, I count to twenty caterpillars, then skid down the hallway towards the back-door. Time to break another Auntie rule.

Wet grass tickles between my toes as I creep down the slope to the bottom of the garden. Anticipation shivers all the way to the top of my scalp.

"Hey, Mama," I say, peeping through the wire into her cage. Mama's pointy nose appears, whiskers twitching. Her ancestors came from far away, too. Except, mine probably didn't come from the Andes mountains in South America.

"Can I have a cuddle?" I say, lifting the lid to her sleeping-box.

You CAN, Nee-Nee, but whether you MAY is another matter.

"May I have a cuddle?"

When Mama has sniffed my fingers, I slide them under her soft belly. She gives me a little nip as I lift her from the hay, but she's not really mad. I can tell because she sinks her weight into my hand. She only bites if she gets a fright or if I'm packing a sad.

Don't fall into the boggy-woggies, Nee-Nee—Mama's eyes narrow into black ovals—*otherwise, who will save the day?*

She reminds me if I don't follow our rules, I'll fail my ultimate mission and that would be the end of the world. Literally. Mama doesn't care much about Auntie's rules, though.

"I'm going to take you into my room," I say. "Just don't start *reeting*. If the damsel hears, she might tell Auntie I brought you inside."

Mama sniffs the air above my elbow, her eyes turning into wide circles again.

"It's okay. There's no danger, I looked already," I say, triple-checking from fence-line to fence-line.

But, Nee-Nee, what about the dangers you can't see?

That makes the hairs on my arms stand stiff.

"Don't worry, Mama," I say, holding her close. "I'll protect you from the Evils."

But my words taste like teaspoons when there's no medicine left.

Little~Fish~Through~The~Internet

On the screen, the damsel's face is white like paper, ready to scrunch up and tear if we don't follow my rules. No being sad. No asking when we're going Home. No missing. I try to pull Apricot Beanie over my ears. The damsel knitted Apricot Beanie about two Martian-years ago. I still wear it even though it's been shrunk at least twice, and the wool kind of itches behind my ears.

"You're a sight for sore eyes." The damsel's smile is too bright for the screen. "Tell me my daughter, what have you got planned for your special day?"

I look past her to where Mama's chomping carrot on my galaxy bedspread and try to think of an answer, but all I can focus on is the chittering of long teeth: *Ch-ch-ch. Ch-ch-ch. Ch-ch-ch.*

"Uh—nothing*much*," I mumble, itching behind my ear. "Just picking*up*litter*from*the*playground*." (Also known as, Ultimate Mission: Save Papatūānuku from the Evils).

"Aww, that's not nothing. You know, the first time I saw you, I knew you'd grow up to do special things."

I shrug, catching my smile before it spreads too far across my face.

"Talk to me, Little Fish, I miss your voice."

Lots of rules broken today.

"Sorry—" the damsel pretends to snatch the word "miss" from the air and lock it back inside her chest. "I meant to say I *want* to hear your voice."

"I could tell you a story," I say, before everything turns into a soggy bog.

"Mmm, yes, please." The damsel closes her eyes.

My guts sink.

"Once *under* a time," I say, pausing to make sure she's still paying attention, "there was Little Fish—otherwise known as Ika Iti—who grew inside a Pākehā mother's puku, and swam around gobbling up all her invisible Evils. Until, one day, Ika Iti was pushed out of Mother's warm safe bubble into the big wide ngahere, where their Māori pāpā sent down a birthday gift of super-strength—"

Mama stops chomping for a moment. The white hair under her plump bottom lip is stained bright orange. She knows I only chose this story to make the lady on the screen stay awake.

"Pāpā was proud," I say, feeling a squiggle in my belly, "but when no-one was watching, he cried until his tears made a flood. Mother said, 'See all those dark hairs on your arms? They're actually feathers. Do you remember how to fly?' The memory was on the tip of Little Fish's mind, but as salty water from Pāpā's tears licked their ankles, there was no time to *not* remember."

A sharp snore scuffles through the speaker.

"What a rotten situation," I say, yanking Apricot Beanie off my head. "The worst."

Keep going, Nee-Nee. Mama narrows her little eye at me from above Saturn's rings. *The waters are rising fast. What happens next?*

"Well, as Pāpā's sadness crept up over Mother's knees, Little Fish said, 'Hold onto me.' So, Mother wrapped her arms around the slippery shape of Little Fish and held on tight. She nearly pulled them both under, and it was hard to swim, but there was no choice because the Evils were following the smell of onion weed through the water."

The damsel doesn't even react to my new twist in her story. "Oh, well, too bad," I say. "No more Mother and Little Fish."

One-caterpillar

two-caterpillar

three-caterpillar

(If I get to ten-caterpillar, I'm going to exit without saying goodbye)

nine-caterpillar

nine-and-a-half-caterpillar—

"Mm, thank you, my daughter," the damsel says through a massive yawn. "Now, will you shrink me small and take me on one of your adventures?"

"Fine," I say, ignoring the plasticky squelch of the hospital mattress as she tries to get comfortable. "Which organ?"

The damsel thinks for a moment.

"Ba-bup, please."

That's our name for my heart.

"Okaaay, but that'll be a bumpy ride." I don't tell her Ba-bup has been more like "Ba-boom" since we came to the city.

"I'm all good with bumpy rides."

This is the kind of talk we'd have at Home, when she'd stay wrapped in her apricot dressing gown all day. Sometimes the Big Rest lasted so long, the damsel got tired of the same scenery, so she'd ask me to shrink her real small and carry her in my pocket. Then, after a while, it was my heart or liver or spleen or even my tonsils. Auntie would think this game is weird or unhygienic (((but it's better than breaking rule number three))).

Reet! Reet! Reet! Mama chirps from the crater in my galaxy bedspread. A new instruction rises into my mind from hers: *Nee-Nee, if the lady on the screen asks you to do something, you should do it.*

Little~Fish~&~Sicko

It's hard to have adventures surrounded by fences and houses and roads and a gazillion rules. At Home, you can swing on gates and land in another world. There are hills and gullies and ponds and bush. Here, there's only Sicko. I grip his lowest branches and walk up his jigsaw-puzzle bark, hooking each knee over his curves, then lean backwards and look at the world upside-down.

The grass is too short for frogs and skinks. There's nowhere to hide, except up high. Using my super-strength, I hoist myself upright and hug Sicko's trunk. The best thing about super-strength is all you have to do is think about it, then it tingles through your blood and buzzes through your nerves. When my head stops rushing, I climb, testing each branch before transferring my weight. If I was miniature and had claws like Mama, I could scurry up Sicko's bark all the way to the top. But it's okay here. I can see June pulling weeds in the front garden. I squint through my hand so it looks like she's squatting between my thumb and finger. Auntie says, "Thank goodness for June," because she doesn't mind dirt under her nails. In fact, I'm pretty sure June loves dirt.

"Have you detected any Evils today?" I say, raking my fingers through Sicko's pale-green moss. It feels like something between hair and plastic. Sicko doesn't answer, which means yes or no. You have to listen carefully to understand. Auntie doesn't get it. She wants to chop him down, because June says sycamore trees don't have great immunity. I think it's because his ancestors live far away, so he's here fighting invisible battles, alone.

Clumping his moss into a ball, I reach for a cluster of seeds. Each seed is surrounded by a long case that looks like a cicada wing. The wings are stuck together in pairs like rotors. Sicko watches as I launch them through his branches, one by one. They drop for a second,

then spin and helicopter over the fence into Neighbour Girl's yard. There are actually three girls that live in the old kuia's house, but only one has noticed me. First time, she poked out her tongue. Second time, she smiled and gave me the finger. Third time, she stared right through me.

The ranch slider screeches open. Smallest Girl clomps onto the deck with a piece of watermelon. Her sisters follow. Neighbour Girl's wearing a baggy orange tee-shirt that says: Hello World. She stubs her toe and the others laugh.

"Shut up, oi." Neighbour Girl hobbles to the edge of the deck then spit-fires watermelon seeds all the way to the fence. She swipes her mouth with the back of her hand and glances up. "Ha. Tree Gurl's spying on us again."

The oldest sister waves, her smile shining pink with watermelon juice. "Would you like some merengi?"

Something hot wallops inside my chest. She's probably the prettiest girl in Tāmaki Makaurau. In the world. In the universe.

"Shame, Faf." Neighbour Girl jumps off the deck and strides towards the fence. "Even u can't make Tree Gurl talk." She pulls the lid off a black bin. The stink of hot compost wafts up through Sicko's branches, but it doesn't make me gag. At Home, it was my job to take the scraps from the kitchen to the garden. We didn't have a bin, though. Just a heap by the shed to dig into. I always imagined the hole was Papatūānuku's mouth, the broken egg shells were freckles, and the stalks growing new potatoes from old skins was crunchy green hair. I want to reply to Prettiest Girl, but I still don't have my answer. She could be a Carrier.

"Here, Daphne, give this to sister," Prettiest Girl says, passing her watermelon skin to Smallest Girl before wiping her hands on her overalls and pulling a phone from her pocket.

My guts sink as Prettiest Girl steps back through the ranch-slider, her laughter bubbling behind her. I bet she has a LOT of friends.

"Oi, Earth to Tree Gurl." Neighbour Girl grins up at me, her empty melon skin heaped with worms. They're not the thick grey ones that scrunch up inside themselves like you find at Home. These ones are red and skinny. "Want some *merengi*?" she says in a high-pitched voice. Next moment, a piece of watermelon skin slams into her back.

"Ow." She turns just in time for the next one to clip her foot. "Thanks for the warning, egg."

Smallest Girl squeals, then lollops back across the deck. I was just thinking if we were friends, Neighbour Girl could help with my mission. But her reaction speed isn't great. Ugh. I nearly forgot I've got to clean up the Evils from the playground before Auntie gets back.

Little~Fish~and~the~Biodegradable~Bag

Kills 99.99% of germs. That's what the sanitiser bottle says. I imagine the sting on my palms is a gazillion Evils dying their dramatic deaths. Guess I should probably go back now that Mission Playground is complete. Auntie will be back soon. The biodegradable bag I swiped from under her sink puffs up, its soft green belly fluttering litter. But the new seesaw really wants to balance. I feel it ache through my leg-muscles. Five more minutes should be okay. Hanging the powdery plastic on the munted seesaw's handle, I climb up the other one.

What does "biodegradable" even mean? That Papatūānuku can gobble through the plastic like watermelon skin? But what if she only eats through the bag, then chokes on the Evils inside? Just the thought of watermelon makes Ba-bup wallop again. I imagine the damsel holding on for dear life. Ugh. It's super-awkward having her in there all of a sudden.

Halfway up the seesaw, I turn into a sideways star, leaning my weight towards the sticking-up end of the plank. Instead of balancing, it plonks onto the opposite tyre, squashing it flat. I turn a 180 and do one of the damsel's warrior poses. *Yo-gaaa*!

Plonk. Switch. Plonk. Switch. Plonk on the Infectors. Squish so their guts run down the black rubber tread. An energy ball burns in my puku then explodes outwards like Saturn's rings. Pieces of asteroid and dead moon blast out, out, out over the playground, over the footpath, over the trees, over the park, slamming all the Evils into oblivion.

Slow down, Nee-Nee. Mama's voice speaks into my mind from over the fence and through Auntie's wall. *Visualise the seesaw in perfect alignment.* I close my eyes and do as she says, while sun dribbles down my back and reddish blotches float above my eyelids. *Ba-bup. Ba-bup. Ba-*

"What's your name, oi?"

boom!

Neighbour Girl's sitting on the fence, arms crossed over her orange tee. Her skin is smooth below her sleeves and three-quarter length pants, even though she's got super-thick braids. Auntie's tweezers burn through my trackpants, cringing my arm and leg hairs into spikes.

"Well? Have you got a name, Tree Gurl?"

"Tani," I mumble.

"Huh?"

"Ta-NAY." For some reason, the sound changes its mind halfway through, from nee to nay.

"Wha—?" Neighbour Girl raises a brow. "But ur not Māori."

She jumps off the fence and struts towards me, dusting her palms together. Her bright white sneakers squelch the munted seesaw into the tyre and knock over the biodegradable bag. A silver wrapper slips out onto the grass between us. Neighbour Girl ignores the Evil and crosses onto my seesaw, looking me down and up with nosey brown eyes.

"Anyway," she says, "aren't you a gurl?"

"So?"

I shrug, curling my toes against the cracks in the new paint and inch sideways to escape her dangerous breath.

"So, Pākehā-gurl-who-spies-from-trees, why are you called 'man'?"

"Because*of*my*dad*," I mumble.

"Who's your dad?"

"Tāne Mahuta . . . from Waipoua Forest."

Her eyes grow even wider, which I didn't think was possible. "As in the big old tree?"

I nod.

"Nah. Where's your proof?" she says, folding her arms.

My proof is my super-strength. That's how I squash all the Evils. Even the most dangerous ones, the Infectors. They'll fly inside your nose and mouth and maybe kill you. Neighbour Girl snorts, then jerks sideways as though she's going to jump off her end of the seesaw.

"Jokes," she says. "Anyways, I know you don't go to school. That's why you're weird. And I know you come here in the dark with your mum. My sister saw her clean the playground with spray and wipe. She says you're the gurl in the bubble."

She thinks she saw the damsel.

"No, that was my auntie," I say, listening hard towards the fence. Did she just call?

"Why? Is your mum the sick one?" Neighbour Girl tries to read my blank face. "Anyway, how old are you? You're taller than my big sister, but you tell even bigger porkies than my baby sister. You're way too big for that top, eh?"

I clamp my arms over the wet circles which have spread like bruises under the sleeves of my apricot tee.

"You should come over to my house, oi," Neighbour Girl says as I jump sideways. "My sister's brother has a vape that smells like lollies. He'll blow it in your face if you want."

"Can't." I grab my trash and staunch across the prickles, pretending I don't have major ground shock. I don't tell Neighbour Girl lolly-air is actually Evils in disguise.

"Tomorrow?"

I shrug.

"Okay, well bye, Tāne's daughter."

Little~Fish~Flings~Poo

I smell marshmallows and broken rules.

"It's not a *birthday* cake," Auntie says sneakily, "just a special treat." She seems happy for some reason. Even does a little twirl to the fridge. "Miraka?"

"Thanks." I plonk down at the island and watch her fill my glass while my mood gets even more dank. (Too big). ((Not-Māori enough)). (((Too-much-of-a-girl))).

I pick the thickest slice of lolly cake and drown it. Milk runs like fangs over my bottom lip.

"Ew, Tani." Auntie wipes my chin. I secretly like how her forehead wrinkles under her makeup as she studies me for messes. It's the only time she gets real close.

"Your mother suggested we go on a special adventure, then visit her after?" she says like she's trying to sound excited for me.

"That's against the rules." A soggy chunk flies out my mouth.

Auntie doesn't notice. She's too busy thinking about what to say next. I hate waiting for her words. Makes my belly unplug and gurgle down the drain.

"We talked about this, bub. The rules can cha—"

"Migraine."

I launch to my feet and make my escape.

When I get to my room, there's a pile of poos on my galaxy bedspread and Mama's hiding in a lump under my pyjamas.

"Don't worry, Mama," I say, scooping up the tiny black sausages. "I'll deal with this."

Not sure how, exactly. I don't want to get cornered by Auntie again, and I can't put poos in the bin. She'll spot them with her hawk-eye. The droppings turn warm and shiny-

damp in my fingers as I scan my room for ideas. It's not really *my* room. It's just a room filled with my stuff that's waiting awkwardly until it can go Home where it belongs. I'm about to hide them in the Petri dish from my science kit, when Whekī's green fingers tap-swish against the window. *Chuck them out here, e hoa!*

That's a better idea. Careful of Mama, I kneel on my galaxy bedspread, open the latch and fling—right at the orange figure standing in Whekī's shade.

"Ow." Neighbour Girl swats away the flying dung. "What the actual—?"

I grab Mama by reflex, like I would if there was an Evil outside my window. She nips me through my pyjamas good and sharp.

"You'reNOT*allowed*here," I blurt.

"Uh, why?"

"You*could*be*a*Carrier—"

"Huh? What's a carrier?"

"—of diseases."

"Pshhh." Neighbour Girl blows air through her teeth. "You're the one flinging poo. Anyway, I just saw your auntie. She didn't seem worried about diseases when she brought us lolly cake."

The Potential Infector looks to see if I knew already.

"It's true," she says. "Your auntie wants to pay us to baby-sit you, but Kuia Jean won't take her money. To be honest, I would've."

Milk and lolly cake jump back up my throat mixed with acid. I yank my curtains shut.

"Okaaay," Neighbour Girl says. "Anyways, how can your dad be Tāne Mahuta? Wood can't make flesh and bone. You'd know that if you went to school. You should come to my school, oi."

Yeah, right. Not even if the rest of the Earth was lava.

“Well anyways, my kuia says your ‘dad’ is seriously in danger. Like, for real.”

I don’t like Neighbour Girl with her dimpled cheeks, her cheeky smile, and braids shining like a cat o’ nine tails ready to whip.

“It’s true,” she says. “There’s this, uh . . . germ? And if it touches Tāne’s soil—” her voice goes flat “—he dead.”

I bundle Mama onto my chest with my pyjamas and squeeze my whole body shut, like one giant eyelid. All I can hear are red blood cells speeding through my ears, polluting my thoughts so they don’t know where to go, causing traffic jams and bottle necks.

There’s a hot tightness inside the fog that winds and winds until the sun goes down. Until Neighbour Girl goes away. Grows old. Dies. Until everything burns and sinks. When it’s the end of the world, I let go, and open my giant lid.

Neighbour Girl has gone home, but the sun’s still there. Mama rotates under my pyjamas, her claws poking through my apricot tee.

“Tani?” Auntie taps on my door. “I found your knickers . . . I’ve put some sanitary pads in the bathroom. They won’t flush, though. Just wrap them up in loo-paper and put them in the bin.”

Ugh.

She thinks I’m

(((Perioding)))

I scrunch the thought into a ball and roll it into the dark place in my mind, then pretend I’m asleep.

Mama chirps softly as Auntie's footsteps disappear back down the hallway, her whiskers tickling my throat.

Nay-Nay, you should listen to your girl-friend. You should talk to the old kuia about the germ.

"She's *not* my friend," I snap.

Mama weasels under my chin and thrusts her bony little head upwards, gnashing my bottom teeth into my top teeth.

Don't be mad, Nay-Nay, don't be mad at Mumsy-Wumsy-Whemy-Woo. Woo! Woo!

Little~Fish~Wants~to~Stay~in~Her~Bubble

“I know the idea of being around other people makes you uncomfortable—” Auntie talks as though her thoughts are made of glass that might fall and smash on the hospital floor “—and I know going next door will be a big change, but it means you won’t have to go far in the mornings, and you’ll be able to pop back and visit your hamster. Please don’t look at me like that, Tani. June isn’t available anymore, and you know I can’t leave you alone. It isn’t safe.”

I hate how Auntie calls Mama a hamster. I hate the way she brings me to the damsel and watches us with a sad smile, holding her own hand. I’d like to remind Auntie she said exactly the opposite. It’s not safe being around Carriers. What are we even doing here? Infectors could be pouncing off our skin onto the super-sick people. But arguing will only make more words sloth through the tiny blue holes in her facemask, so I stay inside my ribcage, getting beat-up by my own heart. How will I save the world from next-door?

“Please, Tania. I don’t know what else to do.”

My breath smells furry inside my face-mask, like green bananas. I hate it when she begs. I hate the stink of hospital. Smells like warm soup and Dettol.

“You know, you might actually enjoy yourself—” Auntie tries again “—wouldn’t you like to make some friends? It isn’t healthy spending all day everyday by yourself. You agree, don’t you, Mary?”

So that’s the real reason she brought me here. To gang up. Two adults against one kid.

“Auntie’s right, Little Fish, you’ll be good as gold.” The damsel reaches for my hand. I hate the feeling of her too-cold fingers. Too loose, even when she squeezes. “And now you

can write about all your adventures, even the stink ones." She pats the cover of my not-a-birthday-present diary and gives me a wink.

I hate the way her pee stays in the middle of the tube. Fluorescent yellow, hanging down the side of the hospital bed. Makes my intestines want to eel out the window over the road and into the Tāmaki river.

"Hey, my daughter—" the damsel cups her hand over mine "—let's make a deal. You hang out with the girlies this week and if you really don't like it, we'll come up with a plan B, okay?"

I wish I could send my whole body through the air like a text, cos I hate saying bye. And I hate the squeak of Crocs down the corridor.

And I hate being stuck in the lift with nurses, cos they've got x-ray eyes and when we go down, my guts stay up for a second and the g-force gives me a buzz in my undies.

"You okay, bub?"

Ugh. No comment. And what does that even mean?

Outside, there's a man in a wheelchair puffing. His gown has come undone at the back. Dark spots cover his skin like eyes on a tree trunk. Reminds me of what Neighbour Girl said about Pāpā.

The thought stalks me to bed. I open my not-a-birthday-present diary, then close it again. Mama scuffles across the old newspapers I put in her banana-box. I've decided she's staying inside tonight, seeing as though everyone else is breaking all the rules.

"Sorry you can't sleep with me," I say. "I might squash you."

Never mind that, Nay-Nay, just focus on your mission, for heaven's sake.

Ugh. I nearly forgot. I slip back out of my galaxy bedspread. There's no light bleeding under Auntie's door. Still, I astronaut-creep into the hall in super-slow-mo, dodging the

creaks in the floorboards, avoiding the bathroom mirror in case an Evil flashes across my eyes. I unwrap a pad from the drawer. The insides are white and very soft in the middle with stretchy wings that unfold. Underneath, there's a strip of plastic with words printed in dark purple ink: *Did you know bananas help relieve period cramps?*

I didn't know pads talked to people.

"Sorry," I say, dropping the wrapper into the bin, as my mind clogs with images of Papatūānuku's gut lined with layers of purple plastic. Ugh. This mission feels shady, but Auntie thinks I'm flushing pads. She accused me on the way home from the hospital. I was going to say the blood was actually from my nose, but then, I had an idea. The fridge-light glares at me. I turn the raspberry jam jar, then reach for the tomato sauce instead. Perhaps I should sauce the crotch of my pyjama pants as well as the pad. It wasn't part of the plan, but Auntie definitely won't make me go next door if I wake up full-on haemorrhaging.

Back in bed, I stare up at the rectangles on the ceiling and tip my thoughts into their empty boxes.

"Whekī?" I whisper into the cluttered darkness. "Neighbour Girl said that Pāpā—"

But I can't even say the words to my best friend. They're too sad.

Little~Fish~in~the~Land~of~Nod

I waggle side to side through hot dampness, past skinny red worms and fat white huhu grubs. Being underground makes me claustrophobic. Then I remember I've got wings, but they're all soft and flimsy like Auntie's pads. When I start to panic, there's a scratch-scratch-scratch above my head. Claws dig through the soil and a snout with two narrow teeth chitter down at me.

Nay-Nay! Get out of the boggy-woggies and go to Pāpā!

"How?" The insides of my cheeks turn floury with dirt.

The oval of Mama's eye grows larger and larger, until I can see stars twinkling in their shiny black. She clamps her long incisors over the scruff of my neck and yanks me up out of the soil.

Fly, Nay-Nay!

The hairs on my arms prickle into feathers. Next moment, I'm flapping through the night sky with Mama tucked-up safe in my talons.

Do you taste it?

"What?"

The Milky Way?!

I open my beak and creamy air rushes in. For a moment, everything is glorious. Then I remember . . .

Before the damsel was in distress, we used to visit Pāpā. I'd run up and down the boardwalk while they smiled over me. But the last time was maybe four Martian-years ago. What if I can't find my way back?

Hot panic tingles my feathers. Then I remember my bird-brain knows exactly where to go. Without even trying, my wings flap towards Waipoua Forest, where the clouds are flashing red.

Little~Fish~Out~of~Water

Clots of tomato sauce race down the drain as Auntie angry-scrubs my pyjama pants with sunlight soap.

I've decided I actually want to go to Neighbour Girl's house. Not because Auntie's in a mood. I decided even before she found the trail of ants marching down the hallway into the washing basket. My dream told me I should ask the old kuia about Pāpā and the germ.

"I know this is hard for you," Auntie says, turning off the tap, "but it's hard for me, too." The wobble in her voice squirms through my guts.

The mood slimes with us out the door, down the steps, and round the letterbox. I hope it doesn't follow us all the way into Neighbour Girl's house. Auntie seems to be thinking the same thing. She pauses on the doorstep, closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, then knocks on the yellow door. My eyes jump to the rainbow doormat. I mouth each colour silently. Auntie doesn't really speak Te Reo, either, even though she's actually Māori. Matawhero means "red eye". That's another name for "Mars", the "red planet". Auntie doesn't know how to use the stars as a compass, either, that's why all her adventures are stuck in the city. I hear feet stomping over floorboards, then the yellow door bursts open and Smallest Girl prances out in a pink tutu.

"Taaneeaaa!" Before I can react, she leaps forwards and wraps her arms around my legs.

Auntie doesn't even try to help me, she just smiles at us while the Potential Infector squeezes so hard, the shrunken damsel rises up my spine like the mercury in one of her old thermometers.

“Get OFF.” Neighbour Girl grabs her sister’s shoulders. “You can’t touch her, oi. Ur probably a carrier of diseases.”

“Why?” Smallest Girl pokes out her bottom lip.

“Cos you pick ur bum and don’t horoia ō ringaringa.”

“CLOVER.” a voice booms into the hallway. Next moment, a wahine looms over Neighbour Girl like a mighty mountain, her eyes softening on Auntie and me.

Auntie steps into the hug, her arms stiff as ever, but when The Mountain releases her, she looks kind of lost.

“And this must be Mary’s daughter.”

I pull a smile and worm my spine up straight.

“Tani, remember I told you Whaea D was my favourite kaiako at Uni?” Auntie says as though she wasn’t just super-mad at me. “And you know her mum was good friends with my mum and dad? Anyway, you feel super lucky that you get to hang out with the whole whānau, eh, bub?”

I want to remind Auntie she said Whaea D is only living here because the old kuia had an accident, so it’s not very lucky for her. And not very lucky for me, when I should actually be at Home with the damsel.

“I’m not sure if you know this, Tania,” The Mountain says, “but the last time I saw Mary, I believe she was hapu with you.”

“Even seven layers of flesh prolly couldn’t save you from one of her lectures,” Neighbour Girl says in a volume just low enough for The Mountain to ignore.

“Taan*eeeee*aa!” Smallest Girl jumps at me again. This time, she grabs my hands. I feel her bum-germs crawl over my skin. “Did you know my name, already? It’s Daphne.” She yanks my fingers, popping a knuckle.

“Okay, you, that’s enough,” Whaea D says before Clover has to save me again. “Go and find your sister.”

Ba-bup forward flips. *Prettiest Girl*. Luckily I decided to put the damsel in my spinal cord today.

“How is Kuia Jean?” Auntie asks as she bends to unzip her boot.

“*Ata mārie.*” The reply floats to us from a room out of sight before Whaea D can answer. If the first invisible voice was thunder, this one is feathers.

“Ata mārie, Kuia Jean,” Auntie calls back, slipping off her other boot. “Thank you so much for this.”

How many times does she have to say that? I feel Auntie’s grump all of a sudden. Maybe I stepped in her mood.

“She’s fine—” Whaea D lowers her voice to private “—according to her. Though I question the judgement of anyone who believes the world won’t spin unless she’s moving it.”

“It’s my foot playing up, not my ears,” the feathery voice replies, unruffled. “Don’t keep our guests to yourself, Diggeress.”

Auntie smiles at Whaea D in a way that means they’re saying something more than their words. They’re not the only ones with secret languages, though. Mine and Mama’s is way more secret. Auntie’s is so obvious.

“Kettle,” Whaea D says as we enter the cream-coloured hallway zig-zagged with photo frames. Neighbour Girl turns on her heel and sways into the kitchen.

“Second door on the left.” Whaea D reads my mind. I don’t actually need a toilet, though. Just somewhere to decontaminate.

There's a cake of soap on the basin but no sanitiser. Counting caterpillars, I wash up to my elbows and imagine Daphne's bum-germs sliding down the drain, all the way to Tangaroa's bowels. Ugh. It takes ages to get to twenty-caterpillar.

"I waited for you," Daphne says, brushing a brown curl from her eye as I open the bathroom door. She turns and clomp-leaps back down the hallway, half-ballerina, half-pūkeko. I follow from a safe distance while old photos stare down at me from dusty frames. The wahine with a moko kauae on her chin looks like she can see through the glass and into my thoughts. I pause outside the lounge. If I give Auntie the scrunch-face, maybe she'll notice the migraine fairies are circling, and take me back. But she's not looking for me, she's looking concerned for the old kuia.

"You'd tell me if it was too much, eh?"

"Never mind what that daughter of mine has been saying—" the old kuia brushes Auntie's worry away with one hand "—I'm fit as a fiddle."

My eyes follow a trail of sunshine back to the heart-shaped crystal hanging from the middle of the ranch-slider that's painting her cheek in wriggling rainbows. I should ask about Pāpā and the germ, then find a way out before Auntie leaves me in this house of a gazillion voices. There's no way I'll be able to concentrate long enough to complete my mission.

Just as I force one-foot forwards, Daphne skips in front of me and does a clumsy cartwheel into the middle of the lounge.

"Stop showing off, oi," Neighbour Girl scoffs. "Everyone can see your nono."

Daphne squeals and grabs her tutu, jamming it between her legs, then runs and plunges face-first into the old kuia's lap.

“Daphne Wilhelmina Jones, I asked you to find your sister,” Whaea D booms for the second time since I’ve known her. “Whina’s eldest is looking forward to meeting you, Kora. I know she was disappointed to miss you the other day.”

Auntie smiles, biting her lip. She wants to leave, but now she has to wait for Prettiest Girl.

There are more photos on the lounge walls, except these ones have colour. I wonder who’s on the other side of the naked puku waiting to be born. The baby in the next photo has a dimple on their chin, just like Neighbour Girl’s. That’s definitely Neighbour Girl in the next photo, with her sisters and two other girls pulling faces. Cousins, maybe. There’s one of Whaea D wearing a cloak made of feathers. And one of an OLD old lady with white hair. Even older than Kuia Jean. Her eyes are shut, but she doesn’t look asleep. She looks . . .

The thought seesaw-squelches between my heart and guts.

“What’s wrong, girl? Do you need your hand holding?”

For a second, I think Whaea D’s talking to me, but it’s Neighbour Girl who’s getting the stink-eye.

“What?” she says. “I poured it already.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“Cos I’m stealth.” Neighbour Girl plants a risky arm around The Mountain and rocks her side to side, causing a smile to crack through her stony expression. “That’s why I’m your favourite niece, eh?” she says, just as Daphne tows Prettiest Girl into the lounge.

“There she is.” Whaea D steps forwards, leaving Neighbour Girl’s arm to flop. “I know I can count on you girls to ensure Tania feels at home.”

“*TĀNE*” Neighbour Girl fake-coughs, but Whaea D doesn’t seem to notice.

Prettiest Girl gives me a smile that makes Ba-bup wallop again. “Hi, Tuh-nae.”

I've never heard my name sound like that before.

"I'm Far-FAH-lay," she says in the same singsong voice. "As in 'butterflies', not the pasta." She pulls a goofy smile as though she's laughing at herself, then steps forwards and opens her arms.

Ugh. I let her do the hug while my hands hover awkwardly behind her back and her chest pokes me in two places.

"Farfalle plans to study medicine," Whaea D purrs, directing her attention away from me.

"I hope I can be like you, one day, Auntie," Prettiest Girl says to my auntie. "It's my dream to help people."

Neighbour Girl rolls her eyes. Prettiest Girl doesn't seem to notice. All the air in the room notices her, though.

"Are you drawn to a particular field, or?"

"Uhh, not sure, to be honest. I just know I want to incorporate Rongoā, but I'm only just starting to learn the tikanga, so . . ."

"Aw, you'll do great, chick," Auntie says as Neighbour Girl reappears balancing a tray of steaming mugs.

She *is* quite stealth. I didn't even notice her leaving the room.

Auntie cringes at the tea. "I'm really sorry, I actually have to go. But thanks for, well, everything, actually. The kai that's been turning up on our doorstep has been a life-saver, eh bub?"

"It's our pleasure." Kuia Jean blows Auntie a kiss, then fishes me over with the hook of her finger. "Haere mai, Tania-love. Let me see your face."

Hers is soft and wrinkled like a blanket, but her eyes are strong as ink.

“Now, Clover tells me you are kaitiaki of our playground.”

“Nah, I didn’t.”

Kuia Jean ignores Neighbour Girl. “Is it true you care for our Papatūānuku?”

I shrug. How does she know that? Maybe Neighbour Girl has been spying on me.

“It’s just pretending though, eh?” Neighbour Girl says. “I mean, you just play games and make up stories, right, *Tāne’s Daughter*?”

“I like stories and games.” Daphne beams up at me, nostrils flaring. Then points a stubby finger all up in my face. “You’ve got blood.”

Little~Fish~on~the~Bowl

Imagine being cut, pulped, bleached and rolled, just to be soaked in nose-blood (or worse), then flushed. At least this dunny paper isn't made from rainforest. The packet says "sustainably sourced", but I'm not sure what that even means?

I slump forwards on the Jones's toilet, pressing my nostril into a wad of Pāpā's murdered relatives. Ugh. It has been less than ONE HOUR since Auntie left. That means there are at least seven more to go, and that's just for today. There'll be more hours tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. The patterns on the lino swirl, while the walls shrink. I know one thing for sure: *this* is not sustainable.

"Tāne's Daughter?" The floorboards creak. Neighbour Girl lets out a long sigh. "Soz for getting smart before. At least you do real stuff, too, eh? Like pick up trash."

She waits for me to open. I wait for her to leave. Next moment, a smart phone appears under the door.

Ever wondered how baby birds poop? The TikTok zooms in on a nest as a scraggly chick points its bald bum upwards and shoots a blob of twink over the side.

I snort by accident.

"Reminds me of you and your guinea pig," Neighbour Girl says. "Speaking of, I've got something to show you."

She promises I'll like the thing, but I think she just wants to boss me around: go straight-straight-straight, turn right. No, other right. And we're going through the door.

"See?" Neighbour Girl points to a gap in the hedge behind the clothesline. "Goes straight into your garden."

I actually do like this. When I stick my head through the hedge, I can see Mama's cage.

"Bring her to chill in my room, if you want."

"Thanks, Clover."

"All good. By the way, my friends call me Clo."

"Cool."

"So, anyways, what should I call you? Tani, Tāne, Tania?"

I secretly like it when she calls me Tāne's Daughter. It makes me feel powerful.

I shrug. "Be*right*back."

"Sweet."

Clover studies me as I duck back through the hedge, shielding Mama from the jabby branches.

"THAT'S who you remind me of," she says, tapping the dimple on her chin like a detective. "Prince Ashitaka, but after he was forced to leave his village."

"Huh?"

"You know? Short emo hair." Clover ticks the air with her finger. "Thick-as brows." Tick. "And—no offense—hella moody eyes." Her last three words all get their own tick.

"I don't know him."

"The guy from *Princess Mononoke*?"

I shrug, twirling the cowlick on Mama's rump with my fingertip. She's Abyssinian, so her hair isn't boring at all. Each rosette is made from strands beaming out around a tiny bald centre, like Daphne's drawing of a felt-tip sun which I saw stuck to the Jones's fridge. Mama's rosettes are a mixture of different colours, too. Some are black and white and silver, some are peach and gold.

“WHAT? But seriously, you look just like him, especially when you’re pretend-fighting.”

So, she HAS been spying on me.

“But you’re also a giant like your auntie.”

“No,” I say. “We’re not blood-related.”

“True. So, where do you actually come from?”

“Waipoua.”

“No, I mean, where are you *from* from?”

I shrug.

“Geez, there’s a lot you don’t know, Tree Gurl.”

Let her think that. Mama burrows into the crook in my elbow. *It’s best not to say too much.*

Clover picks a blade of grass between her toes and passes it to her fingers. “Lil pig, lil pig?”

Mama sniffs cautiously. *You can’t always trust the hand that feeds you, Nay-Nay. Or the foot.*

“It’s okay, Mama,” I say by accident.

Clover’s brow twists. “Did you say—?”

Lava rises to my cheeks.

“Wait. So, your guinea pig’s called ‘Mama’ and your dad’s a kauri tree?”

Ugh. Two-seconds ago I thought we could be friends.

“That’s the weirdest cross I’ve ever heard of,” Clover snorts. “You get half your DNA from your mother and half from your father, so—” her smirk fades when I don’t smile back “—or not, if they’re not your bio parents. So, I guess it works. Like whāngai or whatever.”

I feel as though all the blood has drained from my head. All I can think about is how Clover said “cross”, as in, “cross-between”, as in . . . The thought centipedes through my bellybutton.

It’s okay, Nay-Nay. Mama catches it with her tall teeth and yeets it sideways into the dark place in my mind.

Little~Fish~Looong~Day

My eyes feel open even when they're closed. Probably because all the memories from today are using outside-voices inside my skull. The worst thing is, I have to go back tomorrow because even though I was there for what felt like a gazillion years, I never asked Kuia Jean about the germ.

Little~Fish~in~a~Tizz

I dreamed Evils were flying through my nostrils and pooing all over my brain. My cry woke Auntie. I am staying home today, but that means I have to sleep at Clover's so she can work the nightshift. All the darkness outside my window feels like it's filling my chest.

I'm meant to be writing about my stink adventures in this not-a-birthday-present diary, but the pages smell like hospital.

"Whekī?"

My best friend just stands there like a fern that doesn't give a stuff.

Mama's acting weird, too. Lots of scuffling around her banana box.

I wish I could just go back to sleep and not think about anything.

***

Sunshine cuts through the gap in the curtains. I bury my nostrils in my sleeve. Smells like the damsel smelt Before.

"Technically, they're not new," Auntie said when she gave me the damsel's old pyjamas last night.

The colours melt into each other and burst outwards like Mama's rosettes.

Auntie said it's called tie-dye, and you make the patterns by twisting fabric around marbles. I asked if she made the pyjamas for the damsel, and her voice went funny, then she looked away.

"No, that was my brother. He's the creative one."

I wanted to ask more questions, but she was already half-way out the door.

Mama said, *it's okay, Nay-Nay, you're not breaking the rules*, but I don't know if she was telling the truth or if she just wanted my old pjs for herself.

***

The thought of staying at the Jones's tonight is ruining my whole day. It follows me around and won't let me forget. I was going to climb Sicko, but then I remembered everyone can see me there.

I asked Mama for a cuddle, but she hid under my old pjs and pretended not to hear.

There's only one other option: Whekī.

It's not a good hug, but I don't say that. Not his fault he's scratchy. I try to be nice, but my mood goes off all of a sudden.

"Keep your gross hairs off me," I snap. I DON'T WANT TO TURN INTO A FERN.

***

I tried being a fern. Auntie said a loud nothing when she found me in the dirt covered in Whekī's pubes. I had to shower for ages to get rid of the itch. Now it's nearly time to go next-door. Mama says, *It's okay, Nay-Nay, the thought is often worse than the thing itself.*

Little~Fish~Big~Pyjamas

A moth tings into the lightbulb above the yellow door. As it spirals down, I visualise a fire-shield, ready to burn bum-germs to smithereens.

But only Clover answers. I can hear Prettiest Girl talking on her phone through the wall. I wish I knew what her friends said to make her laugh like that. Through another wall, I can hear Kuia Jean telling a story. It's cosy the way her voice rises and falls over Daphne's giggles. I secretly want to stay and listen, but Clover bosses me into her room.

"I sweet-talked Whaea D into letting us borrow her projector," she says. "Now we can watch Studio Ghibli movie-styles."

I follow her gaze to the giant blue rectangle wobbling on the wall. The cone of light is coming from a small black box with one googly eye, propped on a chair at the opposite side of her room. As Clover steps in front of it, the image transfers all over her like liquid.

She flops onto the mattress in the middle of the floor, and passes me my own bowl of popcorn.

"Figured you wouldn't want my cooties."

"Thanks, Clo."

"All good, T." Clover sticks out her tongue, puts a piece of popcorn on the end and flicks it back into her gob, like a lizard.

"So, what was your favourite part?" Clover asks one second after the movie ends. "Mine's when she pulls the plug from the stink-spirit. Imagine if it was that easy to clean the rivers, eh? Papatūānuku could just puke out all the stank." Clover pushes herself up onto her knees and doubles over, pretending to up-chuck a cushion. "Take back your trash." *Huur*. "Take back your yuck-as pollution." *Huur*.

I want to tell her I was thinking the same thing, but instead of rivers, I imagined pulling the invisible plugs of disease from all the damsels (and man-sels) in distress, until the chunky grossness spilled out into the corridors, squelching through the holes in the nurses' Crocs. Then, when the waters finally ran clean, the damsel wouldn't be in distress anymore and we could go Home and everything would be like Before, except better, because she wouldn't be tired all the time. And she could have her own adventures, so I wouldn't have to carry her around everywhere.

"Take back your Evils!" I say, wobbling onto my knees. "Take back your Infectors! Take back your can—"

Clover farts, for real. We flop onto our bellies, and laugh until tears burn my eyelids and I choke on my own breath.

There's a sharp knock on the door. Whaea D pokes her head in. "SLEEP," she says. Then a frown knots over her reading glasses. "Or wharepaku, then sleep. It smells like a rubbish dump in here."

"Chur," Clover says. "My bad."

I jam my mouth with my hand. Wet laughter hisses through my fingers.

"I mean it, girls. If you wake Daphne, I'll send her in here."

"Just think of something dumb," Clover says under her breath.

I forgot Apricot Beanie. Suddenly, my lungs feel dank as a sponge used to clean the hospital floor. I never sleep without Apricot Beanie.

"Hippy-much?" Clover says, eyeing the damsel's tie-dye pyjamas as I step out of the bathroom. "Naaaah, don't get shy, boi. We're all about the flower power in this house. You should see the monthly rising of the moon cups. Shiz gets gnarly in here. No jokes. Now, buzz off, hippy, so I can drop a stink-spirit."

It's weird. Sometimes I think Clover and I are the same, and sometimes I think we're from different planets.

I try to brush the popcorn shards from the mattress, but it's hard to get comfortable without my galaxy bedspread, and the darkness feels emptier every second I'm by myself.

"Yo." Clover steps over my legs and drops down beside me. "Check out your doppelganger, boi. Looks just like you, eh?"

The picture on her phone isn't even of a real person. Just some drawing of a person. I guess we both have pointy chins.

"So, where'd you actually get the other half of your DNA?"

I shrug.

"Don't know or don't want to say?"

"Dunno."

"True. I got mine from some actor in America. Probably a loser."

"Is that where your mum is?"

"Yeah. They love her over there. She's pretty much a celebrity." Clover rolls her eyes.

"Woah."

"Nah, it's dumb as. She's got a legit voice, though. Wanna see?" Clover holds the screen over our heads as she swipes through photos. "She's real pretty, eh?"

Her mum looks just like Farfalle, but I don't say that. There's a man with his arm around her waist. Bleurgh.

"Is that your dad?"

Clover shakes her head. "Nah, we think he made Daphne. But he's not her dad. Just some cowboy wannabe who planted his seed then bolted."

Salt and butter fizz in my guts. I don't know how she can say words like that without cringing.

"Faf's the only one with an actual dad. He's a total nerd, like her," Clover snorts. "He's Tongan."

"Is your mum coming back?"

Clover blows air through her teeth. "Maybe if she's got another baby to dump? Nah, I don't care. She sends money, so whatever. We can live with her whenever we want."

"In America?"

"Yeh. Faf was there for ages, but I'm not really keen, eh?"

I turn my focus outside the window to the sound of an owl singing their own name.

The damsel said they have two names because different people heard different things.

Tāngata Whenua heard "ruru" and Tāngata Tiriti heard "morepork".

The damsel says ruru are the wise guardians of the night who send secret warnings through their lullabies.

Ru-ru.

Not sure if I'm meant to hear what I hear.

Ru-ru.

Clover says I'm not Māori. Not like her or Daphne or Farfalle or Whaea D or Kuia Jean or Auntie. She thinks I look like anime.

Ru – ru. *Ru – ru*. *Ru – ru*.

I follow the sound until I feel as unreal as a drawing on a page.

"You awake, oi?"

"Mm."

“Can I ask you a question?” Clover doesn’t wait for an answer. “Does it ever psyche you out that you came from an egg?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, before you were adopted by a tree and a guinea pig. You came from your mother’s egg, right?”

I shrug.

Clover sighs. “Seriously? Okay, Homeschool, time for some sex-ed.”

Ugh.

“So to make a human, you need an egg—” she bunches one hand into a fist above our heads “—technically it’s called an ovum, but everyone pretty much says ‘egg’. Then, you need a sperm, which is like a swimming seed.” She taps her fist with the fingers from her other hand, then pushes one inside, up to her yin yang ring. “The chosen one gets to plant itself inside the egg, then it drops its tail and the cells mix their DNA and shiz.”

I definitely should have pretended I was asleep. Maybe the ruru was trying to warn me about this conversation.

“Seriously, though,” she says, scratching the dimple on her chin. “The egg that grew you actually grew inside your mum while she was still inside her mum, like Russian dolls. Do you reckon we get more than just looks from our DNA? Like thoughts or feelings or memories. Or likes and dislikes—?”

I dis-like this conversation. After a long silence, Clover whispers, “Are you awake?”

This time, I don’t answer. I stay still as a plank while she tosses and turns. Guess we’re sharing this mattress. When the snoring starts, I creep up onto Clover’s bed and pull her pirate teddy into a bear-hug, while thoughts of eggs and swimming seeds slither through my puku.

Tomorrow, I MUST talk to Kuia Jean about the germ.

"*Phytophthora agathidicida*."

"Huh?" Daphne leans over the arm of Kuia Jean's La-Z-Boy to gawk at her tablet. "Are you telling magic, Kui?"

"It's a disease, you egg." Clover thumps the carpet. "Now, get down. You'll break that chair."

Daphne plops onto her bum. "What's a diz-eez?"

"Ask Faf, she's the wannabe doctor. Look, she's reading some hōhā sick-lit as we speak."

"Shut up, no it's not."

"Auē!" Clover puts on the mocking voice she always uses for Farfalle. "*I think I'm ugly, cos I'm so skinny from all the sickness and from maybe dying. But it's okay, cos the hot mysterious guy is into me, and that's literally all that matters*."

Farfalle rolls her eyes. "Ha ha."

Daphne lifts her heels and swivels to face Prettiest Girl.

"But, tell meeee."

Farfalle looks over her book. "A disease is a sickness that doesn't get better by itself."

"Why?"

"It's . . . complicated." Farfalle gives up on reading. "You remember that time you cut your finger and it bled, but after a while the tiny cells in your body fixed the hole in your skin?"

Daphne looks off to the side.

“When you were cutting the āporo?”

“Oh, yeah!”

“Well, a disease happens when the workers that usually clean up messes or fix accidents inside your body stop working. Or work too hard. Or not enough. Or do a job they’re not supposed to do.”

“But, I think they’re too big to get inside my finger.”

“They’re not people-workers, they’re tiny cell-workers,” Farfalle says as though she’s searching for another way to say it. “Okay, so you know how each of us looks like one separate thing? Like there’s you, and there’s me, and there’s Clo and Tuh-nae—”

“Yesss, I know.” Daphne gives me a flaring-nostril grin.

“Well, actually, we’re made up of LOTS of tiny things. And sometimes tiny things start growing in places that make it hard for our bodies to do what they need to do. And if our tiny worker cells don’t stop them from growing, then we call that a disease. Or sometimes our tiny workers start attacking parts of our own body, and we call *that* a disease, too.”

“Mm.” Kuia Jean gives Prettiest Girl a nod. “These are tricky words, you’re right, Daphne-love. To understand the meaning of what I was saying, it helps to separate them into their different parts—”

“NO.” Daphne holds her hands over her ears. “I don’t want to hear that anymore. I want to watch DAVID.”

“Shoosh, oi, don’t be rude,” Clover says. “Far. Some of us do want to listen.”

“But—”

“Not now, Moko.” Kuia Jean’s tone is gentle, but firm. “I am answering Tania’s question. ‘*Phyto*’ means ‘plant’ in Latin. ‘*Phthora*’ is Greek for ‘destruction’. Then we go back to Latin: ‘*Agathid*’, meaning ‘the type of tree called kauri’, and ‘*cida*’, which means—”

“To kill.” Whaea D peers over her black-rimmed glasses. Her book could flatten a child’s hand like a pressed flower.

“Oi, sounds like one of your Evils, eh, Tāne’s Daughter? *Plant Destructor Kauri Killer*,” Clover says in an epic voice, sending tingles down my spine.

“Not evil, my girl,” Kuia Jean says, “just life searching for a way to go on living.”

“By stealing another lifeform’s food until they starve to death? Sounds like my definition of evil.” Clover speaks my thoughts exactly. “Can’t we just kill it before it kills Tāne?”

“You can wash your shoes, you can stay on the tracks, but there’s no cure, my girl.”

Kuia Jean looks like the words are eating holes in her insides, too.

Daphne points at the TV and whimpers.

“You’re obsessed.” Clover snorts. “Daphne and David sitting in a tree. Missus A-t-t-e-n-b—”

“Don’t be crass,” Whaea D booms. “Little girls shouldn’t be thinking about marrying old men. Or anyone, for that matter. Don’t turn your sister’s love of animals into something perverse.”

“But—” Daphne shakes the remote.

Kuia Jean pokes her with the end of her walking stick. “Have you asked our guest?”

“Do you want to watch, Taneeaa?”

I actually want to learn more about this new Evil, Plant Destructor Kauri Killer before Auntie finishes work, which should be any minute now.

“Pleeeease.”

I watch, but my attention keeps floating back to the fact there’s an Evil trying to kill Pāpā. Also, Prettiest Girl is sitting beside me.

“Okay, turn it off, please,” Whaea D says as the credits appear. “No more screens for the rest of the day.”

“Shame.” Clover snatches the remote from Daphne’s limp grip. “People are idiots. We’re all gonna die.”

“Why?” Daphne pops up, her cheek red and dented from the carpet.

“You saw. Everything’s gonna go extinct.”

“What’s extinct?”

“Dead forever, like huia.”

“That’s why we’ve got to recycle, Daph,” Farfalle says. “To protect Papatūānuku and all her babies.”

“Ha,” Clover scoffs, “don’t lie to her. We’re basically screwed. What’s the point in even trying?”

“There’s always a point in trying, my girl,” Kuia Jean says. “We must try and try again.”

“You need to have a goal, sis,” Farfalle adds. “So you always have a reason.”

Clover pretends not to hear. “What an epic fail of a species. Might as well just nope out now.”

The Mountain’s huff is strong enough to blow down a house made of sticks. I feel the boom before the air leaves her waha.

“**Tūwhitia te hopo**, **mairangatia te angitū**!” Whaea D’s reo sends goosebumps through the carpet. “Afraid of failing? So, what? Do it anyway! We don’t just ‘nope out’ in

this family, Clover Te Atairangikaahu Jones. You were named in honour of a queen and formidable leader. Remember, your teina looks up to you just like you look up to your tuakana."

Clover doesn't dare argue out loud, but I feel her eyes burn through Farfalle.

"Stop complaining." Whaea D jabs the air with her finger. "Get off your computer." Jab. "And do some-thing—" Jab. Jab. Jab-jab. "Then we can talk."

"Diggeress—"

"No, Mum, don't let her off the hook. You indulge this one too much. It didn't do her mother any good."

"It isn't this girl's job to carry the weight of the whole world on her shoulders. That is our mahi." Kuia Jean catches my eye. "We are the ones who must 'eliminate the negative', as you say. We are the ones who must 'accentuate the positive'. Now, haere mai ki te kai."

Ugh. Auntie said she'd be back before breakfast. It's now lunchtime.

Little~Fish~Gulps~for~Air

"Please pass the salt."

Clover picks up the shaker and dumps it in Farfalle's hand. Farfalle smiles as though her smile has the power to decontaminate the foul mood from the salt before she passes it to Whaea D. That reminds me, we haven't sanitised. I feel tiny feet run across my hands. I look to see if Kuia Jean remembers we forgot, but she looks peaceful. Eyes closed, chewing slowly.

"Is*there*any*sanitiser*?" I blurt.

The table seems surprised by my voice. Daphne stops swaying side to side and chirping like a dolphin. Whaea D swallows, shaking her head.

"Farfalle, explain why it's more effective to use soap and water," she says.

I listen to Farfalle. I listen so hard my whole body is a giant ear. But I don't hear any words. Just the sound of her voice like music.

***

"She's so patronising, eh?" Clover groans, spinning round in her computer chair to face me.

I look over her head to the certificates on her wall.

"Woah. Cool."

She follows my gaze. "Nah," she says as though she's fishing for something. "It's not like I'm *doing* anything."

Ugh. Talking to Whekī or Sicko is way easier. People expect real answers.

Where *is* Auntie? She was meant to be here three hours ago.

"You know, we could actually do something." Clover swirls back to her keyboard.

I run a fingertip along her duvet cover. It's probably my favourite scene from the movie we watched last night. The girl, Chihiro, is flying through the night sky on a white dragon. Suddenly, she realises the dragon is actually the river-spirit who saved her from drowning when she was little.

She tells him she knows who he is: "Your real name is, Kohaku River."

The dragon's eyes open wide. His scales clatter off, like white petals, sparkling into the night, leaving behind his human-self. The scene ends with the boy and girl holding hands floating down through the blue.

"We could be like that fulla."

My attention darts back to Clover's screen. There's a teenager with a cheesy smile. He's wearing a green tee-shirt that says, Kauri Ambassador. "What do you reckon?" she says. "Save ur dad. Gain some respect around here."

"Uhhh." An itch blossoms up the back of my neck, then creeps down my spine and jumps somewhere I can't scratch. It's probably the damsel being mischievous. "Maybe?"

I know Mama's answer. Being around a gazillion Potential Infectors is the LAST thing I should do right now.

***

Auntie's finally home and she says we have to talk :[

Little~Fish~ATT~((((((After~the~Talk))))))

I grab Apricot Beanie and hide under my galaxy bedspread.

Before the damsel was in distress, my favourite game was hide and seek. One day, instead of closing my eyes, I watched her try to find me. First, she pretended to look in all the super-obvious places. Behind the curtains. Under the dining-room table. In the shower. While she was looking in the hallway cupboard, behind the vacuum cleaner, I snuck outside and hid in the tentacles of my first best friend, Octo. After ages of not being found, I got bored and started making cow moos that echoed across the gully. Then, when nothing happened, I crept out of Octo's tentacle-branches, back to the house and peeped through the window. The damsel was lying on the kitchen floor. Not moving.

"Tani?"

The bed dips beside me. Auntie doesn't even care she's crushing Jupiter.

"I'm sorry, bub, I know that was really hard to hear."

Five-caterpillar, four-caterpillar, three-caterpillar, two-caterpillar, one-caterpillar BLAST OFF! Up, out of this room, this street, away from this soggy bog atmosphere, to where the words of aunties and doctors can't reach.

Jupiter's a gas giant, surrounded by three rings of dust and eighty moons. You can't land there, because there's nothing solid to hold onto, so you'd just float around in wisps of nothingness, maybe forever. Jupiter's named after the Roman king of gods, because it's the largest planet in our solar system and probably the oldest. Jupiter's core is hotter than the sun and it spins so fast it bulges out-out-out and the pressure's so intense, there's a chronic storm bigger than Earth that's been raging for hundreds of years. It's called the Giant Red Spot, but it actually looks more like a giant red swirl. And it feels just like my guts.

Auntie finally leaves me alone, but her words won't stop banging against the door in the dark place in my mind. So I shove them down-down-down, deep into the centre of the Milky Way where there's a supermassive black hole that's so dense NOTHING can escape:

((("It has spread")))

Kuia Jean's right. We must eliminate the negative (aka the Evils) as soon as possible.

Weet-bix scratches down my throat, making me cough so hard I nearly puke.

"Are you sure you want to go today?"

I avoid Auntie's eye, and nod like, duh.

"You know, we could watch a movie, then go to the hospital later?"

"Can't," I say. "I*gotta*talk*to*Clo."

Little~Fish~Jumps~off~the~Deep~End

"Eliminators, eh?" Clover swirls on her gamer chair.

I open my not-a-birthday-present diary. Its breath still stinks of hospital. A bit of half-digested weet-bix rises into my mouth.

"Yeah, cos we've got to eliminate *everything*that's*negative*," I say, swallowing hard. "Or it's literally the end of the world."

Clover rolls over to where I'm sitting on her bed and watches as I write, which makes my words come out extra wonky:

tHiNgs tO eliminate oFF thE fACE OF MOther eArth

"Omigod, gimme that." She snaps her fingers at me. "No offense, but I'm way faster. You say the words, boi, and I'll do the writing."

Clover's letters flow from the pen in thick tidy curves:

- **Plant Destructor Kauri Killer**

"What else?" she says, drawing a little skull and crossbones next to Mother Earth.

"Infectors."

Clover pauses, then writes "pollution".

"NO. Infectors are different."

"Soz about it," she says. "How am I meant to know your made-up words?"

"Infectors aren't *just* pollution," I clarify. "They're also Evils that invade, like viruses or bacteria."

"Or humans . . . Hey, can we eliminate specific people?" Clover's grin darkens as she brings the pen back to the paper: ***Farfall***—

"NO. Don't put names. Anyone could read it."

"Fine." Clover scribbles out 'Farfall', thinks for a second, then writes:

- **Sisters who patronise**
- **Sisters who know-it-all**
- **Sisters who get everything**
- **Sisters who talk trash**

"Aunties who talk trash."

Clover nods, biting her tongue to one side. "Okay, what else?"

"Bum-worms," I say, which makes her snort. "Mosquitoes. Migraines. Cancer."

"Yikes—" Clover pauses when she gets to the C "—shiz just got dark."

A sick thought twists through my intestines. I forgot to check on Mama this morning. And I didn't see her last night. Or all day yesterday. I spring up from Clover's bed, knocking over her pirate teddy.

"Be right back."

I charge down the Jones's hallway, my trackpants swish-swoshing together, creating awkward slippery heat between my thighs. What if something has happened to Mama? I push the thought into the black hole in the dark place in my mind, and duck through the hedge so fast I scratch both arms, causing dots of blood to swell. There's no sign of movement in her cage.

I peep through the little doorway of her sleeping-box. One pink foot is sticking out sideways from a pile of my old pyjamas. Pale and stiff.

"Mama?"

The foot yanks back under the pile. My heart thuds back into my chest. Ba-boom!

What's going on, Nay-Nay?

“Evils,” I say, lifting the lid, as hot-cold relief rushes down from my scalp. “It’s worse than we thought. Now, Pāpā’s in danger, too. But it’s okay, I’ve got a plan. And don’t worry, Clover’s going to help me.”

I like the taste of clover.

Mama burrows back under my old pjs. She knows how serious this is. Without Pāpā, I have no super-strength. Without super-strength, I lose my double immunity. And I need my double immunity to save the damsel in distress.

I move Mama’s hutch onto fresh grass and put dry hay and pellets in her sleeping box. When I return, Clover’s in the kitchen with The Mountain, chest puffed out, ready for battle.

“You’re the one who told us to do something,” she says.

“And how does Kora feel about this?”

“She’s all good, right?” Clover turns to me.

I nod. It’s not like Auntie’s *not* okay with the plan, she just doesn’t exactly know about it, yet.

***

“Tania-love.” Kuia Jean appears in Clover’s doorway. “Your auntie’s here.”

“Aw. Can she stay longer? We’re doing something.”

“Tania’s always welcome to stay.” There’s a heaviness in Kuia Jean’s voice that makes my guts sink. “We just need to have a little kōrero in the lounge.”

“Sweet.” Clover rises from her gamer chair.

“Taihoa ake. Not you, my girl.”

“O-kaaay.” Clover thumps back down.

The old kuia cups her hand between my shoulder blades. Heat radiates through her palm into my back, magicking my legs to bend and move me to where I don't want to go. I can already tell Auntie has turned the Jones's lounge into a soggy bog.

Sure enough, she's there with a ball of Pāpā's murdered relatives scrunched to her nose. She tries to smile at me, but it's more like a grimace.

I trudge through the bog to the two-seater opposite Auntie and The Mountain. Kuia Jean sits us down, anchoring my knee to the velvety-green cushion.

Whaea D holds my eye softly.

"Tania, do you understand your mother is dying?"

On Jupiter, everything is two and a half times heavier than on Earth. If you tried to land on her, first you'd fall through her unstable surface, then you'd burn as you floated towards her fiery core, and finally you'd be crushed by the intensity of all the pressure.

Whaea D's voice sounds far away, like her words have been swallowed along with all the oxygen in the room. Everything gets brighter. Suddenly, something snaps. Whaea D's voice slams back to full-volume. Everything turns white, then beige. The atmosphere gets heavier as a strange sensation crawls through my veins. Something's about to happen and I can't stop it.

Molten lava bursts from both my nostrils onto the Jones's cream carpet.

Auntie starts dabbing like my blood's the biggest Evil, while Kuia Jean presses a handkerchief to my nose.

"Hei aha, sweetheart," she says, putting Auntie's shoulder. "Don't worry about that old thing. You can't expect spotless carpet where free-range girls find their feet."

I feel Auntie's sob slug through my oesophagus. I swallow hard, digging my fingernails into the cushion's velvet, while the Mountain sinks to the floor and pulls the Auntie-Gollum into a mighty hug.

"Wait here, Tani-love."

Kuia Jean heaves herself off the two-seater and hobbles out of the room. When she's out of sight, I stay focused on the doorway, so I don't have to look at the wailing wāhine rocking at my feet. I hear what sounds like a cupboard opening. Then a clattering, then a pause, then a high-pitched *ting*. The sound reminds me of the damsel's Tibetan singing bowl. If you swirl the stick around the rim, it will sing the same note louder and louder until it buzzes through your teeth. The cupboard door clicks shut again. There's another pause, then water gushes against metal.

Kuia Jean reappears, carrying a flannel draped over the rim of a bowl. She sits and brings the damp flannel to my cheek, sending a chill all the way down to my toes. Suddenly, I'm small again and the damsel's smiling down at me, singing waiata as she cleans off my dirt. Giving my chin a wipe, Kuia Jean swishes the flannel and wrings it out. Pink spreads, then disappears into the water. My blood. Not Auntie's. Not the damsel's. Only mine. Kuia Jean folds the flannel and rests it over my eyes.

"We are here," she says, squeezing my hand. "You can talk. You can howl. You can be silent. Whatever you need."

I want to shrink small enough to fit through the flannel's cotton threads and escape undetected. Then, I want to crawl onto Mama's back and burrow deep into her fur. Suddenly, the darkness in front of me changes colour.

"Tania-love?" Kuia Jean peels the flannel. It stings as though she's taking off a layer of skin. "Do you want to get some air with Farfalle?"

I want to disappear into a black hole so Prettiest Girl never sees me like this. But I let her lead me into the kitchen, holding my hand as though I'm a little kid, even though I'm taller than her.

"Do you like bliss balls, Tuh-nae?"

Farfalle pulls an ice-cream container from the fridge and gives it a shake. A smile spreads across her face as the insides rattle. "I used the nicest dates ever. They're so gooey and golden, like caramelised sunshine."

I force the corners of my mouth upwards.

She plucks a nectarine from the fruit bowl, then leads me out onto the deck.

I thought I hated being in the lounge, but outside is even worse. The sky is too blue. The playground shrieks over the fence, while a gazillion cicadas buckle their ribs, and a lawnmower rages down the cul-de-sac. But even all that doesn't drown out Auntie. I wish she'd just bug off.

Prettiest Girl lowers to cross-legs and pats the grass beside her. I'm worried she'll try to talk about the damsel, but she just puts her arm around my back, while the well of sadness bubbles below our bums.

The well of sadness goes so deep, every sad feeling that's ever been felt since the beginning of time is there, waiting to escape. The damsel said our hearts are like lids and if we open them too far, we can feel all of the sadness in the world.

Farfalle pries open the ice-cream container. A chocolatey scent wafts out and makes me want to puke.

"Would you like to try my creation?"

I take a sticky-brown sphere, even though my stomach isn't human anymore. It's just a pit of sludge.

Sometimes during an earthquake you get liquefaction. That's water filled with mud and stones and maybe poo. It spews up through the cracks in the ground and smothers everything in its path.

The richness of the bliss ball sends shivers through the insides of my cheeks. If Auntie hadn't turned the Jones's lounge (and my guts) into a soggy bog, I wouldn't have to pretend to like it.

"Wait—while the taste is still in your mouth, take a bite of this." Farfalle holds out the nectarine.

I bite it because she told me to. Because I'm just a robot, now.

"I lurve how the fruitiness hits the chocolatiness," she says, taking a bite from the nectarine next to mine, like she doesn't even care if I'm a Carrier. "It's like a sunset for the tastebuds."

"U tryna steal my friend, al?" Clover jumps from the deck and swipes a hand full of bliss balls. "Jokes. What's up with your auntie? Did she say you can volunteer?"

I shrug, then look down at the ants zig-zagging through their grass jungle. If I could, I'd swap places with them.

Farfalle retrieves a bliss ball from Clover's stash. "You guys are volunteering?"

"Not that it's any of your beeswax," Clover says, "but we're gonna save Tāne Mahuta and be heroes. Anyways, T, I just got a reply from someone called Karen the Kauri Queen. So we'd better sweet-talk ur auntie."

"But not right now, eh, sis?"

"Why are you speaking for her?"

"Shh. I'll tell you later."

"Whatever, don't shush me."

I don’t mind Farfalle talking for me. She can be my voice forever. I’m just a robot, now.

January 1998

Mary K. Weaver (Age 12)

I like headaches because when they stop I feel better than ever.
Tummy bugs are the same. When they end, eating is the best thing in the world because everything tastes amazing
I even like starting again. Just getting up and going out of the house is an adventure!

But I also hate everything about this

They put her bed in the living room. But it's not a normal bed. This one has remote controls, and goes up and down. And they put all this stuff around the house to make things easier for someone who doesn't have much energy. They talked about this thing called "palliative care". I didn't listen, but it's a word that clonks around in my brain like a piece of lego that hurts when I accidently step on it. It basically means everyone has given up, except me.

"You know, you can change your mind, Clover will understand."

"You said I could go." I zip my not-a-birthday-present diary into my backpack pocket.

"And I'm not saying you can't. I just thought you might want to come with me to pick up—"

"They're waiting." I charge out of the room before Auntie can change her mind.

I really hope the Joneses don't make things weird.

***

"Kuia Jean told me about your mum," Clover says as soon as she opens the door. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna bug you, I just wanted to say it's pretty boss still showing up for this."

I shrug.

"Nah, seriously."

"They're wrong."

"Huh?"

"The doctors."

Clover gives me a look as Whaea D appears.

“Oh. Hi, Tania.” The well of sadness flashes behind The Mountain’s eyes, but I don’t let it burn through my metal. “I was just suggesting to Clover that you two might like to download a podcast for the trip.”

“Nah,” Clover says through a yawn. “You pick what you want, Whaea. We’ll entertain ourselves, eh, boi?”

I nod.

“Suit yourselves.” Whaea D lifts a long black puffer jacket from a hook beside the yellow door. As we walk to her car, she pats my shoulder. “Let me know if you need anything today, Tania.”

All I need is to focus on my mission and keep robot-mode fully activated.

***

“Sa-weet, that’s two waves from one car,” Clover says. “That counts as double points.” She pencils two ticks on the back of an old Pak’n’Save receipt. “Sheesh. Better pick up your game, Tāne’s Daughter. I’m wasting you.”

Clover waves hard-out at the silver van we’re overtaking. One by one, the ladies in the back return her wave. The driver even taps the horn.

“Ye-ah!” Clover does a victory dance, stirring the air with a large imaginary spoon. “By the way, honks are five points.”

Whaea D makes a disapproving grunt.

“What?”

“Is Tania happy playing this game?”

“She’s fine.”

“Got one,” I say, robotically before they can get into a scrap.

“Shot, boi. I’ll give you a bonus point, because I’m feeling generous.”

I give her a flat-line smile.

"Hey, question—" Clover scrunches up the receipt and throws it at the back of Whaea D's seat "—have you ever gone to school?"

"Nah."

"Like, never ever? *Ever*-ever?" She lets out a *wooosh*. "I'd be bored as fark staying home all the time with just my family. No offense, Whaea."

She's not at home with just her family, now, but I don't bother arguing. School kids say a lot about things they don't know.

"You should come to my school, oi," Clover says for the gazillionth time. "I'll show you drama, for realz. Those bees won't know what to do with you and your little-kid games. They'll definitely try to bully you. Especially after you say your name, or show up dressed like that, but I'll be your bodyguard."

Not sure why I'd want to go somewhere I need a bodyguard.

Clover tells me about her frenemies. What music they like. What snacks they call *bomb*. Their crushes. The fights they try to pick.

"It's just the circle of life," she says with a sigh. "I hate them for being posers. They hate me for being plastic."

"Excuse me?" Whaea D turns down her podcast. "Who's calling you plastic?"

"Ahhh, nobody. . . They mean fake," she says, smirking at my confusion. "Like, not a *real* Māori."

"There's no such thing," Whaea D barks. "You introduce me to these girls and we'll have a talk."

"Yeah, right. I don't even care. Like I said before—posers."

“Cutting people down by telling them who they are not is a terrible way to build up your identity.”

“Okay, I get it. Sheesh. I apologised already.”

“And to whom would *you* need to apologise for this behaviour?” Whaea D sounds tired and disappointed rolled into one. “Clover?”

“The Pākehā in the car, of course.” Clover limp-elbows me. “Nah. Jokes.”

“Just say the word, Tania, and that one can walk the rest of the way.” The Mountain sounds like she’s only half-joking.

The further we get from the city, the easier it is to breathe. It’s like a different country up here. The world outside rushes past my window in a blur. After a while, my neck gets a crick from looking sideways. I rest back and close my lids to a squint, until I’m blocking out Clover and kind of blurring Whaea D, so I can pretend it’s actually the damsel driving us Home.

When we’re surrounded by Pāpā’s close-relatives, Whaea D lets us put the windows down. For a moment, my lungs breathe like a human.

The air’s colder than city-air. It tastes softer and sweeter. I open my mouth and let it rush in like a liquid, as the road climbs and twists. For a while, I feel full and peaceful. Then I remember what we’re here to do, and all my peace gets sucked up by my Giant Red Swirl.

“Check out Karen the Kauri Queen,” Clover says as we pull into the carpark, nodding towards a lady with green hair.

“How do you *know*that’s*her*?”

“Cos, I stalked her on socials like a normal person.”

Whaea D eyes Clover. “Remember your manners, today.”

“Obviously.”

“That which is obvious to me, Clover Jones, is liable to escape your awareness. Even when it jumps out and bites you on the bum.”

“What are you talking about? The wāhine love me.”

“If you say so.” Whaea D’s eyes settle on me. “How are you doing, Tania?”

“Okay,” I say while my insides loop-de-loop. I hate hellos even more than I hate goodbyes. Mama warned me there’d be lots of strangers to deal with on this mission. But what choice did I have?

My robot-brain zones in-and-out through the introductions.

I try to focus on what the Kauri Queen’s saying, but my mind keeps drifting back to my own thoughts. First rule of being an Eliminator: anyone could be a Carrier. Second rule of being an Eliminator: watch for Potential Infectors. And third rule of being an Eliminator: eliminate the negative (obviously).

The cleaning station should help with that. There are built-in bristles on the entry, and brushes attached to ropes on the side, with squirter bottles.

“Just remember, girls,” Karen says, giving us a rosy-cheeked smile “—con-*ver*-*sa*-tion is where con-*ser*-*va*-tion begins.”

A bit of sick rises. I force it back down. Robots don’t puke.

“Mmm.” Whaea D nods like she’s about to launch into a lecture. “Yes, that reminds me—”

My attention wanders across the carpark to the leafy giants cloaked in kākāriki.

Tāne’s Daughter? A pair of silver ferns speak with one voice. *Our cuz told us about you!*

“Whekī?”

The twins nod, first one, then the other.

They're kind of like him, but way taller and lankier. They remind me of Tiki and Aaron, the guys who sometimes lived with us at Home when they weren't milking cows or pruning orchards or on their mission to clean up the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. A tui swoops and lands with a garble-bell-squark. The white poi at his throat quivers as he lets loose, feathers puffed up ten times his size. Clover hooks my elbow and pulls me sideways.

"She's keen, eh?" Clover nods towards the Kauri Queen. "Did you bring it, oi?"

"Huh?" My robot-brain fails to process the question. It's too busy focusing on the teen with purple hair who just emerged from a parked car.

"Your diary-thing."

"Uh—" the purple-haired teen yanks their jeans up over their boxers and swaggers towards Karen and Whaea D "—it's in my backpack."

"Girls," Whaea D semi-booms, "are you here or not?"

Clover gives me a wide-eye, then strides us back towards the wāhine as the teen drops a clunky ring of keys into the Kauri Queen's hand.

"Thanks, beautiful," she says. They both have the same baby-face and freckles. "Girls, this is Kaihautu. Kai helps their māmā every weekend, when they're not too busy being an artist."

"Ki'ora," the teen says, giving us an upward nod.

"Tania, I was just telling Diggeress, we have another young homeschooler on our team. Aisling spends a lot of time in hospital, too, so I'm sure you'll have lots to talk about. Anyway, she's such a bright spark, I'm sure you'll all get on like a house on fire."

My robot-tongue turns to ash.

“Sounds hot,” Clover says, mimicking Karen’s keen tone. Whaea D gives her the eye. Luckily, the Kauri Queen’s focus has already switched to the black SUV pulling into the carpark.

“Ready to give it a go, girls?” she says. “Kai will take the lead, for now.”

“Yep, all good.” The teen flips their flap of purple hair back over their undercut, gesturing for us to follow.

The black SUV’s paint glimmers like it’s just been attacked by Auntie’s spray and wipe. Except, I know the truth—it’s spewing invisible Evils from its tailpipe. My old babysitter June once showed me a newspaper from 1894 that predicted that within fifty years all the roads in London would be buried under nine feet of horse poo. But then cars happened and solved the horse-problem. I wonder what solution will solve the car-problem? June says electric cars haven’t. They’re too dear for most people, and their batteries are terrible for Papatūānuku.

“Sweet as.” Kai turns to us. I didn’t hear what they just said, because my thoughts were buried under nine feet of hamuti hōiho. “So, we’re just raising awareness to help protect our ancient kauri—Tāne Mahuta, and Te Matua Ngahere, for example—from the dieback.”

I watch Kai’s lips move as they explain what’s happening down in the Waitākeres where over half the kauri population are infected, including one-thousand-year-old Aunt Agatha.

“World famous in Aotearoa,” Kai says with a wink. “Her people put a rāhui on the track after she first started showing signs of illness, but it was too late for her, unfortunately. She could’ve lived another thousand years.”

Kai doesn't say it exactly, but I can tell they think one of her visitors was responsible. They probably didn't even know they were a Carrier.

I've been doing my own research on Plant Destructor Kauri Killer. According to Wikipedia and the Tāmaki Makaurau council website, it's a type of water mould that can swim for ten hours. But the spores aren't great with direction, so they can't get very far by themselves. They can't travel through the air either, so the only way they can spread is if they're carried on the bottoms of shoes or feet or hooves or packs or vehicles or anything that tramples dirt from one part of the bush to another.

But once they reach a kauri's roots, they'll spore and steal the tree's nutrients, causing their base to rot and their trunk to bleed resin. The leaves at the top of the crown will turn white then fall off as it slowly starves to death, while their bark peels away like flesh exposing pale bone.

"Sorry if I said this already," Kai says, "but yeah, seventy percent of dieback occurs within fifty mitres of walking tracks, and all it takes is one pinhead of infected soil, so always make sure you clean your boots, eh?"

The couple are super-nice about it.

"Keep up the good work, guys," the lady says, as they head towards the cleaning station.

"Keep to the tracks," Clover echoes, her voice fading to chill.

"Well done, girls," Karen says, as if we actually helped. "You're officially part of the team."

She doesn't know we've already got our own team: Tāne's Righteous Eliminators of Evils. Or TREEs for short.

"Chur." Clover holds out her fist to Kai. "You were ace."

“Nah, all good.” Kai fist-bumps Clover then folds their arms over their chest. “It’s sweet having new volunteers.”

“That reminds me,” Karen says, “I have forms for your guardians.”

The word “guardian” pings the metal surrounding my robot heart.

“Shall I look after that for you, Tania?” Whaea D waits for my robotic nod.

“Great,” Karen says, “I’ll grab them now.”

As the others follow Karen, Clover spins me round, nearly knocking me off balance.

“Hey,” I say as she roots around my backpack. “It’s not even *there*.”

“My bad. Where is it?”

“Outside pocket.”

Clover licks her lips as she searches for our list of things we’d eliminate off the face of Mother Earth.

I watch her find the word Whekī dared me to add last night:

Pubes

“Ah, geez. Imagine if we banished the world’s pubes into outer space. We’d have one hairy-arse-moon!”

“Oi, giggling-gerties.” Whaea D holds out a container of sandwiches. “Time to refuel.”

“Chur.” Clover takes two. I copy, even though my stomach hasn’t been human since Auntie turned the Jones’s lounge into a soggy bog.

“Here they are,” Karen says as a white van pulls up and the driver lowers her tinted window. “Morena, Claire.” Karen waves her sandwich at the driver. “Before you stop, the

loos are out of order, so if anyone needs to go, you'd better pop straight to the visitor centre."

"Hear that, girls?" The driver says over her shoulder. "Speak now or forever hold your pee."

Claire winks at me, then steps down, and gives the sliding-door a pull. Sitting right inside is the whitest girl I've ever seen. Beside her is one of the darkest. The girl with dark-brown skin is wearing a bright pink hijab. The lady in the back looks a bit like my old babysitter June, with her olive skin, short grey hair and moss-green eyes.

"Diggeress, Claire. Claire, Diggeress," Karen says. "Clover is the young lady I was telling you about. And Tania has a very special connection with our lord of the forest."

I shrink into my robot shell. What did Clover say, exactly?

"Tania is also homeschooled," The Kauri Queen adds as though that's a bonus.

"Fabulous," Claire says. "Aarshling's mad about trees, too. Aren't you, pet?"

The pale girl stares at me through her thick glasses, mouth gaping.

"I'm totally mad about trees, but that's probably obvious," the girl in the pink hijab says, running her hands over her Kauri Ambassador tee. "To be honest, I practically LIVED in one, back in England. My tree-hut, I mean. Well, my grandfather actually built it for my brother, but I totally usurped him. I literally didn't talk to my parents for a week after they told me we were moving. I cried all the way to the airport. Anyway. Sorry, I'll shut up now."

The lady in the back pats the fast-talking girl's shoulder. "We're lucky to have you here, Zuri."

"And so we are," Claire says, waving Aisling out of her trance. "Come on, sweets, let Prue and Zuri out. Then we'll have the birthday cake. Ladies, would you believe I am now the mother to an eleven-year-old?"

Eleven? My robot-brain calculated seven. Nine, at most. Aisling's Kauri Ambassador tee looks like a dress over her red tights.

"Aw, happy birthday, chickee," Karen says, pulling the small-for-her-age girl into a side-hug as she steps down from the van, knees buckling. "How does it feel being eleven?"

"Traumatic," Aisling huffs as Claire slaps a large sunhat on her head. "All morning I've been getting flashbacks to the birth canal."

Clover chokes on her sandwich. Whaea D shares an amused look with the Kauri Queen.

"Aisling has been instructing us on—what was it, dear? Midwifery?" Prue says.

"Gy-nae-col-o-gy," Aisling corrects. "But I have watched at least one birth on YouTube."

Claire smears another blob of sunblock on Aisling's face. "Right, who wants cake? It's dairy-free, gluten-free, no animals were harmed in the makin' . . ."

Everyone wants cake. I want to save mine for Farfalle. She'd like the chocolate-avocado icing, but I can't let Clover see, because then she'll ask why. And it's impossible to sneak anything with Aisling gawking at me. My insides gurgle. Ugh. The damsel has escaped from my liver, and she keeps sliding down my intestines and stomping her big feet into the weet-bix I had to eat before Auntie would let me leave.

I try to catch Clover's eye, but she's too busy talking to Zuri about gaming or something. It makes me feel nauseous watching them, because when Zuri talks, her hands swirl enough to start a cyclone. Worst of all, every time she laughs she touches Clover's arm. And she laughs A LOT.

The rumble inside my belly drops deeper.

I accidentally lock eyes with Aisling. The feeling of needing-to-go twists across my face before I can stop it. The strange girl nods as though she understands, then tugs on her mother's sleeve, interrupting to whisper something into her ear.

"Right," Claire says. **"**If anyone needs the toilet, the van'll be leavin' in t'ree minutes."

***

"Want to know how I read your mind?" Aisling brushes a white ringlet from her eye. "I was born backwards," she says as though that explains everything. "Are you gifted, Tan-ya?"

The shrunken damsel squirms under my seatbelt.

"We're all gifted in our own ways, pet." Claire smiles at me in the rearview mirror.

"But is she *pre-co-cious*?"

"Does that matter? Everyone has their own way of being, and that's grand."

"Too right," Prue agrees with Claire from the back seat. "This world takes all sorts, dear."

"But I just—"

"Just take it easy, pet. Why don't you tell Tania something about yourself?"

"Okay. Well I shall start with my birth story."

"Goodness." Prue chuckles. She's the only one who put her hand up to come. I thought Clover would, because we're meant to be on the same team, but she seems to have forgotten she's an Eliminator.

"Arshee has a talent for tales," Claire says.

"Mu-um!" The strange girl thrusts her jaw out and bites her top lip with her bottom teeth like a dinosaur.

"Sorry. I forgot mothers turn embarrassing the day you turn eleven."

"MUUM."

"I'd love to hear your story, dear," Prue says, patting Aisling's shoulder. "I'm all ears."

My robot-brain generates an image of Prue covered from head to toe in ears.

Aisling adjusts her glasses and focuses on me, as though I'm the one who wants to hear.

"Eleven years, one hour and approximately fifty-three minutes ago, Dad took Mum to the Waikato Hospital. But the midwife said I was playing tricks. Braxton Hicks, to be exact. While they were getting fresh air by the lake, Mum saw a person-like creature pop up between the waterlilies with the most beautiful and terrifying face she had ever seen. Silver hair. Silver eyes."

"Wow-wee!" Prue gasps.

"Mum feared the creature was from the stories her mam's mam used to tell her about the—" Aisling lowers her voice to a grave whisper "—*Ehhshh-Shhee*. For your information, don't let the Aos Sí hear you say their name. They might kill you. Anyway, Mum wondered how they got all the way from the fairy forts in Ireland to a random lake in the Land of the Long White Cloud. So maybe they were actually Patupaiarehe? But the creature just laughed, and Mum said the sound 'shimmered through her nerves like arpeggios on a harp'."

Aisling opens her mouth and lets out a high-pitched note, moving it up in equal steps, then down again.

"It actually sounded quite different to that, but Mum said the sound tasted like rain on water. That's called—what is it, again?"

"Synaesthesia?" Prue suggests.

“Yes. Do you know what that means, Tan-ya? It means you can hear visions or taste sounds, or whatever senses get mixed up. Anyway, Mum got the shivers, so she waddled back to the hospital, as fast as her swollen legs would carry her.”

“Thanks for all the flatterin’ details, pet.”

“You’re welcome.” Aisling snatches a breath. “Dad thought Mum was delirious when she talked about the good folk. But guess what? I was born feet first, with white eyes and white hair!”

“Spectacular,” Prue says, clapping twice. “Well done, mother.”

“But that’s not all,” Aisling says. “Have you heard of the To-a-ha Day Dan-an?” She looks from Prue’s shaking head to my robot face. “Well, the Tuatha Dé Dannann are the ancestors of the Aos Sí. They were brilliantly creative and artistic and poetical and musical and magical. So, if you’re like me, you’d think it sounds like heaven to be them. But, I’m sorry to tell you, the Shining Ones lost their homes and their land, until the goddess Danu led them back to Ireland through a protective mist. So anyway, that’s how I got my middle name, Danu.”

“Fancy that,” Prue says.

“And Aisling means ‘dream’.” Aisling brushes her hair behind her ear and stares off into space.

At the Visitor’s Centre, the strange girl’s eerie singing drifts over her toilet stall into mine, sending goosebumps down my arms. I imagine her in a fluttering white dress, leading the Shining Ones through the mist.

“You okay, sweets?”

“YES,” Aisling humphs. Next second, her door whinges open and slams shut. “Do you want us to wait for you, Tan-ya?”

"Nah, I'm okay," I say, holding my breath, waiting for them to go, so I can *go*.

If I could, I'd sanitise every part of me.

When I slink back to the bus, they're still having the same conversation.

"I helped my mother deliver all my siblings," Prue says, giving me a smile as I step back in.

"Did you see blood?"

"Oh, you see all sorts, dear," Prue says with a sigh. "That's life."

"I was born in this forest," I blurt.

Aisling jerks around to face me. "Really?"

"Now, that's a story." Claire winks at Prue.

"Was your mother lost? Did she have an accident? Were you premature?"

"Poor Tania," Claire says. "Give her a chance, pet."

"She wanted to visit my dad," I say, shaking my head. "I came out super-fast. And there was no-one to help, except him. Which was hard because he can't do all the things people normally do. He doesn't have arms or legs."

Aisling leans in closer.

"But it was okay," I say, inching back, "because his energy wrapped around her like arms. And she wasn't afraid. That's why she named me after him."

"Your dad's name is Tan-ya?"

I shake my head. "Tāne Mahuta."

Aisling grips my arm with both hands, and her chocolate-cake-breath hits my nostrils.

"This is AMAZING. Now I can tell you my secret, because if he's your dad, then you can't laugh."

“Shh,” Claire says through a grin, as she turns us back into the carpark, where the others are still standing around talking.

“But I just think she shouldn’t laugh, because she should understand.”

“I won’t,” I say.

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

Ugh.

“Hang on, girls. Let Prue out,” Claire says. “Leave now, or good luck to you.”

I actually don’t want to be trapped here, either.

Prue scuffles the top of Aisling’s head on her way out. Aisling humphs and blows white frizz out of her face.

“So, your father’s the god of the forest?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, guess what—”

“You’re related to a tree?”

“Actually, I’m *betrothed* to one. Do you know what ‘betrothed’ means, Tan-ya?”

Clover shrugs at me from across the carpark, even though she was the one who ditched. Eliminator? More like traitor.

“Well, do you?” Aisling re-tucks a ringlet behind her ear.

“Dunno,” I say. Even from here, it’s obvious Zuri’s talking faster than the speed of sound. “Maybe.”

“It means one day I shall marry him.”

“Oh. Ha.” Gross. I’m starting to think Zuri might be an Evil in disguise. Especially when she touches Clover’s arm for the gazillionth time.

“Would you pass me that book, please.” Aisling points to the spine poking up from behind the driver’s seat. “And that magnifying glass.”

Aisling heaves the book open and skims through the pages, chunks at a time.

Clover high-fives her new best friend and starts striding across the carpark.

“Okay.” Aisling brushes her face again. It makes me itch watching her do that all the time. “This is what it says: ‘*From the darkened soil there grew a tree*’,” she reads through the magnifying glass, tracing the words with her fingertip. “‘*Danu nurtured the sacred Oak named Bilé. Of the*’ . . . uhh . . . ‘con-ju-ga-tion’? I don’t know what that word means. Anyway, ‘*Of the conjugation of Danu and Bilé, there dropped two giant acorns. The first acorn was male. From it sprang Dagda . . . The second seed was female. From it there emerged Brigid—*’”

“Geeze, what on earth are you reading?” Clover hoists herself up through the van door.

“*The Mammoth Book of Celtic Myths and Legends*,” Aisling says. “Do you know what ‘con-ju-gate’ means?”

“Huh?”

“‘*Of the conjugation of Danu and Bilé—*”

“Lemme see that.” Clover splays the book over one arm and peers down her nose. For a second, she looks just like Whaea D. “Uhh, it means ‘doing it’ and making babies.”

“Oh,” Aisling says as my intestines turn into eels. “That makes sense. Because it says Bridget and Dagda then populated the entire earth.”

Clover snorts. “About as much sense as Tāne’s Guinea-pig-mother *conjugating* with her kauri-tree-father. According to biology, she should be insanely tall and covered in furry bark.”

"It's not *that* weird," Aisling says. "Well, no weirder than a whole universe coming from a Big Bang. Anyway, what's your creation story?"

"Oh, you think cos I'm Māori I don't believe in science?"

"You can believe in science and still have a creation story, actually," Aisling says, tilting her head back to look at Clover.

"What—so you think the entire human race started from two acorns?" Clover blows air through her teeth and shakes her head. "Ask yourself, why is the man always first?"

Aisling opens her mouth to answer, but Clover cuts her off: "Cos they made up the story. That's why. Men made it up cos they think they're the boss."

"But I think the acorns are just easier to imagine than cells or elements. And anyway, it's always the mothers who create the rest of life. Like Papatūānuku. She's the entire earth. And, actually, my cousin said the most powerful force in the whole Māori universe is actually female. She said the missionaries wanted every story to sound like their stories, so they made it all He-Him-His, you know? And she said your ancestors *were* scientists. They even had protocols for hygiene, while my Dad's ancestors were still throwing poop on the street and catching babies straight after slicing up corpses."

"Ha. Sounds like you're an expert already, so why bother asking me?"

Clover jumps down from the van.

"Bye, Tāne's Daughter, I'm gonna go help save your 'dad', in case you'd forgotten that's what we're meant to be doing."

"That was weird," Aisling says as Clover strides away.

This whole day has been weird. I wish I could just slam it closed like her book of myths.

“Alright, pet?”

“Yeah,” Aisling humphs from behind.

I feel stink for striding ahead with a grump in my step, but the van turned super-dank all of a sudden. And Aisling was talking right into my face, acting like we’re best friends. Clover’s acting like she isn’t even my friend anymore.

Karen says conservation is about conversation, but I don’t think the teen in the munted red car is actually listening to her.

Claire lays a hand on Aisling’s forehead. My own forehead tingles with the cool-softness.

If I fail my mission, I’ll never feel the damsel do that again. I clamp down on the forbidden thought as the teen from the munted red car struts through the cleaning station without even bothering to wipe his boots.

Time slows, then speeds up. “STOP!” My robot legs march me across the carpark. “MURDERER!”

I kick off my shrunken shoes and charge through the cleaning station in my socks.

The teen halts abruptly, and my robot chest slams straight into his back. My robot-brain stalls then restarts. When I open my eyes, I’m on my butt, with my arms and legs wrapped around the Potential Infector’s hairy shins.

“What the fuck?” He tries to move and nearly falls backwards over my head. “Get off me, you psycho.”

I get the urge to pluck the weed off the face of Mother Earth, but Claire and Whaea D pry me off before my super-strength can fully charge.

“Geeze, T. Didn’t know you had it in you. That was hardcore.”

“Totally.” Zuri puts a hand on my knee, then jolts it away again, as though my cringe is electric. “You were bloody brilliant.”

“I reckon.” Clover gives me a smirk. “You showed that poti boy.”

“Potty boy?” Zuri giggles.

“It’s, uh—” Clover glances at me “—code for Potential Infector, which is—”

“Someone who’s potentially infectious?”

“Yeh.” Clover nods at Zuri. “But it’s more for the annoying ones. Or ‘weeds’, as we call them. So, anyways, T, what was going through your head when you latched onto poti boy? You legit looked like you were going to eliminate him for real.”

The girls are stoked, but the mums and aunties, not so much. It’s obvious they’re talking about me. I force my attention back into the ambassador bus where six eyes are watching and waiting.

“Excuse me—” Aisling slaps her hand over her heart “—can I just say, don’t listen to the obnoxious weed, Tan-ya. You’re a hero, not a psycho.”

The word “psycho” hovers through the ambassador bus, creating a weird kind of pressure that creeps up my face and pulls at the corners of my mouth. I look at Clover. She flares her nostrils. Air escapes my lungs in a burst. Clover snorts at my hiss, which cracks me up, which sets Zuri off.

Aisling stares at us like she has no idea what’s so funny, but decides to join in anyway. Her high-pitched cackle makes Zuri laugh so hard she honks until nothing comes out except air.

“Stop!” Zuri gasps. “I just peed a bit.”

There’s a tap-tap-tap on the side of the van. Kai pops their head in.

“Sorry to interrupt the party, just wanted to say, right on.” They reach past Clover and Zuri and give me a sliding hand-shake. “If the aunties give you a hard time, just remember, you were fighting the good fight, e hoa. Be proud.”

“Aw.” Clover gives Kai a fist-bump. “You should join our club, oi.”

“True.” Kai folds their arms in front of their chest. “What’s your club?”

“Tāne’s Righteous Eliminators of Evils?” Clover says as though she’s embarrassed by the words.

“Oh, can I join?” Cyclone Zuri grabs Clover’s arm. “I don’t know what you do, but it sounds mad wicked.”

Lava burns through my cheeks, my pulse thumps in my ears.

“Uh—” Clover checks my melting robot-face. “There’s nothing really happening, yet. But gimme your socials anyways, and I’ll let you know when the activism begins, I guess.”

“I’d be keen. When I’m not tied up with mahi.” Kai scratches their head and refolds their arms. “And my girlfriend would be into it.”

“Can you add me, too?” Aisling bounces up and down on the seat, causing dust to rise.

“Suuure.” Clover drags the word out as far as it will go. “It’s basically the more the merrier, amirite, Tāne’s Daughter?”

Little~Fish~Faces~The~Mountain

"I understand why you did what you did."

Whaea D gazes off into the sideways distance. The number twos that refused to come out at the visitor centre slither backwards. They nearly jumped out when she banished the others and I thought I was going to get a telling off. But this doesn't feel like a telling off.

"When my grandmother died, I behaved in ways I came to regret."

The number twos retreat even further.

"Do you know what grief is, Tania?"

Ugh. The telling-off would've been better than this.

Whaea D waits as though she can comfortably wait all day, so I give her a shrug. My eyes dart to Whekī's twin cousins who are sticking out like sore thumbs above the canopy.

"People usually think of sadness, but grief often brings anger, too. Or the desire to push difficult feelings away."

I accidentally make eye-contact with The Mountain. Her words come out stronger than Auntie's. Auntie's always tiptoe around with too many spaces and question marks.

"It's a maemae like no other. I begged the universe to give Gran back and take someone else."

I'd swap anyone for the damsel.

"If all this is too much right now, that's okay. Tāne can wait."

Whaea D's wrong. I don't regret what I did to the poti boy and Pāpā *can't* wait. Waiting is why we're in this mess.

“One more thing, Tania,” Whaea D says, pausing until my eyes find hers again. “I am here if you ever need another adult to talk to.”

My heart has turned into worms. They don’t want to talk. They just want to escape. But there’s no exit.

I stare up at Pāpā.

"Sorry for what's happening because of us," I say, feeling into his atmosphere for sadness or anger towards us humans, but I can't sense any.

Pāpā doesn't even react when I tell him about Poti Boy. Maybe feelings are different when you've had your roots underground for two-thousand years.

I wonder if Pāpā remembers watching me run up and down the boardwalk in my light-up sneakers with the damsel and—

Lava rises to my cheeks. The damsel and . . .

My robot-brain zooms in on this particular memory file, on the face of the other person I can only half-see who's wearing an apricot beanie like mine, except bigger.

***

On the way, Clover wouldn't stop talking. Now she's disappeared into her phone where I can't follow. I don't want Whaea D to think I feel left out, so I just close my eyes and focus on the swish of the tyres while fish and chips gurgle in my robot-guts. I wish I could just disappear through a wormhole and reappear under my galaxy bedspread.

***

A flash lights up through my eyelids. It takes me a moment to realise we're back in Auntie's driveway.

Clover lifts her head from my shoulder.

"Sorry." Whaea D lowers her phone. "I couldn't resist."

Clover yawns. "How long was I asleep? Far. Was I drooling? Boi, you'd better burn that polar fleece."

Ha. But seriously, ugh. The sensor light switches off, then on again. Auntie appears, hugging herself in a long black cardigan, looking like a kid who has been waiting for her friends to arrive, and now that they're here, isn't sure what to do with them.

"Kora, you just missed these two all cosied up. I'll send you the pic."

"Aww. Yes, please. So, how was the volunteering?"

"It was sweet as," Clover says with another yawn. "You shoulda seen your niece—"

"Indeed," Whaea D cuts her off, "Tania went above and beyond the call of duty, today."

"Look at you," Auntie says. "You should go tell your mother. Mary's dying to hear all about it."

Little~Fish~Big~Conundrum

"What should I do?" I half-whisper, trying to ignore the slosh of Auntie helping the damsel shower through the wall. "We can't go to Waipoua every day. That would burn a tonne of fossil fuel."

You're right, e hoa. Whekī's silhouette nods through the gap in my curtains. *You've got to find those naughties in their cribs and lambast them! Heh heh, nah. Actually, you've got to fill their baskets of knowledge cos—not gonna lie—ignorance is one of the deadliest Evils.*

Ignorant means lacking knowledge. Lacking knowledge means not knowing something. Like, not knowing who the person in the big apricot beanie was.

I yank my galaxy bedspread all the way up to my chin. My robot-brain spins, getting nowhere, until my thoughts sneak out over the lawn, past chirping crickets and up Sicko's helicopter branches. A dog barks. The sound seems to shrink as it moves through the darkness. A yappier dog answers from some corner of the neighbourhood. One time, at Home, I was out collecting the green heart-shaped leaves called kawakawa, when I heard an abandoned baby in the gully. I searched between all the tree roots arching like doorways, and through the undergrowth all the way down to the Eel Pond, but found nothing. The damsel said it was probably just a cockatoo flown over from Australia.

At Home, the neighbours are so far away, you can talk as loud as you like and no-one listens. Here, the houses are so close together, you can hear what people are arguing about, and smell what they're having for dinner. A train rumbles behind my thoughts, then Mama's voice dings like the sirens at the crossing:

Nay-Nay, you should listen to the hairy fern. Find your neighbours where they are, even if you have to knock on every door in the city!

“That’s A LOT of doors.” Clover scratches her dimple. “Seriously, T. Way too much for just us.” She’s right. But it still feels stink to hear. “And anyway, don’t you want to, like, hang out with your mum?”

I glance outside just as a bird flits in through the window, tail-feathers fanned.

Cheet-cheet-cheet-cheet—up into one corner of Clover’s room—*cheet-cheet-cheet-cheet*—then another—*cheet-cheet-cheet-cheet*.

I may not be Māori, but I know what that means.

“Tell the others they can be Eliminators,” I say.

I’ll do whatever it takes to save the damsel.

Little~Fish~To~TREEs~Or~Not~To~TREEs

The damsel's eyes sogged-up when I showed her my last baby-tooth this morning, and now she's stuck in the meaty gap inside my gum. The noise in the Jones's lounge is next level. Clover's up full-bore and the only thing more apocalyptic than Zuri's laughter is her hurricane hands. The mums and aunties aren't any better. Their conversation keeps erupting from the kitchen. At least Daphne has latched onto Aisling instead of me. I try to think of somewhere else to put the shrunken damsel. I would've just left her at Auntie's, but she was super-disappointed she couldn't come to the meeting, and I was worried she was going to ask me to bring her through video-chat or something.

Kai gives me a nod from across the lounge. Their girlfriend has been talking to Prettiest Girl for over twenty minutes.

This isn't how Eliminators are meant to act, but my robot-brain can't figure out how to get everyone on track. If I was Mama, I'd give them all a nip on the wrist.

The feeling of wanting to say something sends a wave of heat up my body. But the words dig their heels into my throat and refuse to come out.

"Oi, listen up," Clover semi-booms, lowering her arms until the noise drops to silence. "Chur. Thanks for coming, team. Or should I say, Tāne's Righteous Eliminators of Evils!"

Zuri whoops. I definitely regret not making face-masks mandatory.

"Clo-vaaa?" Daphne's arm wags above her head. "What's Evils?"

"So, the wharepaku's that way." Clover points towards the hall. "And yeah, if you need anything, just ask me or one of my ugly step-sisters. Jokes—they're half-sisters. Anyways, you've been awesome and I've been Clover Te Atairangikaahu Jones."

Whaea D snorts as the mums and aunties bring their hot drinks into the lounge.

"Now, let's hear it for my main man, Tāne, also known as Tania or Tani-wha the environmental gangsta. It's not every day you meet the human child of a tree, who full-body tackles weeds to the ground."

Aisling claps while my face burns, and the damsel scratches down my throat.

Spontaneous human combustion has never been proven. But I feel like I could prove it exists right now.

"T?" Clover says, rubbing her hands together. "Want to address your followers?"

Ugh. This isn't the worst silence I've had, but it's definitely second. What makes it particularly horrid is that Prettiest Girl is watching.

"Hei aha, Tania," Whaea D says, "not everyone is comfortable being a show-off like Clover the Clown."

Clover clutches her chest, pretending to be wounded.

"*A hit!*" Zuri says dramatically. "*A very palpable hit*! Sorry. My brother was in *Hamlet* recently. Well, before we left the UK. Anyway, I'll be quiet now."

"*This above all—*" Farfalle meets Zuri's tone and raises it to singsong "*—to thine own self be true*."

"*A rose by any other name—*"

"*LOVE—*" Aisling cuts Zuri off "*—looks not with the eyes but with the mind*."

"Well." Claire reaches for her tea. "It's getting rather Shakespearean in here."

Zuri fake-swoons. "He came up with some mad wicked lines."

"To be honest, he loses me most of the time," Farfalle says. "But I adore poetry that shines and uplifts."

If I use all my energy, I can untwist my grimace into plain old robot-face. But there's no way I can make it smile like Zuri and Farfalle. Even Clover's smile is more convincing as she pulls Whaea D's invisible arrow from her heart and shoots it through her eyes at her sister.

"Far—I was just trying to get this thing rolling. Do you just want me to tell everyone your idea, Tāne?"

"It's Ta-*nee*," Daphne pipes up, "not Ta-nay."

"Yes, u egg. Her name's Tāne."

"No."

"YES. Eh, Tāne's Daughter?"

My robot-brain turns blank. I can't even remember my last name.

"Haere mai." Kuia Jean claps her hands, and her voice wraps around me like a blanket. "There'll be plenty of time for korero after we've eaten. Come with me, Tania-love."

"See, it's Ta-nee," Daphne says. "TaNEEaa."

I let Kuia Jean take my hand and walk me into the dining room, away from Clover's defensive shrug.

"What? She told me her name's Tāne."

Sweet and savoury smells waft up from the table.

"I made those for Arshling," Daphne says, "because there's no glue."

"Did you, pet? Gluten-free, well that's just grand." Claire studies Daphne's cupcakes. "They look absolutely scrumptious."

Guess she doesn't know about the bum germs.

Kuia Jean stomps her walking stick on the floor. “I have something to say.” She gives my hand a squeeze and waits for the chatter to quieten. It’s a bit awkward being stuck at her side with all the eyes in the room watching us, but if she wasn’t holding on, I’d blast off into outer-space. “While gathering like this, we are reminded of our loved ones who can’t be here with us. But they still follow us into the room, in their own ways. And it is our job to welcome them, with our words or in our hearts.”

“I’m thinking of my Nana,” Aisling says before anyone else can react. “If she was here, her laugh would make everyone else laugh. It’s contagious.”

“Ohmygosh.” Zuri jumps in. “If my aunties were here, they’d be reminiscing so loud, no-one would be able to hear themselves think.”

I can believe that.

Clover flares her nostrils at me, once, twice, three times. It’s obvious she wants to get on with the eating.

“I miss my jiā,” Kai’s girlfriend says. My robot-brain accidentally deleted her name.

“I bet they miss you heaps, too, e te tau.” Kai pats her hand.

“Are you talking about your family?”

“Mmm.” Kai’s girlfriend nods at Farfalle. “But more than—how say? ‘Jiā’ also mean the ‘home’. The special place. Like you say when-u-a—” she looks at Kai “—for the ‘land’, also for the, uh, ‘bāo’—I forgot?”

“Placenta,” Kai says, going pink under their freckles.

“Mmm. And like we talk about—the family spirit.”

“Tino pai,” Kuia Jean says. “Hearing the awhi in your voices, I am reminded of my own parents. *Okioki i roto i te rangimārie*. And my daughter, Whina.”

Clover snorts. “You make it sound like Mum’s a ghost.”

"Yes, well," Whaea D grumbles under her breath.

"My girls will always be my girls, wherever and *whatever* they are." There's a stubbornness in Kuia Jean's voice that reminds me of Clover and Whaea D.

"Sorry, Mum. I just wish she was here to see her girls growing into exceptional young wāhine."

Clover smiles like the Cheshire cat.

"Aw, luv you, Whaea." Farfalle steps forwards and hugs her auntie.

"Luv you, Kui." She wraps her arms around both Kuia Jean and me at once.

Boom.

Suddenly, all the energy in the room jolts straight into my crotch.

***

Ugh. I can't believe I wet myself in front of Prettiest Girl.

I triple-check my trackpants, then roll my soiled undies into a ball, and, twisting round backwards, throw them out the toilet window. They can wait with the shrunken damsel until I'm ready to leave the Jones's. I don't care if the damsel misses me, she's staying out of my insides right now.

My trackpants feel super-weird, like I'm more naked than if I was wearing no clothes. I stride down the hallway so fast, I nearly slam into Kai's girlfriend.

Her eyes are full of concern. "Are you oh-kay?"

"Yeah."

"You are Ta-ne-ah?"

I nod. "Sorry. I*forgot*yourname."

"Is oh-kay. Lí Xiu is my name. Or you can call, 'Julie', is my English name. I will walk with you?"

It is awkward being alone with a stranger who keeps giving sorry-looks. It's even more awkward walking back into the kitchen when everyone goes quiet.

"Did you have one of your nose-periods?" Clover says. "Just fyi, if you stick a tampon up there it'll swell and bust your nostril."

"Clover—" Whaea D shakes her head "—really?"

"Shall I start the karakia?" Farfalle smiles like caramelised sunshine.

Kuia Jean nods. "Tino pai. Go ahead, my girl."

"But if I get this wrong, don't judge me."

"Nah, you'll be disowned," Clover says. "By all your ancestors, whoever they are."

"Thanks for that, sis." Farfalle pokes her tongue at Clover. "Kia tātou whānau . . . me ngā hoa . . . mo te kai . . . kia ora!"

***

"It's okay if you ARE, Tan-ya," Aisling says, sucking pink icing off her fingers. "My favourite people in the whole wide world are actually intro-verts." She half-burps half-swallows the last syllable.

"Who's a flirt?" Clover sits beside me.

Aisling humphs. "Actually, I said I think Tan-ya might be an intro—"

"READY." I blurt, swallowing a half-chewed rice paper roll.

Everyone looks at me.

"I'm ready*to*say*something*." Waves of hot energy charge through my thighs, while a slither of ginger burns the side of my throat. "The first rule of being an Eliminator—" I push the words out while my eyes refuse to land "—anyone could be a Carrier. So *our*mission*is*to let*everyone*know about what's waiting*to*attack us or our—our—" The heaviness in my head melts, mixing with the ash on my tongue. "We*have*totell everyone about Plant Destructor

Kauri Killer and eliminate their ignorance, because some people don't read*the*signs. So, we have to knock on all*the*doors in Tāmaki Makaurau."

Kuia Jean and Whaea D give each other a look. Claire starts to say something, then just bites her thumb.

Zuri looks to Clover.

Clover shrugs. "Told you she was upping the ante."

"Umm—" Kai scratches the back of their neck. "So, are yous gonna knock on weekends?"

"And afternoons," Clover says. "There are literally half a million houses, so . . ."

Whaea D clears her throat. "I think the adults need to have a little kōrero."

Team TREEs:

- **Daphne Wilhelmina Jones (4)**: bum-germs hazard, loves David Attenborough
- **Tani Can't-remember-her-own-last-name (6 in Martian years)**: needs to maintain super strength to eliminate the Evils
- **Clover Te Atairangikaahu Jones (12)**: loves Studio Ghibli, jokes a lot, dislikes posers
- **Aisling Danu O'Ryan (11)**: betrothed to a tree, likes pretending she's in a story
- **Zuri Kaba (12)**: has hazardous hands, talks loud and fast, laughs even louder
- **Kaihautu Parata (15)**: is an artist, has a girlfriend called Lí Xiu, helps their mum, Karen the Kauri Queen protect kauri
- **Lí Xiu (16)**: is an exchange student from China who sad-smiles a lot and makes really good rice paper rolls
- **Farfalle Jones (16)**: prettiest girl in the universe
- **Whekī**: a rough tree fern who lives out Tani's window
- **Mama:** an Abyssinian guinea pig who understands everything without being told, likes hiding under old pyjamas and inventing new rules and missions. She keeps Tani out of the boggy woggies and helps them stay on track to save the damsel in distress

Little~Fish~Knock~Knock~Knock

“She should be in hospital,” I hiss, but Auntie doesn’t seem bothered the damsel woke up looking kind of see-through. I’m secretly worried it’s because I threw her out the Jones’s toilet window the other day, then forgot to bring her back.

“It’s okay, bub. I’ve got this.” Auntie pulls a pillow from the linen cupboard. “Are you still going door-knocking?”

“Yes.”

“Hope you guys have fun.”

I want to tell her it’s not about fun, it’s about life and death, but the damsel calls out:

“Shrink me small and take me with you?”

I don’t tell her where I’m putting her. In my little toe—right out of the way.

Having her in Auntie’s house feels dangerous. I have to force my robot-feet to walk out the door towards a gazillion Potential Infectors.

“How should we decide the teams?” Clover turns to me.

My eyes dart to Prettiest Girl, then fall to my shrunken sneakers.

“We could put our names in a hat,” Farfalle says, “then you three could pick your chaperones?”

Clover sighs. “If I get ur name it’s going straight back.”

“I’ll go with Farfalle,” Zuri says. “I mean, I’m totally happy with the hat-thing. But also, happy to go with Farfalle.”

“Yay! Poets unite.” Prettiest Girl splays her fingers around Zuri’s while Zuri does a happy-bounce.

“Fine, well I’ll go with Kai,” Clover says, whipping her braids back over her shoulder, just missing my neck.

Lí Xiu looks at me hopefully. I give her a robot-smile.

“What about Aisling?” Clover says. “I bet she’ll want to go with Tree Gurl.”

I secretly hope so. Aisling’s more of a stranger to me than Clover, but less of a stranger than Lí Xiu.

“Eeee, I’m so excited.” Zuri shakes her hands. “So, how do we know which doors to knock on?”

“Uh. Good question.” Clover looks at me again, like I should automatically have the answers.

“I think—” Lí Xiu holds out her phone, spreading her fingers over the screen to zoom in on maps “—team one knock the odd number. Team two, team three, uh, how to say? Lúnliú—” She opens an app on her phone and types a character into the side-bar “—*al-ter-nate*. Take turn for the even number.”

Clover nods. “Makes sense.”

“All good,” Kai says. “Aisling’s not coming, by the way. Bad night.”

Stink. Rotten stink.

“Aw, poor thing. Hope she’s okay?”

“Yeah.” Zuri echoes Farfalle’s sorry tone. “Someone should send a get-well-soon message. Can we use your phone, Kai? I dropped mine in the lav yesterday. Mum was livid. That’s the second phone I’ve destroyed since ‘laundry-gate’ 2016. But I promise I’ll be careful with yours.”

“Yikes. Yeh-nah, all good.”

Not all good. We've got to stop mucking around, otherwise it'll take forever to complete our mission.

"Actually, you should totally do it." Zuri passes Kai's phone to Farfalle. "You make ordinary words sound beautiful."

"Aw, you flatter me, Zuri Kaba."

In our stomachs, there's a thing called hydrochloric acid. It's so strong, it can kill Infectors and smash food to smithereens. And burn through skin. If our stomachs weren't lined with super-strength mucus, we'd dissolve ourselves from the inside out.

"Excuse me, Ta-nay-a," Lí Xiu says, "please, you will speak?"

I stare at her.

"Nah," Clover butts in. "Tāne hardly ever speaks. Cat's always got her tongue."

"Oh." Lí Xiu looks confused. I scowl at Clover.

"What's up?" Kai wraps an arm around Lí Xiu's waist.

"I ask he will speak to neighbour?"

"You mean Tāne?" Clover says, raising a brow. "Tāne's not a boy, but she looks like one, eh?"

"Uh—" Lí Xiu shakes her head. "I was make mistake. English very hard!"

"All good," Kai says, "You're way better at te reo Pākehā than we are at te reo Mandarin."

The eels in my gut pick up speed. I thought I'd be with Clover, and obviously she'd do most of the talking. Now, I'm on a team with someone who wants me to do ALL the talking.

"Don't worry," Farfalle says, "Tuh-nae knows everything there is to know about kauri dieback. You're in good hands."

The eels dance upwards. Raise their heads. Open their mouths and gulp.

“Okay, team,” Clover says, “bring it in.”

A pile of hands form over Clover’s.

“Boss?” she says, looking at me.

I’d rather chop off my hand than put it there. But Prettiest Girl is watching. At least there’s no Daphne. I hover my palm over Lí Xiu’s glittery nails.

“See, she luvs us even if we’re contagious.”

My robot eyes shoot lasers at Clover.

“Okay, Tāne’s Righteous Eliminators of Evils, let’s get eliminating.”

The mountain of hands erupts.

Zuri whoops. Farfalle gives everyone high-fives. When she gets to me, I fumble, awkwardly half-missing her hand.

“Shame, Faf, now she’ll have to sanitise again.”

I hate Clover.

“Okee.” Clover turns on her heel. “Leshgo.”

As we walk down the cul-de-sac towards our starting point, a strange power buzzes up from the concrete. I feel like we’re a real team and we’re actually going to save Pāpā from the germ.

“Get lost, Faf,” Clover says as soon as we reach the end of the street, “this side of the road ain’t big enough for the both of us.”

Farfalle wraps her elbow around Clover’s neck and kisses her cheek. “Good luck, sis! I believe in you!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Clover says, wiping her face before turning to me. “Well, Tāne’s Daughter, here goes nothing.”

For a moment, I imagine it's just her and me, like I thought it would be at the start. I try to pull my lips into a smile, but only manage what feels like a slightly curved line.

Lí Xiu scuttles up to my side as I stride towards the brick house with a concrete terrace, then she walks normally. Except, her posture is better than normal. Even though she's older, I feel her nervousness knocking against my invisible shield. If the eels in my guts get even a slither more of that to feed on, they'll burst out of my skin.

I wish I could swap places with the ginger cat watching us climb the steps from between two terracotta pots. It's weird. For a second, I feel exactly how Auntie felt when she stood on the Jones's doorstep that morning after I sauced my crotch. It's like I remember *her* memory.

"Comin'," a voice warbles down the passage. I'm not sure if she means "come in" or "coming", but it's against the rules to open a stranger's door anyway.

The eels nip as a human shape appears through the frosted glass panels. With a tinkle of a chain and a click of a latch, the door opens.

"Hah-loo." A lady with watery-blue eyes and a boof of yellow-ish hair beams down at us. "An' who dae we have here?"

"Uh-hi," I say, as her perfume hits the back of my throat. "We're your neighbours. I mean, I'm your neighbour—well, my auntie is. Soon*I'll*be*going*back*to*my*home*inWaipoua."

"Is that so, Lahd?"

"And she's from China."

"Gudness! And what b'rings yer knockin on me door?"

"Uh—" My tongue sluggens "—we're Tāne's*Righteous*Eliminators*of*Evils, cos, uh—there's*this*new*germ*called Plant Destructor Kauri Killer. Anyway, we're*just*here*to*

eliminate*your*ignorance, so when you visit Waipoua Forest, you don't accidentally kill Tāne Mahuta with your dirty shoes."

The lady chuckles at me.

"Uh, so have you heard of kauri dieback?" I say. "Because you could trample it from one patch of soil to another and never know you're the one infecting someone's family tree. You could even kill someone who's been alive for two-thousand years."

Her eyes glisten. "Yer an earnest wee 'un, aren't yer?" She gives Lí Xiu a look like they're in on the same secret.

Lí Xiu seems confused, but smiles politely.

"Ah dinnae, truth be told, it's nae been on me radar, until yer wee bairns came knockin. Tuh be fair, I've not gone trampin—or 'tramplin'—since yer were nu'hin more than a sparkle in yer mam's eye—ya ken?"

"But will you help us?" I say. "Will you tell your friends about our mission?"

"Aye, course I will, Lahd. I'll be callin me hens an tellin em all aboot how they best be washin their feet, or they'll be answerin tae Skinny Malinky Long Legs and—how'd yer put it—the Germ Busters."

"Eliminators of Evils," I say.

"Aye. I'll be sure to tell me hens."

"Thank you." Lí Xiu gives a little bow.

"Right ye are." The lady wipes her eye. "Nu, is there anythin' more I can dae fer yer, young'uns? A juice? A sweetie?"

"Nah, thanks," I say. "We've still got to knock on all the other doors on this street. Yours was only number one."

"Aye. Be off with yer, then! Lang may yer lum reek!"

“Thank you for talk to neighbour,” Lí Xiu whispers as we reach the bottom of the steps. “I was not much understand.”

“That’s okay.”

A charge of energy pumps through my muscles as we approach Clover and Kai, who are sat on the curb, poking sticks in the gutter.

“How’d it go?” Clover says, shielding her eyes.

“Okay,” I say. “She said she’s going to tell her hens.”

Clover looks at me like: what the—?

“I think she meant her friends.”

“Cool-cool.” Clover yawns. “Well, we nearly had an epic fail, eh, Kai? Old man couldn’t hear a word. Probably due to all the white hair growing out of his ears. We had to type on our phones. He wanted to give us coin, but we weren’t sure about the protocol.”

I shrug. “I don’t think it was a rule . . . ”

“Nah,” Clover says. “Whaea D would blast me for taking money off a kaumātua. But he was keen-as to donate, so maybe we should find a way of setting something up, legit.”

“Yeah.” I scuff my shrunken shoes against the footpath, sending antsy vibrations through my humped toes.

Clover hoists herself up. “So, do you guys want the grey house or the beige house?”

Lí Xiu hums. “I think, take turn. Da, *da*, da, *da*, da, *da*—” she compartmentalises the air with one hand then the other “—otherwise, get confuse and visit same house two time.”

“My gurl’s not just a pretty face,” Kai says, giving Lí Xiu a kiss on the cheek.

One thing I’ve learnt from this mission is that romantic teens make the air almost as soggy as Auntie’s bog. I stride to our next door, then wait for Lí Xiu before knocking. No answer.

“We can write letter for neighbour can read later,” Lí Xiu says.

It’s a good idea. Except for the paper thing. It’s like the car-problem: solve one problem and create another problem. It’s exhausting.

“Aww,” Lí Xiu says, pointing towards a lady wearing leopard-print, holding a ball of fluff under each arm. “Xī Shī quǎn! Lion dog. So cute!”

It’s weird seeing her eyes fill with a feeling that isn’t worry.

“Sorry, I see dog, I get excite,” she says, her joy changing to something that looks more like missing. “Like my dog, at home. When see, get so excite! Tail wag! Jump-jump-jump!”

“What’s your dog’s name?”

“Uh—Zhen Zhen. Do you have dog, Ta-nay-a?”

She seems disappointed when I shake my head.

“But I do have a guinea pig.”

“Mm?”

“A guinea pig,” I repeat, holding my hands out as though I’m measuring a block of cheese. “Like a rabbit, but with small ears and no tail. She eats grass side-to-side like a cow, except with tall front teeth, and she sings.”

I chirp alien sounds into the street while Lí Xiu sniffles back laughter. Suddenly, I get the sinking feeling Mama misses me. But it was her idea to knock on all the doors in Tāmaki Makaurau.

“What is—how say—gee pig name?”

“Mama.” I hold my breath and wait for Lí Xiu to laugh at me.

“Okay, I meet Ma-ma soon?” she says. “I feed grass?”

“Sure.”

It’s not so bad being alone on a team with Lí Xiu. It’s actually kind of nice not being mocked all the time.

“You like animal, Ta-nay-a?”

I nod.

“Me too. But I have wish.” Lí Xiu gazes into her imagination, then her whole face lights up. “Grow animal so small—” she measures an inch between her thumb and finger “—can fit in the pocket for pocket-elephant or pocket-tiger. Pocket-swan. What Ta-nay-a wish for? The pocket g-nee pig? Pocket-kiwi?”

“You’d have to put something on the end of its beak,” I say, pinching the tip of my middle finger to demonstrate. “Otherwise, you’d get stabbed through your pants.”

Lí Xiu nods, enthusiastically. “And pocket-tiger—scratch, scratch, scratch. Hmmm. Good when the mean person do mean thing.” Her smile fades.

Usually, she’s looking at me like I’m the one stuck in a bog. I don’t know what to do now she’s stuck in one.

“Yes, but I would wish for the pocket-Zhen Zhen,” Lí Xiu says, her smile returning. “To keep for always.”

I don’t tell her about the shrunken damsel in my little toe.

Or the tightness in my chest that feels as though Auntie has shrunk my ribcage in the wash with all my clothes.

Little Fish: Magic Air

"Did you get very far along the street?" Auntie says as I poke at my shepherd's pie.

I shake my head, forcing myself to swallow the mouthful that doesn't want to budge.

"Is something wrong, baby?" The damsel says. "You'd usually be onto your second helping by now."

"Ifeel. Weird."

"In what way?"

"In*my*. Ribs."

Auntie studies me from across the table. "Are you having difficulty breathing?"

That's not how I was thinking about it, but when I try to talk, there isn't quite enough air.

"I think I'd better take her to A & E," Auntie says. "I'll let Kuia Jean know you're home alone."

"I'll be fine. And you'll be okay, my daughter."

The lights in the waiting room sting my eyes. It's weird being here for me, not the damsel.

"Wait here, bub. I'll fill in the form." Auntie guides me to a chair beside a kuia holding a sleeping toddler before heading to the reception desk. For a second, I imagine I'm the one lying across the wahine's chest, her comfy hand drumming my back.

"Busy place on a Saturday night," the kuia says, looking straight ahead. "Not enough doctors, eh? Must be off partying." She lets out a chesty laugh, then turns into her elbow and coughs, her chest heaving under the sleeping toddler. "Yeah, right. My neph was on

sixteen-hour shifts, and that was after he was smoked from all the school. Can't call it a health system when it makes the healers sick, eh?"

I wonder if Farfalle knows about sixteen-hour shifts.

"Maybe in your time they'll figure it out. Make it good for everyone." She kisses the toddler's head. "Ka pai."

***

The nurse says I have to use an inhaler, because one boy stopped breathing so fast, they had to open his ribs and squeeze his heart with their hand. *Ba-bup!*

***

Evils that can trigger asthma: smoke and vape and other air-trash like dust, grass, pollen, mould spores, perfume, exhaust fumes, and animal dander. Also cold temperatures, chlorine, exercise, laughing, crying, stress, and even some foods. Basically life, the whole world and everything you can think of.

***

"How are you feeling, Tania?" Doctor Hana sits on the chair beside my bed.

I pretend she's Farfalle looking tired under lots of make-up.

"Okay," I say.

"You've been breathing easier for a while, eh, bub?"

A yawn escapes as I nod at Auntie.

"Well, everything looks good." Doctor Hana scrolls on her tablet. "I'm happy for you to go home. Get a good sleep in your own bed. Just promise me you'll let Mum know if you feel unwell, yeah?"

My voice cracks when I say "okay".

The well of sadness reflects off the brown-gold flecks in Doctor Hana's eyes.

“She’s had a long day,” Auntie explains while I try to reactive robot-mode.

“Aw,” Doctor Hana says. “Your body’s had a shock. Make sure you take it easy, yeah? Rest is as important as the medicine.”

When Doctor Hana asked if I had any idea what might have triggered my asthma, I didn’t tell her about TREEs or about the shrunken damsel who keeps messing around inside my organs or how it’s impossible to rest when there are a gazillion doors waiting to be knocked on.

Little~Fish~Take~Two

"TaaaNEEEaaa, wait for meee!" Daphne stomp-runs along the footpath, hugging her *Dora the Explorer* backpack to her chest. "WAIT."

Ugh. We're not even moving. At least Daphne's only allowed to volunteer for a maximum of one hour each weekend.

"Poor Aisling," Zuri says, while Team TREEs hums in agreement. "I wonder how long she'll be in this time?"

I feel sorry for Aisling being stuck in hospital, but I'm secretly relieved it's her everyone is focused on, not me.

"Come, teina." Farfalle gestures to the puffing, red-cheeked Potential Infector. "I'll put that on for you."

"I'm. Going. With. Taneeeee." Daphne gives me a toothy grin as Farfalle fastens her straps.

"Nah, ur not," Clover says, "it's either me or Faf."

"Aww." Daphne sticks out her bottom lip.

"Pick us!" Zuri says. "You can be our good luck charm. You're so cute, everyone will have to listen."

Daphne skips towards Zuri's open arms, and I get an image of bum germs launching off hurricane hands at the speed of sound.

"Sorry you have the asthma attack, Ta-nay-a," Lí Xiu says when we're alone.

"I'm*okay*." I flash my inhaler.

"Oh-kay!" Lí Xiu pulls out her own and clinks it into mine. "For the team Magic-Air!"

It may be magic, but it tastes like something a robot would swallow.

"In China, sometime the pollution so bad, you must stay inside or wear mask to protect the lung."

I've heard about smog. The air's so full of Evils, it actually changes colour.

Our first house looks like a student flat. There are empty bottles on the deck, and the ranch slider is half-open, with a torn net-curtain billowing out. I shrink my breathing hospital-shallow as we climb the half-rotten steps, dodging a clump of decomposing junk mail and cigarette butts.

"Hell-o?" Lí Xiu knocks tentatively on the ranch slider.

A grunt comes from inside. There's a man sprawled face-down on a couch spewing stuffing.

"Sorry," Lí Xiu says. "I not see until already knock."

The couch springs twang as the man rolls to face the wall, the top of his bum-crack peeping out over his shorts. Next moment, he lets out a rumbling patero. Lí Xiu takes my hand and walks us away quickly.

"Eww-eww-eww," she says, fanning her nose with one hand. "Did you see?"

"YES," I blurt. It looked like Auntie's worst nightmare. Trash and dirty plates everywhere. But that's not what disturbed me most ((I didn't know sprouts could grow from *there*!?)).

I exaggerate squirting sanitiser onto my hands, then pretend to squirt it up my nostrils and in my eyes and all over my body, while Lí Xiu titters and snorts as though I'm super-funny.

A grin creeps across my face just as Prettiest Girl waves from over the road. *Ba-boom*.

"Far-far-lay is so nice," Lí Xiu says, catching my eye. "So kind."

“Yeah.” I look down at my shrunken sneakers. There’s a new blister on the side of my little toe—right where I put the damsel. I’m secretly getting sick and tired of this rule: only wearing clothes from Before. But if I break one of my rules, then I might break another, then another, then another, until everything falls apart.

“Hey,” Clover calls from the shared accessway. “Someone just asked if we have a website.”

“Nope.”

“Well, yeah, I know we don’t right now, but we should make one. Man, those chicks were nice as, eh, Kai? They said what we’re doing is legit and even offered to help if we ever want to protest or anything.”

“I am not understand?” Lí Xiu says.

“As in carry signs and march, like School Strike for Climate?”

Ugh. Each time we talk about our mission, it seems to get bigger. It already feels too big.

“Come on, boi. No way imma let Faf finish before us. Hope you guys have fun at the party house.”

Ugh. There are cars all over the path and lawn. Music blaring. The smell of barbeque. The door is wide open, but no-one comes when we knock. I’m just about to give up when a girl appears in the hallway.

“Are you here to complain about the noise-pollution?” she says, hopefully.

“Actu’ry, that is correct,” Lí Xiu says, “we are here to stop the pollution for Lady Hòutǔshén. Uh, I mean for Papa-tū-ā-nu-ku. Or how you say, the Mother Earth?”

The girl looks genuinely excited about our mission.

“Hold up,” she says. “There are others here who definitely need to hear this.”

She leads us round the house, past a couple of men play-fighting and a woman cackling at them.

"Hey!" the girl shouts with her hands either side of her mouth. "Listen up, our neighbours have something important to say. Brad, shut up!"

A chuckle bubbles across the deck as the rowdiest man freezes, mouth open, cheeks bright red. Brad, I guess, lets out a mighty burp, causing the cackling woman to slap him on the knee.

"Would you please show some respect," the girl says.

"Yes, ma'am." Brad gives her a salute.

"Just ignore him, he's an imbecile." She rolls her eyes at us.

"Bro, you just got roasted by a nine-year-old," someone hoots.

The girl ignores them. "Go ahead, guys."

Sloppy smiles and raised glasses return my gaze. When I tell them about eliminating their ignorance, they erupt into claps and whistles. Brad wobbles forwards onto his feet, holding a five-dollar-note out between two fingers.

"For the whales," he slurs.

"Boo, cheapskate," says the woman who slapped his knee. "Given how you abuse Mother Nature, I think you owe her more than a fiver."

Brad pulls out his wallet and rifles through clumsily while the crowd chortles. He plucks out a fifty.

"That's a good start," the lady says, narrowing her eye, "but don't think you're off the hook, you filthy old sod."

Lí Xiu shakes her head. "We are not allowed to take, sorry."

“I wouldn’t touch his money either, girls,” the slapping lady says. “God knows where it’s been.”

“Sorry about that. I swear, alcohol turns them into animals,” the girl says leading us back around the house. “Actually, no, that’s offensive to animals. At least animals don’t know any better. I’d definitely join your team if my parents weren’t dragging me to Egypt.”

“Oh!” Lí Xiu says. “You see big cat-body with person-head?”

“The Sphinx,” I blurt.

The girl nods. “You know, my ancestors *built* the pyramids.”

Lí Xiu’s face lights up. “Wow, so cool.”

“Well, they were probably slaves, so . . . Did you guys know there are still like fifty million slaves in the world, right now? Like kids our age could have literally stitched our clothes.”

My shrunken apricot tee suddenly feels ten times more claustrophobic.

Lí Xiu shakes her head sadly. “It is big problem in China.”

The girl nods. “Anyway, I didn’t mean to be a down-buzz. Hopefully see you guys when I’m back. I’m Scarlet, by the way.”

The thought of growing our team is less scary than the long driveway ahead. It feels shady walking so far from the footpath without an invitation.

The house kind of looks like an Evil. It’s standing on stilts, with ivy winding up and along its wooden face.

“You know this neighbour, Ta-nay-a?”

I shake my head. I don’t know anyone, except for June and the Joneses. And the lady with the “hens”. And Scarlet, I guess.

As I climb the staircase, I focus on the music floating down. Flutes and violins—Auntie's favourite. It makes me feel a bit more comfortable, like the person who lives here might be nice.

Lí Xiu reaches out to knock.

"I see you," a voice startles her hand away. The lady is lying on a lounger off to the side of the deck. "I didn't know Girl Guides were still a thing," she says, pulling an earbud. "Do you have any of those ones with chocolate on the bottom?"

"Uh—no, sorry," I say.

"That's a shame."

"No, I mean, we're*not*Guides."

"So who are you, pray tell?"

"Tāne's Righteous Eliminators of Evils?"

"Oh, no, I'm not religious." The lady snorts and takes a sip from her glass. "Not one iota."

"Butdoyou believe in pathogens?" I say.

"Is that a trick-question?" She tilts her straw-hat back and peers over dark sunglasses. "Are you looking for something to steal?"

"Huh?" Lí Xiu looks to me, but I have no words.

"Take. Burgle. Lift with your youthfully light fingers." The more the lady goes on, the more bored she sounds by her own accusation.

Concern returns to Lí Xiu's face. "We only want to talk, please. Thank you."

The lady yawns, patting her open mouth. "Look, no offense, but you're really not my cup of tea."

"My auntie's your neighbour—" I try again.

"Oh, have we met?"

"Dunno. Her name's Kora White. She's tall with super-long black hair. She's a nurse?" I say, searching my mind for more important details. "I can ask her to*call*you?"

"No, no—never mind. I prefer not to shit where I eat."

I feel as confused as Lí Xiu looks. "Anyway," I say, finally remembering why I'm here, "we have to tell you about kauri dieback and eliminate your ignorance."

The lady snorts. "You're straight up, I'll give you that."

"We are activist," Lí Xiu says. "For the kauri disease."

"OH, you're *activists*." The lady lies back, repositioning her dark glasses. "How original."

I stand frozen beside a pair of weirdly tall pink glass flamingos, feeling even more unsure of what to do.

"I think we will go." Lí Xiu says, taking my arm gently.

"Take my advice," the lady says, melting further into a plush pink cushion, "I was young and idealistic, once. You might as well save your breath, girls—" she lowers her sunglasses again "—or are you one of those non-binaries? No offense, babes, I have nothing against androgyny, but everything you think you're doing is . . . misguided. You and I, we're teeny-tiny. We can't even chip a dent in the fundamental bull-shittery. They make us think it's our fault. If we just recycle our god-damned milk bottles, we'll save the world, right?"

Her laugh sends a shiver into a place I didn't know I had.

"The real 'evils'—as you say—have done a fabulous job of remaining untouched while they screw the rest of us over. They'll sooner bunker down or bugger off to Mars than clean up their mess on Earth."

"Ta-nay-a, we will go now." Lí Xiu insists.

“What can I say? The truth hurts,” the lady sighs, disappearing back under her hat. “Don’t be hypocrites and shoot the messenger.”

I want to say at least *one* thing about Pāpā—he’s not dead, yet. He isn’t even infected. He still has his super-strength. The flamingo lady’s words swirl as Ba-bup pounds in my ears and a familiar pressure builds up from the bottom of my lungs.

“THERE’S ALWAYS HOPE.”

I let Lí Xiu lead me away, while the sound of my words still burns through my throat.

“What the—?” Clover appears at the bottom of the long driveway with Kai scuffing their jandals close behind.

“We heard yelling.”

“Neighbour not nice. Not listen to Ta-nay-a.”

“Sheesh, what happened?” Clover’s eyes widen. “Did you go full eliminator again?”

My metal feels raw, like the popped blister on my heel. Even the slightest attention hurts. I just want to hide under my galaxy bedspread and think about what the flamingo lady said.

“Maybe you should go chill for a bit?” Clover says. “You look like you just heeled yourself in the vag.”

Kai turns away, stifling laughter.

“What? Haven’t you ever landed wrong on a trampoline?”

“Clo-va is right, Ta-nay-a. You can rest. Put cold-pack on face.” Lí Xiu uses a fingertip to draw a line from the top of one cheekbone to the other. “Take slow breath and Ta-nay-a brain will start to say, ‘Oh-kay, you are ac-tu-ary underwater, now. Like the fish.’ Ta-nay-a heart will not so much *boom-boom-boom*.”

I shake my head. “I’m okay.”

“You sure ‘bout dat, boi?” Clover says, “You look like Prince Ashitaka after San slit his cheek.”

I’d be fine if everyone would stop telling me what to do.

“Okay then.” Clover shrugs at Kai. “You heard the boss. Back to work.”

I wish she’d stop calling me that. It’s obvious she’s the actual boss. But if I have to be the boss, then I want us to be bosses together.

“But ac-tu-ary,” Lí Xiu says, “I worry, maybe Ta-nay-a be too much . . . brave?”

Something dark and oily coils inside my belly. Suddenly, I have the urge to write everything down in my not-a-birthday-present diary.

“Maybe I’ll go to the toilet,” I say.

Lí Xiu smiles. “Yes. Go-go.”

The flamingo lady’s words replay as I charge back to Auntie’s, but the moment I open my not-a-birthday-present diary, my mind goes blank.

Each blister needs two plasters. While I’m wrapping my little toe, I bite down on a mean thought. If the damsel wasn’t in there, maybe it wouldn’t stick out and hurt so much.

Mary K. Weaver (Age 12)

Dear Diary,

moving through glue is weird

you can walk and talk

except it feels like something is slowing everything down to slug-speed

every movement is heavy

even thoughts

and sometimes you get stuck on something simple while people are waiting

but they don't understand, because they see right through the glue

Little~Fish~Day~Three

I hate how the damsel doesn't notice the messes she leaves behind. The colour I found under the toilet seat this morning when Whekī dared me to pee standing up . . . how does that even come from a human body?

Lí Xiu rattles the mesh on a security door.

There's a shuffling from inside, then silence. She tries again.

"Woah, Nelly," a husky voice coughs. "Hold your horses." There's a louder shuffle, a creak, then the solid door on the other side of the mesh security screen opens letting out the warm breath of the house. Gravy and pudding. An old man with bushy eyebrows and greyish skin peers at us through the mesh as though he's trying to figure out if he knows us.

"Hello," I say, using a voice I don't fully recognise. "I'm Tania Weaver—" I stumble over the sound of my last name, which randomly decided to reappear on this old man's doorstep "—and this is Lee Sh-eu. We're here to talk about how you can prevent the spread of kauri dieback."

"Oh? I beg your pardon, ladies," the man says, searching a ring of keys. "It's like Fort Knox, here. Better to be safe than sorry."

"Is oh-kay," Lí Xiu says. "We can just talk from door?"

"Here it is!" The old man holds up a key with a wink.

Lí Xiu smiles as he fumbles with the lock.

"That's better," he says, opening the security door. "Now, who do we have here? You'll have to excuse me. My memory's not the best."

"Please to meet you, sir. I am Lí Xiu."

"I'm Tarnae," I say, kind of blurring the "ee" and "ay" together like Farfalle does.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lee-u.” The man offers his hand. “Tanny.” His knuckles poke out above long, cold fingers, slightly purple at the tips. “They call me Scout. How’s the weather out there? There’s meant to be a spot of rain.” He raises a hand to shade pale blue eyes and squints into the distance. “The tomatoes will be getting a drink this evening, I’d say by the look of things. Have you ladies come far?”

Lí Xiu shakes her head. “Not for Ta-nay. I have come from China.”

“My word. That is a long way. Where abouts in China?”

“Wuhan,” Lí Xiu says with a nod.

Scout squeezes his eyes shut and holds up one finger. “River City?” he says, opening his eyes. “The Yangtze and the Han.”

“Uh—very good, Mister Scout!”

“And what brings you all the way to the City of Sails?”

“For the school exchange. But I am here for Tah-nay Mahu-ta. Very special tree. Very old.”

“I know the feeling! Will you ladies come in for a drink?” Scout steps backwards, nearly tripping over his own slippers. “There might be a biscuit—I’ve been meaning to do the groceries, but I’ve had this right tick of a cough.”

Lí Xiu shakes her head. “Thank you. We are only allowed talk outside. Better safe than sorry.”

“Right you are.” The man looks disappointed, but not upset. “How can I help?”

Scout listens to our mission and interrupts to tell us random facts about his travels “back in the day”. At least his stories stop me lifting the dank toilet-seat of my memory for a while. Before we leave, Scout gives us seeds in envelopes smudged with dirt and labelled in handwriting even wonkier than mine. Broad beans. Marigolds. Sweet peas. He tells us the

ladies in the other flats are hard of hearing and often “have a bit of shut-eye” at this time of day, but he’ll spread the message.

“Can you put these in my backpack?” I say, handing Lí Xiu my envelopes.

“Huh?” Her thoughts seem far away again. “Sorry. I was just worry Mister Scout not eat very well. Very skinny.”

I guess she worries about everyone.

“Maybe I cook and take food,” Lí Xiu says to herself. “Yes. I cook for Mister Scout. I can visit you after, yes? I meet g-pig. Feed grass?”

“Okay,” I say, feeling pleased she remembered Mama.

Lí Xiu smiles. “So fun not know who will answer when knock. Could be anyone!”

I’m not sure “fun” is the word I’d use for it, but at least the eels have stopped squirming. Or maybe they just suffocated.

“Hel-lo! Who is hiding?” Lí Xiu says in her puppy voice, causing a mud-streaked face to pop up from behind the hedge in front of us.

“Oh! What is your name, please?”

“Lol-lah,” the dirty-blonde child says in a gruff voice.

“Aw, Lol-laa, so cute! So much mud.”

“We made a choc-lit fac-tree,” Lola says, wiping a new brown trail across her brow. “Me and Milo did. Eh, Milo?”

“Yeh,” another gruff voice rises up from behind the hedge. “And mud pie-ez.”

The sanitiser tingles in my pocket. But I feel another urge too. A different kind of itch. It’s as though my fingers remember what it would feel like to dip into the thick brown mud that’s turning to liquid below the garden hose.

“Then you cover in pretty flower from garden,” Lí Xiu chirps.

Miniature Lola nods solemnly. “Flow-*erz*. Therz more than one.”

“Oh. Flower-z. Thank you. English is hard.”

Miniature Lola nods.

“My name is Ju-lie, and this is my friend, Ta-nay. We are here to talk to your parent about the tree-z.”

Big Lola points towards the house.

“So cute,” Lí Xiu says leading me to the door. “And the garden is so big. Could grow the fruit and vegetable for all the neighbour.”

While she talks to a woman who looks exactly like her kids, I’m still squishing mud between the fingers in my mind.

When you push down, then pull up, the pressure changes and you get stuck for a second. Then, when you squish, the mud oozes through your fingers. And if you stand in it with bare feet, it squelches between your toes in gooey towers. My mouth waters with a different kind of hunger.

Little~Fish~Sleepy~Fish

"How was it, today?"

"Good," I say to Auntie over my spagbol.

The buzz of the fridge comes to a halt, and, for a moment, the air is extra quiet. Then the damsel jerks away from the table and hurries out of the room, hand over mouth. Even though she shuts the door and turns the bathroom tap on full, her retches burn through my throat and turn the cheese in my gut to acid.

Auntie wipes her lips with a napkin and follows. She returns a few minutes later with a sorry smile.

"Have you guys made a plan for when the others are back at school?"

I hate the way Auntie always makes me think about a time that doesn't exist, yet.

"I had a word with Clover's principle," she continues, ignoring my scowl. "They'd be happy to have you—"

"Am I adopted?" I blurt.

Auntie puts her fork down and clasps her hands together, two fingers resting on either side of her nose.

"Hasn't your mum talked to you about this?"

A gazillion times. But the old stories are just words.

Auntie goes to say something, then changes her mind. "I think you know you're not adopted."

"But I don't look like anyone."

"That's not true," she says, picking up her fork.

***

“Pō mārie, baby.” The damsel smooths my fringe from my face. She smells like toothpaste and mouthwash, but nothing disguises the smell of sick. “You did so good this week, Ika Iti. So good.”

“NIGHT.” The word catches in my throat. It doesn’t feel good saying it, but I do so the damsel will leave. She forgot she said she’d help me with my homework for team TREEs, and I don’t want to remind her she forgot. When she shuts my door, I bite Apricot Beanie hard.

Little~Fish~Eyes~Wide~Open

It's impossible to sleep or do anything with the damsel in the house. Knowing she's there makes me super-restless. And I can't even focus on my mission because my robot-brain keeps replaying what the flamingo lady said about the *real* Evils being the ones who want to go to Mars. Did she mean there are people who don't care if they make things really bad for everyone else?

The thought of going out and knocking all over again tomorrow makes me feel hollow and stuffed-too-full at the same time.

Lí Xiu likes not knowing who will answer the door, but it fills my heart with worms. And those worms spill out and grow into eels. And those eels swim round and round.

I roll over onto my stomach. What if we can't knock on all the doors in time? What if we can, but still fail, like Clover said? I have so many forbidden thoughts. Why can't I just be like Zuri? I hate the way she has so much fun all the time.

I roll onto my back and thump my legs. I hate this night. I hate this bed. I hate this room.

Pulling my galaxy bedspread over my chin, I bite down as hard as I can and puff like a monster. Hotness rises through my trunk. Maybe if I keep biting and puffing and tightening, my blood will boil and all these Infector-thoughts will die.

***

I feel worse when I wake up. Like overnight, all my boggy thoughts spilled down my throat into my chest. The damsel talks at me while I'm eating breakfast as though nothing's wrong. Everything she says is another pump of air into an over-full bicycle tyre. When she says

“shrink me small and take me with you”, something goes *pop!* All the pressure bursts out in one word: “BYE”. Rude. Horrid. Too-much-and-not-enough: BYE.

“Sorry I wasn’t here.” Aisling stares at me while the others gush over her like she’s a celebrity. “I desperately wanted to come, but *Mum* wouldn’t let me.”

“You had a fever, pet,” Claire sighs.

Whaea D nods knowingly. “You’d better make sure you don’t overdo things today, girls.”

Clover sucks air through her teeth. “Insensitive much? Not everyone here identifies as a gurl, Whaea.”

“Excuse me? I’m talking to my girls—the ringleaders. You’ve got some cheek calling me insensitive, hei a koe rawa te kōrero!”

“I’m just saying, Kai is they/them.”

“It’s all good, Whaea.” Kai hugs a cushion from the two-seater to their chest.

“Is it, though?” Clover pushes. “And anyway, you never know. There could be more than one takatāpui in this whare.” Her eyes go straight to me.

One-wriggling-eel,

two-wriggling-eels,

three-wriggling-eels.

I’m not a girl. I’m probably half-robot, half-eel. But that’s not what she means. She means something else.

Farfalle smiles as though she can soothe the burning in the room. “It’s okay, Tuh-nae, we love you no matter what. You’re whānau.”

“Absolutely.” Zuri makes a love-heart with her fingers and thumbs. Ugh.

“Shame, Faf. She doesn’t want to be related to you,” Clover says, then under her breath: “coz that would be incest.”

I stare at Clover. ((How does she know?))

“Heavens. Never a dull moment with you lot,” Claire says. “Now, sweets, don’t forget to reapply your sunblock—”

“YES. I KNOW.”

“Actually, Diggeress, is that coffee still on offer?”

“Absolutely.”

Whaea D and Claire disappear into the kitchen, leaving us to deal with the dankness created by Clover. I’m back to thinking I don’t really like her.

“So, tell me about your week.” Aisling claps her hands. “I want to know every single detail.”

“Uh—” Lí Xiu looks to me “—for each door, different answer.” Her concerned smile doesn’t irk me this time. I kind of want her to feel sorry for me for what Clover just did.

“Yeah, I totally agree,” Farfalle says. “We adored the sisters with the wishing well in their own little ‘secret garden’. June and Celeste? Daphne was in heaven.”

I don’t tell Farfalle I know June. I also don’t tell her they’re not sisters, they’re wives.

“What about your story from the other day, Clo-Clo?” Zuri says.

“Oh, yeah. You wanna tell it, Kai?”

“Nah, you go, cuz.”

“First this clown wanted to hear our pitch in Te Reo. I thought he was taking the piss, but he knew what Kai was saying. Then he said he had to get his old man, but it was just him wearing a Trump mask. He gave us foam bats and told us to whack him while he talked smack about Mother Nature.”

“Are you serious?” Aisling says.

“Yeah, and he had the voice down. Told me to chill and to stop being such an angry little girl. He said he’d donate one buck to Sea Shepherd for every whack, so we went hard.”

“That’s wild,” Zuri says.

I don’t believe Clover. I don’t laugh and I don’t smile.

“Yo, Tāne’s Daughter, got those words for me to type up?” she says.

I don’t want to talk to her, but everyone’s watching so I give her one nod. Full stop.

She clicks her fingers at me.

I bolt off the floor and head for the hallway. Clover follows.

“Oi, what’s wrong with you?”

My lips tighten as I unzip my backpack.

“Geez, stop acting like I’m the dick for saying things that are super-obvious.”

My mood shrinks into a tiny hard ball.

“Anyway, you’re wasting your time with Faf. You think she’s nice, but she does that for everyone. Also, she’s way too old. It would be gross. Like paedophilia or something.”

A sting burns up from behind my nose.

“And no-one cares if you’re queer. Everyone’s just confused about what they’re meant to call you.”

I grab my not-a-birthday-present diary and hold it out to the neighbour who’s definitely not my friend.

***

“Can I go with Tan-ya?”

“Called it,” Clover says.

If I had one wish, I'd make her shut up for the rest of the day. Anytime she started to say something, her jaw would zip closed.

"I have a question—" Aisling looks to me, as always "—can I hold onto your arm?"

Uh. Why is that even a question? She literally just had enough Infectors to send her to hospital.

Lí Xiu looks from Aisling to me and back to Aisling. "You can say again, please? I was not understand."

"I said I need to hold onto someone's arm. So I don't fall."

"OH-kay. No problem." Lí Xiu offers her elbow. "You can hold."

"Thanks." Aisling sounds disappointed. That makes me sad for Lí Xiu. She's actually the best person here.

"It's because of the albinism."

"Huh?"

"The fact I'm legally blind."

"Ooooh. You are blind? I was not knowing."

"I *can* see, just not like you see. And new places trip me up, sometimes."

I feel bad for thinking she was just gawking all the time.

"Is this oh-kay? Too fast?" Lí Xiu says.

"You can just walk normally." Aisling pushes her glasses up her nose. "So, how does this work? Who does the talking?"

She can do all the talking for all I care.

Little~Fish~Sleepover

“Please, please, please can I stay too?” Aisling makes her dinosaur face at Claire.

“I don’t know, sweets.”

“PLEASE. If something goes wrong, Whaea D can just call you.”

“Can she, now?”

“We promise we’ll look after her, eh guys?” Farfalle says, while Zuri nods.

“Absolutely. You can count on us, Mummy-Claire.”

Even I want Aisling to stay. I thought I was going to have a terrible day, but it was actually fun because of her. Each house she put on a different voice. Nobody could tell except Lí Xiu and me, so we had to pretend everything was normal, and it made me smile so hard. Then she did silly walks from house to house.

“You’re not really prepared for a sleepover, are you?”

“Before you say ‘no’, listen, can’t we just go home and get everything then come back? Please, Mum, I NEVER get to have sleepovers. EVER. Unless you count hospital, which I don’t.”

The whole room holds its breath.

“Oh, I suppose so,” Claire sighs. “If Diggeress says it’s alright?”

Whaea D nods. “Of course. As long as Aisling will be safe here.”

“She’ll be fine. And if she’s not, you’ve got my number.”

“Mum, PLEASE can I stay while you go and get my stuff? I don’t want to leave for one minute! Shall we sleep here on the lounge floor?”

“Is everyone staying?” Farfalle looks hopeful.

“Nah,” Kai says. “Sadly, I gotta bounce, cuz.”

“Aww.” Clover slumps onto the large sofa. “Dumb. Can you at least stay for the first bit?”

“If you go, we understand.” Lí Xiu pats Kai’s hand. “So much mahi to do.”

“Oh, true, you’re gonna be in an exhibition, eh?” Clover says. “How’s that going?”

“Yeh, getting there.”

Lí Xiu touches Kai’s arm. “Kai-hau-tu, you should show photo.”

“Yeah. Show us.” Clover smacks the cushion next to her on the long couch.

Kai sits and the others crowd around them, while I stay on the green two-seater. The ambassador bus reverses out of the Jones’s driveway as another car pulls in. Next moment, there’s a slamming of doors and a scuffing of shoes.

“Oh, wow,” Zuri says, sidling up to Kai. “You’ve got mad talent.”

“Can I see?” Aisling leans over Zuri.

“Mirror it, oi.” Clover heaves herself towards the coffee table and reaches for the remote. Next thing, Daphne appears in the doorway with cat-ears on her head and painted whiskers on her cheeks. She sways side to side with a wild look in her eyes and pokes her belly at us.

“Eww, Daph.” Clover wipes the remote on her pants. “Next time wash your paru fingers.”

The wild-eyed cat stomps into the middle of the lounge, throws her *Dora the Explorer* backpack on the floor and screams for three whole caterpillars before marching out again.

Ow. Goodbye hearing cells. The room is stunned for a second, then Clover heaves a belly-laugh. Daphne lets out another scream in the hallway, but this time Whaea D intercepts.

“That’s enough. Go to the bathroom, please.”

Daphne starts wailing.

Kuia Jean pokes her head in the door. “Tired girl.”

“Are you okay, Kui? You must be tired too,” Farfalle says. “I’ll make you a cup of tea and bring it to you in your chair.”

“Do you need any help?” Zuri jumps up, ready to follow.

“Hei aha, girls. The tea can wait. This one needs me for now.”

I secretly hate the way Daphne gets to tantrum whenever she wants and everyone just lets her. I can’t even imagine what would happen if I did that.

“Earth to Kai.”

“Yep-yep.” Kai fiddles with their phone, next moment a painting appears on the TV. The wahine has red clay for skin and wide-open eyes with a fiery glint, like she’s looking past us at something awesome. Her nostrils are splayed, as though she’s taking a breath as big as everyone’s gasps put together.

“Far, man, leave some talent for the rest of us,” Clover jokes.

Lí Xiu nudges Kai. “You should tell the story.”

“Aw, they don’t want to hear me rambling, E te tau.”

“Uh, yeah we do,” Clover says, echoed by everyone except me, though I’m thinking it.

“Well, my inspiration was the moment before the first human, Hineahauone—who was made from the feminine element of the Earth—took what was hers to take from the male element. Essentially, life force.”

“Is to say, *Tī-hei mauri-ora*!’” Lí Xiu’s voice is full of pride.

The words ring in my ears, even after the TV screen goes black. I know this story of being sneezed to life by Tāne Mahuta's breath.

"Okay, gangstas," Clover says, jolting me out of déjà vu. "Let's get this party started."

"Oh, can we please-please-please play truth or dare?" Aisling says dizzily. "We play it all the time in hospital. You wouldn't believe some of the dares. It's extra funny because the cystic fibrosis kids and the bronchitis kids can't breathe the same air, so we have to use walkie talkies and watch each other through the glass."

"Fine by me," Clover says. "But Kai should go first cos they have to leave early."

Kai smiles and shakes their head. "Go on, then."

"Truth or dare?" Aisling says.

"Truth? I guess." Kai leans forward and takes a coaster from the coffee table, then rolls it over the glass, until its cartoon pūkeko is standing on its head.

"Do you LOVE Lee Sh-eu?"

"Of course. Haha." Kai returns the coaster to flat as a chorus of "oooohs" rise up.

"Lee Sh-eu—" Aisling slides off the couch and onto the carpet "—how do you say 'I love you' in Mandarin?"

Lí Xiu thinks for a moment. "Uh . . . I would say to Kai: Wǒ xǐ huān nǐ."

"Woh-she-wan-ee?" Aisling does her best to mimic.

Lí Xiu nods. "Is to say: 'I like you.'"

Clover snorts. "Sounds like you're in lurve with her, but she's only in like with you, bruh."

"Mmm." Lí Xiu shakes her head. "We only say, 'love'—how to say—very formal time. In China, people would think very strange if I say 'I love' to Kai."

"Ha. My bad." Clover yawns. "Okay, truth or dare Queen of the Fairies?"

There's a pause, then Aisling perks up.

"Oh! Truth. I thought you meant Tan-ya, because that's literally her name-meaning, too."

"Of course it is," Clover mutters. "So, is it true you're albino?"

"Clo! That's a bit, uh—"

"It's okay, I honestly don't mind," Aisling says to Farfalle with hyperactive speed. "So basically, my cells don't produce much melanin which affects the way I look and see."

"True. Why don't you have a guide dog? That would be sweet as."

"Mum said they won't give me one till I'm older. I have to be able to communicate properly or something. Who's asking you, Clover?"

"Me!" Zuri says. "Truth or dare, Clo-Clo?"

"Gimme a dare."

"Woo! Okay, I dare you to get that ice-cream Whaea D was talking about and squeeze all the topping straight into the container."

"Is that all?" Clover hoists herself up off the couch and ambles into the kitchen. There's an opening of doors and a rattling of spoons. For a moment, I'm back in the soggy bog waiting for Kuia Jean to return and save me from the wailing wāhine. Instead, Clover returns with her arms full of dessert stuff, and instead of wails, there are cheers.

Kai reaches out just as a spoon falls.

"Chur." Clover plonks the ice-cream container on the coffee table and peels off the lid.

She shakes the bottle of chocolate whiz, turns it upside down, then squirts the runny topping out onto the vanilla in wheezy wet bursts. Dark puddles spread across the creamy surface until the bottle splutters its last oily breath.

“Oh wow, do you think it will harden?” Zuri says, picking up a spoon. “Maybe if we spread it out.”

Everyone (except me) grabs a spoon.

“It’s only hardening low down,” Aisling says, tapping lightly. “Make sure there are no thick patches.”

“Aw.” Clover scrunches her face. “But thick’s better.”

Kai digs into one corner, then feeds it to Lí Xiu. I catch Farfalle watching them with an expression I haven’t seen on her before. Like real happiness mixed with real sadness.

“Mmm. So sweet!” Lí Xiu says.

“Not until it’s set!” Clover fake-scolds, smoothing out the corner with more chocolate.

“Hehe. My bad.” Kai wipes a drip off Lí Xiu’s chin.

“You guys are adorable.” Zuri sighs across the melting biohazard. “How long have you been together?”

Lí Xiu and Kai look at each other, then start counting in their heads.

“Six month?”

Kai nods.

“How did you meet?” At least if Zuri keeps milking the same truth, the game will stay off me.

“Ah, at—how to say—L-G-T event?”

“LGBTQIA+, I believe,” Aisling pipes up. “I’m actually an ally.”

“Was it *like* at first sight?” Zuri says with a cheeky grin.

“It is true I never see such a sweet, uh—spirit—before.”

“Aw. I remember this absolute angel appeared out of nowhere,” Kai says in a way that makes my insides blush. “Every time I tried to talk, I got shy, so I just kept offering plates of food. After watching me clown for a bit, she took pity. Asked me to sit with her. Then I discovered Lí Xiu was not only the most graceful person I’d ever laid eyes upon, but also the kindest and most sincere, with thoughts about the world that took my mind to a whole new dimension.”

“See?” Lí Xiu picks up Kai’s hand. “So sweet.”

“Ho-ly.” Clover blows air through her teeth, while the others shuffle around in excited agreement. “Boi, we’d better change ur name to Romeo.”

Kai pinkens. “Hey, you could shove that in the freezer, give the chocolate a hurry-up.”

“Yes,” Aisling says. “That could work.”

Clover takes the ice cream and whistles out of the room.

“Go, Tāne’s Daughter,” she says, returning from the kitchen. “Truth-or-dare Zuri.”

“You can choose for me, Tuhnae,” Zuri says. “I can’t decide.”

“Uh—” Mama’s advice reets through my mind: *It doesn’t matter what you say, Nay-Nay as long as you say something.*

“So . . . you’re from England?”

Zuri nods. “I was born there, but my mum’s from South Asia and my dad’s from Northwest Africa, so you could say that’s where I get my devastatingly good looks.”

Farfalle blows Zuri a kiss, and Kai gives her a high-five.

“Random question,” Aisling says abruptly, “but who in this room gets periods?”

Ugh.

Hands pop up around the coffee table while rule number three spins inside my Giant Red Swirl. Aisling seems relieved that my hand isn't up, either. Maybe Lí Xiu didn't understand the question.

"So, everyone with their hand up, what's it like to bleeeed?" Aisling asks.

"Hey, don't leave Tāne out," Clover says. "They bleed more than any of us—just out their nose."

Ugh.

"I mean blood out the UTERUS," Aisling huffs. "I heard there are all these different phases in the menstrual cycle that literally change your brain, and right before you bleed, your immune system weakens, so you feel like you've got the flu."

"The dreaded luteal." Farfalle nods. "I honestly don't mind it. Bleeding was a bit weird at first, but now it makes me feel kind of energised."

"Pshhh, lucky for some. All I want is to feed and sleeeeep, yo."

"I hear you." Zuri turns to Clover. "Mine are mad unpredictable. One month, spots. Next month, boom! Right down to the mattress."

"Have yous looked into IUDs?" Kai says. "It's a bit sore when they shove it in—okay, real damn sore—but once it's there, the bleeding will stop or be light as. It lasts for ages and it's free."

"True?" Zuri says.

"Yeah. But do some reading, cos there can be side-effects. Mum took hers out cos it made her feel māruru, but I dunno, might be worth checking out?"

"Chur for the info," Clover says. "Go ahead, Julz, truth-or-dare Tāne."

"Oh-kay." Lí Xiu turns to me. "What do you want, Ta-nay? The truth or the dare?"

Neither, but I also don't want awkward silences.

“Truth?” It’s the lesser of two evils, as Mama would say. At least that way I won’t have to *do* anything.

“Hmm,” Lí Xiu studies me for a long moment. “What are you think about when so quiet?”

I shrug. “Nothing.”

“Nah, come on, T.” Clover stares me down. “We’re your friends and we never know what’s going on in your head, like, ever.”

“We know you think about save Tah-nay Mahuta,” Lí Xiu says. “But what else does Ta-nay think?”

“This game is stupid.”

Kai chuckles at my answer. “So, how’s that aihikirīmi coming along?”

“I’ll check.” Farfalle rises to standing in one graceful movement.

She returns beaming. “Guys, it worked. Look.” Farfalle ice-skates two fingertips over the chocolatey surface.

“Lemme see.” Clover taps the dark shell. “Wowzers. Okay, raise ur spoons to our first week knocking, team! One street down, ten-thousand to go.”

Ugh.

There’s a clinking of metal, then spoons slip and scrape across the frosted surface. It’s a nightmare. Kai’s is the first to crack through. Then Clover’s. Chunks of chocolate shell stain lips and teeth. I imagine tongue-slime painting a new glittering of Evils with each lick, mingling and creepy-crawling through the wreckage.

“But if you just pee the blood out, why do you need period products?” Aisling says, nibbling on a triangle shard.

“Oh, geez—” Clover pretends to gag.

“Sorry, but isn’t it like urination?”

Farfalle swallows delicately, shaking her head. “You really only know *after* it has—uh, what’s the word?—sloughed out. And it doesn’t all come at the same time. More like trickles here and there. Some days it’s heavier and comes out more frequently. It’s like having a runny nose. Does that make sense?”

Aisling nods vaguely.

“Can we stop talking about this now?” A bit of chocolate falls from Clover’s lip and melts on her tights. “Aw.” She licks her finger and rubs it off. “Okay, truth or dare, Julz?”

“I answer one truth, one truth, only,” Lí Xiu says, in a mock-serious voice. “Make wise choice, Clo-va.”

“No pressure, lol.” Clover cracks her knuckles. “What do you honestly think about living here? Mum hates it cos she’s so far away from everything. Everyone else seems to act like it’s the shiz. But is it tho?”

Lí Xiu’s smile changes. “It is so nice here with all the treez and blue sky and so much nature e’rywhere,” she says, pausing like Auntie does when she’s lining up words I don’t want to hear. “Sometime the people—uh—not so nice. They not happy to see visitor. Or not even ‘visitor’. My host family came from China not long after Treaty.”

Kai puts a hand on her back.

“It is okay. Everyone in this room is very nice,” Lí Xiu says, nodding, her smile returning to its full glow. “Like the ice-cream with chocolate shell.” She takes a small piece and uses it to draw a moustache above her top lip.

“Luv you, gurl,” Farfalle says, picking up a piece of chocolate.

Within seconds, everyone—except me—has chocolate mos and goatees.

“Tāne’s daughter, where’s your ice cream?” Clover pretends to study me through a monocle made with her thumb and finger. Then she scratches the curl at one end of her chocolate moustache. “Hmmm. You don’t really need the chocolate, eh?”

I hate that I can’t keep my expression robotic. I hate that I didn’t force myself to pluck all the dark hairs with Auntie’s tweezers, but it stung and there were so many. I thought no-one would look at me that closely. Guess that was stupid.

“Don’t feel bad, Tuhnae,” Farfalle says. “I’ve seen Clover wax hers with sticky plasters.”

“I never said it was a bad thing. Sheesh.”

“My mum gets hers zapped with a laser,” Zuri adds. “But I’m not saying you should do that, Tuhnae. I think you suit the way you look.”

My cheeks flame again.

“Pizza will be here in around fifteen minutes,” Whaea D calls from the hallway. “There’ll be gluten-free, and vegetarian options, courtesy of Claire.”

“Aw, you gotta stay for the pizza,” Clover says to Kai. “Also, Tāne wants to ask you a question.”

My eyes shoot to Clover.

“About being enby.”

I NEVER said that.

“Sweet as.”

Not sweet as.

“Uh, Clo?” Aisling’s voice turns tattle-tale. “Maybe you shouldn’t talk for Tan-ya?”

“Pshhh. Fine, it’s my question.”

Kai’s eyes bounce from me to Clover, then down to their hands. “All good.”

“How did you know you were non-binary?”

There’s a long, uncomfortable silence. Finally, Kai clears their throat.

“Uh, well, I didn’t exactly have the words for it when I was younger. I just knew I felt different from how everyone expected me to behave, I guess.” They slide a coaster from the coffee table again. “I acted like a guy around guys, so they called me a tomboy, and I tried to act girly around girls. And like a sister and a daughter, or whatever. But the thing is, I was always acting, so I felt fake. It was like playing dress-up, I guess, except not just with clothes. I copied what I saw, but that always felt too—I don’t know— extreme? Like the real me was more subtle. I was always there, just pretty-much invisible.”

I wish I was invisible right now so Clover’s eyes would stop landing on me.

“I guess the label just gave me a way to talk about what has always been true. And it helps other people see more of who I actually am.”

“Mm. Same thing.” Lí Xiu pats Kai on the knee. “I always know—this is me. Feel very strange when people want me pretend to be other person. Not understand why the rule are different for boy and girl. When little, very confuse.”

“Yeah, some people make things way harder than they need to be,” Kai says. “Just be yourself and let others be themselves, too.”

“But what about people who legit want to harm others?” Clover says. “Why would we want them to be their nasty true selves?”

Kai shrugs. “I don’t understand wanting that, eh? We need other people to survive. And other people make everything worth surviving, anyway.”

Something slips inside my robot ribcage.

The worst sound in the universe tries to push up through my lungs. I clamp down just in time. But the sensation doesn't shrink. It just pushes until there's no more room to hold it in.

Aisling's eyes follow my charge across the lounge.

"Tan-ya?"

I shut the door behind me in a way that says: DO NOT FOLLOW.

My chest is heaving like it's going to throw-up my lungs. I lock myself in the bathroom. But the more I try to force the gusting to stop, the worse it gets.

"Tani-love?"

I freeze.

"Will you open the door?"

I manage to un-scrunch my face long enough to obey Kuia Jean and look her in the eye.

"Come. Sit with us."

She takes my arm and leads me into the almost-darkness of Daphne's room, where purple light dots the ceiling in the shape of stars, moons, and planets.

"Hi Taneee." Daphne sits upright from under her *Dora the Explorer* bedspread. "You can have this pillow. And you can hug that bear." She points to a teddy like Clover's, except with a tutu instead of an eye-patch.

"Would you show Tani what we were doing?"

Daphne flops back down on her pillow and squeezes her eyes closed. "I can feel blankety-ness under my head. I can feel tickle-ee-ness in my nose—" she pauses to scratch it "—I feel swallowing in my mouth. I feel darkness over my eyeballs. And I'm itching the top

of my foot with my other toes. And I can hear a naughty car on the road. And the air is blowing the leaves in the trees. And I can hear Taneee breathing."

At least I'm not gusting anymore.

"Ka pai. Now, your turn, Tani-love. What can you feel? Perhaps start with the bottoms of your feet."

"Carpet?" I say, feeling stupid.

"Ka pai. And what does the carpet feel like"

"Soft?"

"Good. Now tell us three things you can see."

"Stars," I mumble. "A doll's house."

"You did rua," Daphne holds up two stubby fingers.

"Darkness."

"Ka pai, now three things you can hear."

"Uh—"

There's a toilet flushing, but I don't want to say that. I just hope whoever it is doesn't come looking for me.

"Tania?"

"A siren," I say, "and, ah—a door closing. My heartbeat." *BA-bup*.

"Ka pai. Now tell us three more things you can feel. The first things you notice."

I shrug.

"What's that āmaimai?" Kuia Jean says, pointing towards my shoulders.

"Tightness."

"Good. So, tightness in your shoulders. What else?"

"Stinging. And slime on my face."

“I’ll find a cloth. While I’m gone, I want you to notice three nice feelings, no matter how small.”

“I’ll tell you,” Daphne says in a loud whisper as Kuia Jean leaves the room. Before she closes the door, I catch a glimpse of Claire carrying what looks like medical equipment down the hall. Two black tubes attached to a vest and a white box. “Taneeaa! Whakarongo mai! I said my snuggle-blanket and my rabbit and Kui’s voice talking all nicely. You can say those things too cos you’re my friend. And I’ll tell you: *Hā ki roto*. She picks at the poster of the karakia on her wall. “Now you say it, too, Taneeea: *Haa kee rrror tor*. And now say: *Hā ki waho*.” She takes a massive breath and blows out, counting eight stubby fingers. Then starts speeding through the reo, raising her voice for the last words: “*TIHEI MAURI ORA.* Or you can read the Pākehā.”

Breathe in Breathe out

Settle the mauri that stirs inside of me

Through the ups and downs

It is peace I seek

“Her and me can say the same, eh?” Daphne says, bolting upright again as Kuia Jean returns.

“Of course, but Tani might have different answers.”

“I feel coldness,” I say, pressing the flannel against my face. “No-one talking too loudly. The duvet under my bum.”

Daphne giggles when I say “bum”.

“Well, now I suppose it’s my turn.”

Kuia Jean closes her eyes and lets out a long breath. She has tiny hairs above her lip, too. And on her chin. But they shine silver against the light of Daphne’s star lamp.

“I smell the lavender from the shampoo I used to wash my moko’s hair. I hear the call of the crickets. The sway of wind in tree branches. The sound of my own breath, in and out. I feel tiredness in my muscles. Soreness in my foot. Relief to rest in the dark and quiet with two of my girls at my side.”

Daphne yawns and brings her thumb to her mouth, nuzzling down into the blankets. I’ve never heard Kuia Jean call me one of her girls before.

The old kuia opens her eyes. “I see kōtiro with shadows on their faces, ready to moemoe. Kōtiro who are beside themselves with tiredness, because everything looks new through their eyes. But they are actually the new ones. And they are not on the outside of things, collecting worlds to keep safe in their pockets like marbles made of glass. They are on the inside of a swirling pattern that is lively and chaotic and multifaceted and even bigger than their imaginations.”

For a moment, I think I’m imagining her words, then Kuia Jean reaches for a book and the bed jiggles.

“We were about to read one more story. Would you like to listen, Tania-love?”

There’s a picture of a kauri tree on the front, with a bird flying out and a fiery sun bursting from behind.

“Yes,” Daphne says through a yawn, already half-asleep.

While Kuia Jean reads the reo, my mind drifts from her voice to the pictures to a soft mechanical noise I can hear through the wall, then back to the pictures again. There’s a tiny seed growing in a mound of soil. Then three long branches reaching into a pale sky, swirling with wind that is shaped round and round, smaller and smaller, like koru. Finally, a grown-up tree beside a crescent moon.

"Papa said to Kauri, *'I am Papatūānuku. Every lifeform depends on me. I was here long before you grew. And long after you are gone, I will remain.'"*

***

Little~Fish~and~the~Sleepover~Part~Two

I hear coughing and spitting as I change into my tie-dye pyjamas. When I leave Clover's room, Aisling is in the bathroom washing her hands, so I back up and wait twenty caterpillars before following her back into the lounge.

"Everyone, I regret to inform you that I am lactose intolerant," Aisling says as I slink towards the half-eaten pizza. "After all this dairy, there WILL be consequences. Whatever you do, DO NOT go to the toilet after me."

Zuri bursts into laughter. "Sorry," she splutters. "I'm on a major sugar-high."

"You oh-kay?" Lí Xiu mouths from across the coffee table.

I nod.

"Aw, I love ur pjs so much." Farfalle smiles up at me from the long couch as Clover appears at my side, shoving a pottle of ice cream at me.

"It's fresh," she says. "Don't tell Whaea D. I took it from her secret stash."

"What flavour have you got?" Zuri says.

I tilt the lid so she can see.

"Chocolate ripple. Nice." She gives a smile that seems like it's just for me, too.

"Anyway, going back to the conversation we were having before my *mother* interrupted me," Aisling says, "I had a dream that Clover was queen and I was her loyal subject."

"I can totally see that," Zuri says, choking slightly. "Ow. Ow-ow-ow. Brain freeze."

Lí Xiu nods. "Yes, Clo-va—you have the queen spirit."

"I totally agree," Zuri says. "You're very regal."

Clover farts, setting off another round of the silly-gigs. Except this time, I join in.

“Uh—” Farfalle fans her nose.

“Have you considered you might also be lactose intolerant?” Aisling says excitedly.

“Nah.” Clover lets out a massive belch. “Are you heading?”

Kai nods. “Probably should. Maybe in five.”

“Oh, that’s enough time!” Zuri reaches for her purple suitcase. “Everyone, shut the doors. It’s time to release some endorphins.”

“Some what now?” Clover hoists herself off the floor.

“Errr, yeah,” Farfalle says, looking kind of green. “Something’s been released alright, and I’m not sure we should be closing it in, Zuri Kaba.”

“We must!” Zuri pulls a UE Boom from her suitcase. “Everyone up. It’s time to dance!” Next moment, a familiar beat shakes into the lounge through the little purple speaker.

“Ye-ah!” Clover wags her bum at Zuri. Zuri wags back. Clover ups the ante with a kind-of twerk, which starts a full-on battle of the bums. Aisling dances on the spot, floating her hands as though she’s doggy-paddling through the air, while Kai and Lí Xiu spin each other round in wonky twirls.

I feel vibrations coming up through the floorboards. For some reason, I don’t mind the noise and movement. My toes start to tap. My knees start to sway. The more sway, the more energy comes. The more energy, the bigger the movements. The bigger the movements, the more the space around me buzzes. I let it move me like yoga. Bending my body into different shapes like birds and trees and bubbles and stomping thunder.

“Yeh-boi!” Clover says, whooping in my direction.

Zuri jumps right in front of me and starts dancing like a mirror. Her smile is so happy and her eyes are so bright, I can’t help but smile back. It’s weird. Every move feels like a

reflection, but I can't tell who's reflecting who. It's like our bodies are talking at the speed of light.

All of a sudden, the feeling gets too big, so I close my eyes and dance through the textures in my mind.

"That was sweet as, team," Kai says when the song ends. "Thanks for all the laughs. E noho rā."

"Byeee," Zuri and Aisling chorus, while Farfalle steps forwards for a hug.

"Haere rā, luv u."

"Laterz." Clover gives Kai a fist-bump then rests back against the foot of Kuia Jean's La-Z-Boy, stroking her puku while poking it out as far as it will go. "Check it out, yo—I think it's twins."

"Ur so crack up, sis," Farfalle says. "I kind of like the sound of Auntie Farfalle tho. Has a nice ring to it."

"Whatever." Clover lets her puku drop.

"Question," Aisling says as Lí Xiu follows Kai outside, "does everyone know what a clitoris is?"

"Jesus."

"What?"

Clover blows air through her teeth and shakes her head. "Go on, Doctor Jones."

"*You* go on," Farfalle says, swaying into the hallway. "It's not exactly medical."

"Zuri?"

Zuri starts giggling again. Clover doesn't even bother asking me.

"Fine. All I'm gonna say is it's the part that feels good—"

“YES, I know,” Aisling talks over Clover. “I was just checking you all know that, because my friend at hospital thought it’s where they put the catheter.”

“Nah, not the pee-hole. Or the v-hole. The part at the top, with the hood.”

Aisling looks off to the side as though she’s imagining a vulva.

I’m imagining a bump wearing a hoodie that says “Hello World”.

“Kai, wait up,” Clover calls. “We should publish our website before you go.”

She’s never going to let them leave.

“Too late, I think?” Zuri says, opening the curtain. “Yep. Too late.”

“Aw. I’ll just have to show you, then. Just shut your pie-holes, cos if we wake Daphne, all sleepovers will be cancelled forever.” Clover leads us down the hall in a creep, and no-one dares breathe until she closes her bedroom door behind us. Clover swipes her mouse, waking the computer screen to reveal Kai’s graphics. “We can change the slideshow to whatever,” she says, clicking on the side menu. “I put some basic info. And Kai created links so people can donate to Te Roroa, and the Tree Council, who do activism with lawyers and stuff.”

“Eeee!” Zuri claps. “We’re on TikTok.”

“Can I just say the ‘d’ in their logo makes no sense,” Aisling says. “I mean, there’s no ‘d’ in TikTok.”

“Hmm—actua-ry, in China, ‘Douyin’ is name for you call the TikTok. Is to say, uh, ‘shaking sound’. Also, look like the musical note.” Lí Xiu paints a quaver in the air with her fingertip.

“Truuue,” Zuri says, while Aisling looks like she’s storing the fact to bring out and show off later. “Is that Tuhnae?”

“Yip-yip.” Clover flashes me a look.

Ugh. I didn't even know I was being watched in that moment, let alone photographed.

"What do you think, boi?" Clover says. "Pretty rad pic, eh?"

No. Long. Silences. "I think you're sneaky," I blurt.

"Chur." Clover looks proud. "I do my best. Anyway, you can talk, Tree-Spy."

"Wow! I LUV that pic. Is that in Waipoua?"

"Obviously. You'll let us keep it cos Faf likes it, eh Tāne's daughter?"

"I was anyway."

"Faf's right, you're so photogenic," Zuri says.

Clover snorts. "It's from behind."

"Still. The way she's gazing up at Tāne. She looks striking."

Clover pinches the dimple on her chin and nods. "Yeh. True. So, can we use it?"

"Fine," I say, even though I secretly want it there, so Zuri will see it and think I'm striking.

"Sa-weet." Clover clicks PUBLISH. "Now everyone go share. Let's spread this thang."

PART TWO

Little~Fish~Swings~and~Seesaws

There are so many sensations to notice. Like the air through my arm-hairs when I walk outside. Or the change in texture stepping from concrete onto grass.
Or the buzz of success . . .

Since Clover's sleepover, Team TREEs has gained super-speed—we've nearly knocked-off all the doors in this neighbourhood! Super-strength plus super-speed feels like invincibility, but it can also become a bit of a hazard. Anytime Ba-bup trips into forbidden territory, I just do what Kuia Jean said and focus on every other feeling.

Heat rises up from the rubber through my trackpants as I find the right position: not too far forwards, not too far back. Daphne wants me to teach her to swing, so I said maybe after the meeting today, but first I need to figure out how I actually do it. Pushing my legs out, I lean back until my arms are straining and I'm half-dangling. Then I pull my chest forwards while sweeping my legs under, so they splay backwards. That's basically it. Push forward. Pull back.

Except, your feet move in the direction you're swinging, and your weight sort of shifts opposite. So it's not just the direction of your feet, but also the energy you put behind them. It takes a lot of effort to build momentum from nothing, but once you find a rhythm it gets easier. If you increase power, each forwards thrust will charge you further and each backwards swing will take you higher.

When I get close to parallel with the bar, there's a moment when I float in space, then the chains flop and it feels like I'm going to fall straight down. I do for a second, then my weight sinks back into the rubber and follows the curve.

The jolt sometimes bungs my sway and I have to be careful not to ram into the pole. There's a nice height where I stop feeling unco, but not clunky. High, but not too high. Each swing is smooth and even like a pendulum. And if I let go while rising quarter-way between the ground and the forwards peak, I fly. It's kind of scary letting go, but for a split-second, I can imagine what it would feel like to have zero gravity. Then g-forces zip through my belly, and there's a moment of panic when all the air pulls out of my lungs. Then slam. Ground shock.

The sting needles through the soles of my feet, up the bone of my shins. I won't teach Daphne that, cos if you land wrong . . .

The shock isn't too bad this time, but it still takes me a moment to stand and my palms smell like blood. They're not cut, they're just red from gripping onto the chains. Probably smells like that cos I'm actually made of metal.

"Woah, Tuh-nae."

Farfalle waves from across the playground. She's with some guy in shorts and a singlet.

"That was *sick*," he says, releasing a cloud of Evils over the seesaws.

"Nah, don't do that around her, bro. She's got asthma."

"Ow. My bad."

"Tuh-nae, have you met Feleti?"

"Hi," I say.

"Heya." He smiles at me with Farfalle's eyes, which kind of weirds me out. "K, bye."

As Feleti walks back across the playground, I imagine what it would feel like to have his body. Probably like super-super-strength.

Farfalle points to the swing that isn't moving. "All good if I—?"

“Sure.”

I bet Feliti could hang from the top bar and do pull ups.

Farfalle flips the seat so the white streaks of bird poo are facing down. I look away as her thighs squish into the rubber, and remember my sanitiser.

“You know, soap’s better for Papatūānuku.” Farfalle’s sneakers drag along the rubber turf. “Have you always been worried about germs?”

“I’m not worried.”

“Are you just extra careful cos of ur mum?” She glances towards Auntie’s fence.

“Do you want to hear a funny story about her?” I say, searching for something that will make Farfalle feel better about the damsel.

“Yea, gurl! Always.”

“So, my real Home is actually on a farm.”

“In Northland, right?”

“Yeah. And after it rains, there’s this patch of dirt that turns to mud, like half-melted chocolate.”

Farfalle closes her eyes and smiles like she can feel the deliciousness.

“Once, she covered herself in that mud. Like all over. Smeared it over her arms and legs and even her face. Then she chased me across the paddock.”

I don’t tell Farfalle I was in a mood because it was just after the damsel said we had to leave. Or how her voice echoed across the gully: “There’s no escaping Papatūānuku, my daughter!”

“She sounds crack up. I wish I could meet her.”

“You can if you want.” The words come out by accident.

“True?”

“Yeah . . . You just have to make sure you’re not infectious.”

“Do you reckon the others could come?”

“Uh, probably?” I mumble as Clover appears wearing her Hello World tee.

Kai and Lí Xiu are next to arrive, followed by Zuri and Aisling, walking arm in arm.

“Someone launch me,” Clover says as she balances on one end of the munted see-saw. “Kai?”

“Nah, I’ll send you to the moon, cuz.”

Clover shrugs. “I’m keen.”

“What is it you wanted to tell us, Clo?” Farfalle pings a daisy-head at her sister. “Dad’s waiting.”

“Fine.” Clover jumps off the seesaw. “So, we’ve all been stressing about how to get new volunteers, right? Well I reckon we attract them with a sweet-as party.”

The idea bounces off Zuri, Aisling and Farfalle’s excitement, and picks up speed before I can get a proper grip on it. Fancy dress. Nature themes. Sponsor-a-Tree. By the time I have found words for my “no” feeling, Clover has already bossed out tasks and Lí Xiu has written them down.

“I lurve it,” Farfalle says. “Hey, Tuhnae, can I say that thing we were talking about before?”

And just like that, we’re having a party, and everyone is coming to see the damsel.

Little~Fish~V~The~Invisibles

New rule: whenever forbidden thoughts escape the dark place in my mind, my other thoughts just have to get LOUD. So, instead of thinking about how much I don't want my friends to see the damsel in distress, I'm focusing on our new plan. At first, I wasn't keen on the TREEs party idea, because I like our team the way it is, but maybe it'll be the same as when I only wanted Clover and me. Maybe once I know the new people, I'll like them too. Anyway, more people means more hands to knock. And working faster is how we win this race. I can feel the Evils gaining. Things keep happening that even Mama can't explain (((Like today I woke up with clear slime in my undies!#%?))).

"I think our goal should be to knock on one-hundred doors per day," I say, as we follow Auntie into the laundry. "At *least* one-hundred," I correct, my eyes briefly landing on Zuri—the only one who's actually listening. The others are too distracted by the fact they're inside the bubble-house. Zuri smiles up at me.

"Every time I think I can't be more impressed by you, Tanae, you prove me wrong."

My cheeks catch fire, just in time for Auntie to pull out her laser thermometer. After our temps are checked, she shows everyone how to wash their hands in the tub like a medical professional, then passes out facemasks.

"I'll find you a tie," she says to Zuri, "so you can fasten it over-top."

"Thanks, but that's okay." Zuri unwraps her blue headscarf.

"You can do that?" Aisling's jaw drops.

"Of course. It's not super-glued on. Oh, wow. This feels totally Sci-Fi." Zuri fits the mask's elastic bands behind her ears. It is strange seeing her without her hijab. I'm used to

seeing bright colour around her face, not dark brown hair tied up in a French plait. “Have I done it right?”

Zuri turns side to side so I can see. The mask is a bit big on her.

“Just pinch the metal strip.”

“Like that?” Her almost-black eyes peep up at me over the blue fabric, giving me a flashback of mirror-dancing at Clover’s sleepover.

I give her a thumbs up, then look down while she re-wraps her scarf.

“Man, are you sure your mum’s okay with us all rocking up like this?” Clover says. “Seems a bit over the top.”

“Not to me,” Aisling declares from inside her super-intense plastic mask that shields her whole face and makes her voice sound shrunken. “I’ve had approximately twenty doctors standing around my hospital bed at once. The first time, I thought they were each there to fix a different problem. When I found out they were just students, I was dis-a-pointed.”

“Mary is actually looking forward to meeting you all,” Auntie says. “It’s been hard for her spending so much time by herself. But thanks for being considerate.”

The word “considerate” scrapes across my robot-skin like chalk. I know Auntie thinks I should hang out with the damsel more, but that’s cos she doesn’t understand my mission.

“It’s like we’re actually part of Tuhnae’s mum’s immune system right now,” Farfalle says. “Like, her immune system goes beyond her body into our bodies and our immunity gives her immunity. Is that weird?”

“Not at all.” Auntie glances at me. “Our immune systems do extend beyond our own bodies, in a sense.”

She tells Farfalle what she told me when I first moved here. Basically, all the spaces in between us are alive with microbes, and we carry microscopic lifeforms around with us all the time.

"Generally, that's okay," Auntie says. "Our immune cells keep things in check. But Mary's have been wiped out, so she's relying on our immune systems to work as a kind of back-up."

I want to tell them not to worry, that I'm the one who has to save the damsel, because I'm the only one who grew inside her, and so I'm the one who has to share my double immunity. But even though everyone has gone quiet, I don't actually know how to explain what I mean.

While the others meet the damsel, I sit outside the living room door with Mama and try to make sense of my thoughts. Mama points her nose towards the gazillion voices, sniffing, twitching her whiskers, and flashing her long teeth. Probably because she thinks I should stop being a sog and go in there.

The floorboards creak, and the living room door opens before I can escape.

"Oh!" Lí Xiu squats beside us in her blue shorts and white top. "Hello, Ma-ma."

Mama steps her front paws onto Lí Xiu's hand and sniffs at her pink nails then up towards her face.

"It is hard to hear what e'ryone say," Lí Xiu half-whispers. "So much talk-talk-talk and laugh. Mary sense of humour is like Ta-nay sense of humour."

I'd never thought about that.

"Oooh. Is Ma-ma wanting Lí Xiu to hold?"

Just as Mama starts transferring her hind legs onto Lí Xiu's hand, there's a knock on the front door, and it opens slowly.

“Hullo!”

Mama startles back into my arm as Auntie’s nurse-friend steps inside. She’s the one who visited the other day with the too-kind smile who looks like Bic Runga. The one who kept talking about “palliative care” in her super-thick Kiwi accent. Later, I dreamt she was standing over my bed with a skull for a face, and a scythe for a hand which she used to slash my chest open, but when she tried to snatch Ba-bup, there was nothing except dirt.

“Aw.” The grim reaper shifts her too-kind smile towards Mama. “Hullo, cutie. I always wanted a hamster.”

She’s NOT a hamster.

“Actuary, Mah-ma is a g’nee pig,” Lí Xiu says with a friendly nod.

“Aw.” The grim reaper reaches out for an unwanted pat. “It sounds like Mum’s having fun in there?”

The damsel’s belly-laugh punches me in the solar plexus.

“Last time I was here, I think I left a little booklet with your auntie, Tania? I’m not sure if you guys have had a chance to read it yet, but I thought maybe you might have some questions for me?”

I trace the new Mama-scratch rising pink on my arm. Why would I want to read about some glum-looking kids talking about that stupid word “grief”?

“That’s okay,” the reaper says when I don’t answer. “Maybe next time.”

My only question is, when will everyone leave this house?

The last “goodbye” finally fades a gazillion years later with the closing of the front door. I creep out of my bedroom.

“Is that you, Ika Iti?”

Bum.

Counting caterpillars, I clomp into the living room. The air feels scrambled.

"How are you doing, lovie?"

"Mm." I wrap one arm over my waist, but that feels too much like Auntie hugging herself, so I let it drop.

"I like that colour on you." The damsel looks like she's thinking big things about me, but all I can see is the little smile that comes from her thoughts. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I grumble.

"What's up?"

"I just don't know why you're looking at me like that."

"I was just thinking about how much you've grown in the last month. Have you noticed your voice is sounding deeper? Your hair's getting a bit of length, too."

I want to snap that I'm going to cut it all off.

"Sorry," the damsel says, as though she's reading my mind. "Your body belongs to you, and if anyone says anything that makes you feel ick—including me—I want you to listen to those feelings. I think that's what you were doing the other day when I asked you to take me on your adventure with you. I'm sorry if I took our game too far, baby. It used to help you play outside when you needed me close to feel safe, and I was too unwell. But it's normal to start wanting more space. Anyway, I'm going to stop saying those things, unless you do, okay?"

"Kay." I glance back towards the doorway as the damsel lets out a big yawn, which turns into a chuckle.

"Your girlies crack me up. That wee Irish girl, my word—"

"Aisling."

The damsel nods. “Aisling. She paints a picture with words, doesn’t she? I feel like I have memories of you all dancing in your fancy costumes, and your ball hasn’t even happened yet!”

“Mm.”

“You look weary?”

The damsel’s gentle tone could slip me straight into the bog. But there’s no time for that. It’s time to get LOUD.

“A megaphone?” Clover raises her brow at me. “You want us to yell at people through their doors?”

I give myself a secret wedgie. The idea did sound better in my head.

“Tani, can I just say—” Aisling claps her hands together “—I’m soooooo glad I got to meet your mum. She said if I become a researcher, I should study guts and gardens, because gardens become our insides, and our insides are basically gardens. And did you know touching soil literally grows your immune system? Anyway. She’s amazing.”

“Totally. And hilarious,” Zuri says. The others agree, while I search for something else to feel.

“I know!” Aisling springs up on Clover’s bed and nearly falls back down, but manages to steady herself with Zuri’s head. “We could hire a blimp to tow our message through the sky.”

“YES. Or a horse and cart,” Zuri says.

“And how does that help us, exactly?”

Zuri shrugs at Clover. “We could trot along with the megaphone?”

“OH. And we could use it for our ball, too!” Aisling launches off Zuri’s head into a twirl and flops sideways into Clover’s pillows. “IMAGINE how splendiferous we would look in our suits and gowns.”

“Yes!” Zuri swoons beside Aisling.

“Guys—”

“AND we could paint it green to symbolise the environment.” Aisling squeezes Zuri’s hand. “The carriage, I mean. Not the horse.”

“GUYS.”

“Yes, Clo-Clo?”

“They want to interview us.”

“Who?”

“Ao FM.”

“Seriously?!” Zuri attempts to stand, gets caught in her skirt and nearly falls off Clover’s bed.

“I’m lost for words, but in a good way,” Aisling says.

I’m lost for words, but NOT in a good way.

While the others crowd around Clover’s computer screen, I scrunch caterpillars with my toes, and plan my exit.

“What do you say, T?” Clover swivels to face me in her gamer chair. “Gain some new recruits before we lose our chaperones? It’s basically a megaphone, but for the whole motu.”

All I can think about is my slime. And the damsel’s belly full of worms and compost.

“I’m going to miss Farfalle and Kai and Julz so much,” Zuri sighs. “I could actually cry.”

“Chill,” Clover says. “They’ll still be with us on weekends.”

“Yeah, but it won’t be the same.”

“Shame high school’s so intense, eh? I don’t get why everyone’s so focused on what jobs we’ll do in the future when there might not even be a future.”

“I know, right?” Zuri looks deflated.

“My Nana says the world’s always been ending according to someone’s story, and it’s only the cliffhanger that changes. So, all we can do is be good to each other and do our best.”

Clover looks like she has zoned out, but nods, vaguely. “True-true. So, how should I reply to this? Tāne’s Daughter, do you reckon you’ll be able to find your words under pressure?”

“I have to go,” I lie, putting my phone back in my pocket.

“Aw, but we just started.”

“Auntie says.” I shrug at Clover, and head for the door before anyone can question me further.

The air feels strange, like something’s stretching, and if it pulls too far, we’ll never be able to go back to Before.

Next thing, I’m frozen at the top of the slope on Auntie’s back lawn with Mama nosing the soft of my elbow.

Hush, Nay-nay.

Auntie’s talking about me, we can hear her through the open kitchen window.

“I just—she avoids any conversation that isn’t about trees.”

“I’m sure she’ll open up when she’s ready, hun.” Ugh. The Bic Runga lady.

“I hope so.”

“What does Mum think?”

Auntie lowers her voice. “Mary’s in her usual ‘she’ll-be-right’ mode. But I’m not so sure.”

Mama startles. Next thing, warm pee soaks through my t-shirt and turns cold against my skin. I sneak her back down to her hutch and poke paspalum through the holes in her cage until I've put a thousand caterpillars between myself and Auntie's worries

((((((((((something's wrong with Little Fish)))))))))))

One caterpillar two caterpillars three caterpillars four caterpillars five caterpillars six caterpillars . . . TWENTY-seven caterpillars twenty-eight caterpillars twenty-nine caterpillars . . . THREE-HUNDRED CATERPILLARS three-o-one caterpillars three-o-two caterpillars three-o-three caterpillars . . . five-o-thirty-four caterpillars five-o-thirty-five caterpillars five-o-thirty-six caterpillars . . . SEVEN-HUNDRED caterpillars . . . ~~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~~~ ~ ~ ~~ ~ ~~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~~~~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~~~~ ~ ~ ~ ~~~~ ~~ ~ ~

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Little~Fish~On~The~Air

The air in the studio tastes like warm dust and electronics, mixed with body spray.

"Tania Weaver?" The DJ's eyes land on me. "Do I have it right that Team TREEs was your idea?"

I shrug, then realise no-one can see body language on the radio. "Yeah. And Clo's."

"Clover Jones? It says on my notes you're the brains behind the team website?""

"Yeah, pretty much. But everyone contributes. Shout out to Kaihautu Parata. They couldn't be here today, but check out their exhibition. Link's on the front page."

"Awesome. So, what I'm hearing is this has been a team effort?"

"Yep. It started with this one's tree-obsession. We wanted to make an actual difference, so we joined the kauri ambassador volunteers in Waipoua. Things kind of escalated from there."

"For your information, we are knocking on all the doors in Tāmaki Makaurau." Aisling jumps in. "And soon we'll be throwing an enchanted arboreal ball for anyone who wants to volunteer."

"Ha. Amazing—and that's the key focus of your message, right? To raise awareness of kauri dieback?"

"And environmental stuff in general," Clover adds. "Like the kids on the street are saying, there's no Planet B. Unless you're a billionaire, I guess."

"True. And I don't know about you guys, but Mars doesn't sound too crash hot to me. Especially if it's crawling with billionaires. Ew. So, just to clarify for our listeners, in the room today, we also have Zuri Kaba?"

“Eeee!” Zuri bounces on her swivel chair and nearly loses her microphone. “Sorry, I’m so excited to be here!”

“Aw, we’re excited to have you. And sorry, who was I talking to before?”

Aisling clears her throat. “Aisling O’Ryan. I’m the youngest team member, except for Daphne, she’s an Alpha. As in the generation who will have to clean up all the other generations’ messes. You probably know that already. Sorry for mansplaining. I had blood taken just before this, so my brain’s a bit woo-woo.”

“Oh, wow, thanks for making the effort. Actually, speaking of—I’m wondering how you find space for activism? I know my niblings have crazy-busy schedules.”

“Tan-ya and I are home-schooled,” Aisling says.

“Also, we started in the holidays.” Clover adds.

“I just have to cheek—surely you’re not Daphne?”

“That’s Lí Xiu,” I say. “She brought you kiwi-fruit.”

Lí Xiu holds out the mesh bag full of furry ovals that look like little kiwi bums.

“They grow in the home garden. No spray.”

“Oh, wow, cheers for that.” The DJ sniffs the fruit and leans back on his chair. “But hang on—if you’re Leeshoo, who’s Daphne?”

“My lil sister,” Clover sighs. “We asked if she wanted to come here or go to kōhanga. She chose kōhanga.”

“Wow. I’m impressed you have kindergarteners volunteering. What am I doing with my life, eh?” The DJ laughs at himself. “So, back to the school question, how do you think you’ll juggle everything once the holidays end?”

Zuri’s sitting on her hands and for once she seems unable to speak. Clover shrugs.

“I guess we’ll do what we can when we can.”

“In China we say, yǒu zhì zhě, shì jìng chéng,” Lí Xiu adds. “Where there is a will, there is a way.”

“Can’t argue with that. Any other words of wisdom for our listeners?”

“Clean your gear before you enter or exit the ngahere,” I say, “and always keep to the tracks and respect any barriers. It’s weird to imagine that small things can have super-strength, but even a pinhead of infected soil is enough to kill a giant kauri.”

“True.” The DJ turns to me. “And it goes both ways, right? Small actions can have massively positive impacts and even save lives? I have a studio of nodding heads, so I must be saying something right. Phew. I’ve never felt so much pressure to impress.”

“Also, we’re on the socials,” Clover says. “So if you’re a young person and want to talk about this stuff, you can find us there.”

“Great. Thanks, team TREEs, keep up the good work. You guys rock.”

My skin’s buzzing when we exit the studio. Zuri shrieks and bounces ahead as the rest of us bumble through the corridor towards the lift.

“Shhh, oi,” Clover says, “there are people working.”

Zuri slaps a hand over her mouth and keeps it there until we’re safely inside. When the doors close, she grabs Clover’s arm and starts bouncing again. “You were mad-wicked good. SO good.”

“Chur.”

“Everyone was brilliant—you all knew exactly what to say, while I was too excited to say a single proper thing.” Zuri stops bouncing and opens her arms to Lí Xiu and Aisling.

The uncertainty of what she’s going to do next hatches through my guts.

A real smile sun-flowers across Zuri’s face as she lunges forwards and kisses my cheek, then squeals again and bounces against the drop of the lift (and my guts).

It's weird. I only get a slight urge to sanitise. But a massive urge to go to the toilet.

"Can anyone see my mum?" Aisling asks as soon as we're out of the building.

"There." I point to Claire who is waving from across the carpark.

"Well done, girls," she says as we approach the van. "You all did so well. Does anyone want a bite to eat? Treats are in the back."

"EEE! Thanks, Mummy-Claire, I could literally eat a horse."

I picture Zuri literally eating a horse. It is very disturbing.

"This is all gluten-free?" Aisling asks, holding up a pastry.

"Of course."

"You're coeliac, right?"

"Mm—" Aisling nods at Zuri as though she's going to say something. We know when she does that, we just have to wait. "It's because my Viking ancestors assaulted my Celtic ancestors and passed on their coeliac genes."

Claire chokes on her water. "That's a bit much, sweets."

"What? It's the truth. That's what the blog said."

"Well, you shouldn't be reading blogs like that."

Aisling huffs. "It's not my fault my intestine was colonised one thousand years ago, so now gluten plunders my villi and pillages all the vitamins and minerals from my blood," she says, clearing her throat. "*Colon*-isation. Literally. That was before my Irish ancestors were starved by my English ancestors, then came here and took land that had been stolen from tāngata whenua. No offense, Clover."

"Huh?" Clover raises a brow, but doesn't look up from her phone.

"You can't just say 'no offense', pet." Claire says. "It's all pretty offensive, really, isn't it?"

“Yes, but that’s why we believe in Land Back.”

“Well, I’m sorry about the gluten thing,” Zuri jumps in. “When my cousin eats it, her tummy blows up like a balloon.”

“Mm. It’s hard.” Claire wipes her mouth. “Not everyone understands how sick you can get. They only see what they see.”

“Yeah,” Aisling humphs. “What are you looking at, Clo?”

“Soz, I was listening, but check this.”

“No, way!” Zuri says. “They want to put us on the actual News? Mummy-Claire, we’re going to be on TV!”

I twist Auntie's doorhandle, imagining the damsel's excited face. She's going to be so happy when I tell her the news. But the door is locked.

I check the living room and Auntie's bedroom, then remember I put my phone on flight mode.

Hey bub, we'll be back soon. Kuia Jean is home if you need anything xx

Well, at least Mama will be excited for me.

I stretch my arms out wide and fly down the slope into the back garden, but when Mama sees me, she runs into her sleeping box and hides.

Guess I'll just go back inside and wash off the day's stink.

After a good scrub, I wrap myself in a towel, stomp into my room, shut the door, and belly flop onto my galaxy bedspread, slamming straight into rule number three.

Ugh. My chest feels . . . different.

While checking for forbidden bumps, a strange heat buzzes down through my belly. I pull my sheet and wrap up tight until the too-much-nakedness feeling goes away.

The buzzing doesn't go away though. And the more I notice it, the buzzier it gets.

Pulling my galaxy duvet over my head, I slow-rocket my hand under my sheet, and hover over the part Clover said feels good. When I land, the buzzing shrinks into one place, I orbit with my fingertip

An energy ball starts to glow

The glow expands . . . and shrinks

Expands . . . and shrinks

And expands . . .

And expands . . .

The glow expands so far into the darkness, I feel a bit afraid

But I keep going higher and higher

until I'm surrounded by a gazillion stars

I don't know what's going to happen. Maybe I'll black out (((or disappear)))

suddenly, I tip over the top of the universe with a supernova

giddy heatwaves move up and down

then everything shrinks in a split second

the atmosphere floating around me in a shower of fading embers

like my electrons are mirror-dancing with the electrons in outer space

Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom.

Ba-bup. *Ba-bup.* *Ba-bup.*

Mama, are you mad at me?

I’m going to keep talking to you even if you don’t answer.

Hey, Mama, can you hear me from this far away? No-one knows I'm talking in my head, so they might interrupt. Also, my head's feeling super weird, today. I wish we could stop now, but Blaire's trying to get permission to film us knocking on someone's door. Are you quiet because you feel the strangeness in the air, too?

"Excuse me, Amna?" Aisling says to the camera lady, jolting my attention outwards again. "I really like the pattern on your hijab."

"Oh. Thanks," Amna says. "I like the pattern on your sunhat."

Aisling traces the green stitching. "It's a shamrock for good luck. My cousin said Saint Patrick stole the four-leaf-clover from the Druids and gave it to Christianity. I have to wear massive hats even with sunblock, because otherwise I'll turn into a boiled beetroot. Also, I have another question, is Blaire telling the people at the door everything first and then we pretend they don't know already?"

"Uh—" Amna fiddles with her camera "—just talk like you normally would. Pretend we're not here."

"Who's going to knock? Probably a bit much if we all rock up to their doorstep?"

Amna nods at Clover. "Three would be a good number."

"I'm totally happy to do it!" Zuri bounces on the spot.

"Oh-kay, I am happy, too," Lí Xiu says.

"T?" Clover raises her brow.

"Nah."

"Aw, but you're so good, oi."

"You should do it, sis," Farfalle says to Clover.

"Fine," Clover sighs, but looks secretly happy about it. "So—that's me, Julz and Zuri."

"Great," Amna says as Blaire strides back towards us with a thumbs up.

Mama, we're going to be on the News tomorrow night.

Mama?

Are you mad at me because I broke the rules?

Not~So~Little~Fish

I think there *is* something wrong with me, Mama, and I think—

"Stop fidgeting, oi. Ur making the screen wobble."

Clover gapes at her tablet like she's not just swallowing the movie with her eyes, but through her entire mouth.

"Hey, Clo?"

"Yeh, boi?"

I force the Petri dish out of my pocket before I can change my mind. "Do you know what this is?"

Clover tilts the dish side to side, examining my slime through the plastic lid.

"Where did it come from?"

"Dunno."

"Then how should I know? Geez. At least give me some context."

"From my undies."

"Ugh!" Clover chucks the Petri dish like it's a hot potato. "That's rank, boi. What the hell? *Why*?"

"Do you think it means I'm sick?"

"YES. But not like *that*. Geez. It's just vag snot. Talk to your mum or auntie or anyone who isn't me. Far. You probably just dropped an egg."

"No."

"Yeah, from your ovary. That stuff will bleach ur undies, for real." Clover laughs at my expression. "Welcome to puberty, boi."

Mama, I’m begging you, please talk to me.

Google says the slime is just a liquid that protects your tenetene from Infectors. It can be thick and cloudy like cooked egg-white or clear and stretchy like uncooked egg-white. It may have no smell or a sweet yeasty scent. A strong, fish-like odour can mean you have an infection, which may need antibiotics. Otherwise, it’s normal. The inside cleans itself. DO NOT WASH. You can wash the outer vulva area with warm water, though. Mild soap is okay but not needed.

Google said don’t worry, but it also said something that is the polar opposite of okay (((clear stretchy discharge may signal ovulation !#%?)))

Clover thinks it’s funny, but it’s actually a major violation of rule number three. And she wouldn’t laugh if she knew the deadly serious consequences of what the Invisibles are trying to do to Little Fish.

Little~Fish~Big~Lesson

"Is that you, Ika Iti?"

"YES."

I peel off my socks, then go straight to the shower. Knocking in this heat turns my whole body into an eel. I hate the way the skin under my arms slips together.

And I hate-hate-HATE the slime feeling. It makes me more grumpy than the pain from my shrunken shoes and the damp under my arms combined. When all three sensations happen at once, I feel so irritated, I can't focus and I mix-up what I'm trying to say when people answer the door.

There's a basket on my galaxy bedspread that wasn't there before. Stacked inside is a tower of black gruts with thick bottoms, and a hot water bottle with a knitted cover made from the same wool as Apricot Beanie. There's also a book with a picture of a bunch of cartoon kids on the front that says: *Your Body Belongs To You*.

Ugh. I reach for the homemade card, even though I can already guess who did this:

For when you need them, love Māmā xoxo P.S. the period undies go in the wash like normal clothes.

I dump the basket in my wardrobe and shove on my trackpants, a clean t-shirt, and the kind of robot-face that says this never happened.

The damsel is peeling potatoes when I enter the kitchen.

"Kei te pēhea koe, my daughter?"

"Okay." I open the fridge, then shut it again.

"There are muffins in the pantry from June and Celeste."

"Cool." I hover as though I'm lost in space.

“Come. Sit. Tell me about your day.” The damsel taps the seat next to her. “Māmā needs her dose of adventure. Did you meet anyone interesting?”

“Uhh.” Images from a gazillion different houses crash together in my mind, leaving behind blankness. “Someone said they’ll give us a big donation if they win Lotto.”

“Oh, yeah? And what would you do with that?”

“Turn Aotearoa into a giant air-purifier,” I say, tapping my big toe against the floor. I’ll give her one-hundred caterpillars, then I’m going back to my room to maybe read that weird book.

“Okay.” The damsel pulls a clump of potato skin from the peeler. “And how would you do that?”

“I’d plant forests and gardens and fruit trees along every street, and I’d grow medicine for Farfalle’s Rongoā.”

The damsel reaches for a kumara. “You’d have to think about what each plant needs to thrive. It’s not just the individual you have to consider, it’s their whole ecosystem. And what happens when fruit falls and goes rotten along the side of the road? Rats and mice and insects galore.”

“Well, I would learn all the rules first, then do the right thing.”

“It’s tricky, eh?”

I shrug.

“Doing the right thing isn’t always black and white.”

Ugh. I’m already hot again. Major dislike.

The damsel pats me with a potatoey hand. “What’s up, Ika Iti?”

I wish I was actually a little fish. Then I could escape the blaze of that fire-ball burning a hole in our atmosphere, and swim down, down, down into the deepest faraway darkness

of Tangaroa. Far away from all the uncomfortableness. But the damsel's question won't leave me alone until I say something.

"How can things be so unfair?" The words feel like a puke.

"What do you mean?"

It's hard to put all the thoughts swirling round my mind into actual words, but the damsel looks very keen to hear them, so I push against gravity.

"Farfalle said some people don't have enough . . . like, food or whatever."

"Ah, I see." The damsel turns the peeler around and uses the pointy end to dig out the eye of the potato she's holding.

"So humans can figure out rocket-science, but they can't figure out how to feed everyone?"

"Oh, humans absolutely *could* figure that out."

"Then, what's the problem?" I sound like I'm telling the damsel off, as though she's the one who has turned the world into a nightmare.

"Well, the truth is, the rules are rigged so some people will have way too much, and others won't have enough. People allow it, because they believe we get what we deserve. Or because they feel powerless to change things. Or because they're afraid of losing what they need to survive. And some powerful people encourage those beliefs to turn everyone else against each other so they can get what they want."

The ocean is like outer space. If you go down-down-down, the pressure gets heavier and heavier, until all your air gets pushed out from all the spaces inside you, until there's none at all, and everything collapses.

“I know it sounds awful, my daughter, and it is. But that’s why you and your girlies are out there talking to your neighbours. You know we can do better. And there are a lot of clever brains in the world who believe that too.”

The damsel used to talk like this at Home with Tiki and Aaron. I mostly didn’t understand what they were saying, so I just hid under the table and crawled between their feet while their voices battled invisible enemies over my head. Now, I get the sudden urge to crawl into the Mariana Trench, so I can become a human-raisin with no thoughts.

“If you want to understand the rules of this game, you need to learn how money works, my daughter. Maybe that’s something you might like to study in the future? If you can get past the boring stuff, economics will open your eyes. Numbers have so many stories to tell.”

I shrug off the question and plug my mouth full of muffin. The future can bug off.

Little~Fish~Television

"My baby's on TV! Look at her, Kora. Isn't she articulate?"

I think I look super-awkward and mumble more than once, but Auntie and the damsel won't stop smiling. I'm secretly glad I'm watching with them, instead of next door (Daphne has a temperature, and is therefore a poti girl).

It's weird, though. Team TREEs looks real and unreal at the same time.

I still think it's strange Blaire chose that street. The people in the massive houses are usually the ones who act like DICKs:

D: don't care

I: I'll be dead by then anyway

C: climate change is a lie

K: kids should be seen and not heard

If it was my choice, I'd have filmed the street with the apples. There were lots of kids running around with bare feet and super soakers, and the adults actually talked to us. Lots of them donated, too, and one house had a banana box full of apples sitting out for anyone who wanted them. But I guess this street looks nicer.

Amna and Blaire were with us for ages, but all of the footage they shot has been shrunken into a clip that goes by super-fast, so all those parts that took ages to film flash by in a second. Like when they got us lying on the grass with our heads together while we stared up at the sky. That took AGES. My back was so itchy. And my eyes stung from how bright it was.

Suddenly, I'm sucked into the infinite emptiness behind the blue. It's like I'm being pulled by my wrists and ankles and stretched in four different directions.

"I'm so proud of you," the damsel says, opening her arms to me. "May I have a cuddle?"

I mumble that I might be a Carrier, but the real reason is I don't want to feel my too-bigness against her too-smallness.

Little~Fish~in~the~Dumps

Mama, I'm stretched over two opposite worlds happening at the same time: a world of winning where I get to be on the radio and TV and open a gazillion doors in one second.

AND a world of losing

I feel like no-one can see me, even though I'm all through the air

I feel so super-alone, I might as well be invisible

Dear Tania, I saw you on the News.

You probably don't remember me (I was there when you met Tāne Mahuta for the first time).

The people up this way consider trees family.

If you and your team would like to visit, maybe we have something to learn from each other.

Please say hi to your Mum and Auntie Kora for me.

Xanthe (Zan)

Little~Fish~and~the~Letter

The damsel flicks off the TV as I walk in. Just before the screen goes black, I catch a glimpse of people wearing face masks.

"Auntie says I have to show you this." I hold out my letter. The damsel's skin looks extra weird today. But I won't think about that. Or her strange new odour.

"Xanthe wrote?" The damsel bites her smile. "Do you remember Uncle Zan, Little Fish? He's the one who made it possible for the doctors to plant you inside me."

The memory is like a shape I can feel is there, but can't quite see.

"Was he your boyfriend?"

The damsel pats the side of her bed. I have to make my breathing hospital-shallow.

"There was a lot of love between your Uncle Zan and me, but he wasn't ready to be a boyfriend."

Auntie looks like she's going to say something, but bites her tongue.

"Xanthe had struggles," the damsel continues. "It took a while for him to find a safe family to grow up in. Remember, I told you Uncle Zan was born with the body of a girl, but the spirit of a boy?"

I remember the words, but not the meaning.

"The world can be a very hard place, especially for people who wear their hearts on their sleeves, like your Uncle Zan."

I don't like that image. At all.

"He knew I had always wanted to be a mum, but my body wasn't releasing healthy eggs, so he said the doctor could take a part of him to make you for me."

And that's why I don't look anything like the damsel.

She tells me the same story she used to tell about how they went to a special clinic where the doctor took Uncle Zan's "teeny-tiny" ovum out of his body, mixed it with a donor's "spermatozoa", then planted the tiny bundle of cells inside the damsel to grow. Her body was "the snuggly nest" that gave me all the food I needed, so my cells had the energy to follow their list of complicated rules. Multiply and differentiate. Which basically means, grow more cells, but also different kinds of cells. Brain cells. Muscle cells. Heart cells. *Ba-bup.*

"But the letter says he saw me at Waipoua Forest?"

"Yes—" the damsel nods "—before I got super sick, we used to hang out there."

He must be the grown-up in the big apricot beanie.

"Can we visit him?"

Little~Fish~&~Uncle~Zan

"Far—your uncle looks like you."

Clover nudges my arm, gesturing towards the lanky man leaning his weight from one gumboot to the other. He's definitely tall and pale like me.

I could tell her it's because I was grown from one of his cells, but I don't want anyone barging into my story. I just want to stare at Uncle Zan through the van window-tint while I'm still invisible. He pulls the beanie off his head, puts it back on, takes two long strides towards the edge of the log-cabin deck and steps off.

"Aisling, move, oi," Clover says. "They can't get out."

"Sorry." Aisling unbuckles her seatbelt.

"Nah, all good," Kai says from the back. "We're actually gonna chill here for a bit. Lí Xiu's not feeling well."

"Oh, no. What's happening, bub?" Auntie asks from the front.

Lí Xiu holds her head. "World is . . . spin. Too much . . . colour."

"She gets carsick sometimes," Kai says. "And things are a bit full on at home, so yeah."

"Do you need me to take you back?" Whaea D offers, but Lí Xiu raises a hand.

"Is oh-kay—e'ryone can go." She makes her voice extra-soft, but even that seems too loud for her. "Please. I just want stay still."

"I'll holla if it gets worse, Auntie," Kai says.

I feel bad for Lí Xiu, but Clover yanks me out of the van before I can think of what to say, and drags me to face the first person who actually looks like me.

Auntie drops her brother's name like it's an Evil, and the hug she gives him is even stiffer than usual.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Xanthe." Whaea D embraces Uncle Zan with mighty-mountain firmness.

"Uh-thanks-you-too." Uncle Zan's eyes dart around to the rest of us. "Hi," he says to no-one in particular. "Sorry-youcancallme Zan."

Clover widens her eyes at me. She thinks we talk the same, too.

Aisling lurches towards Uncle Zan with a container of cupcakes. "My mum made these for you. She's Irish."

"Uh, ta-for-that." Uncle Zan's smile reddens. "Thanks*everyone*for*coming*."

"Thank you for the invitation," Whaea D says. "We are all impressed by your niece and all that she has set out to accomplish."

Uncle Zan smiles as if he doesn't know how to react, his eyes hovering back to land on me.

I understand not knowing what to do or where to look when people are waiting for something you don't have. When he catches my eye, his words aren't lined up in a queue like they always are in Auntie's head. They don't even exist yet. They're just feelings branching out into space. It's like listening to a tree.

"You probably don't recognise Tania." Auntie claims me with one arm. She doesn't realise we don't need her words to communicate.

"Thanksfor*reading*myletter."

Uncle Zan's smile is real. Just shy.

"I imagine you remember Kuia Jean?" Auntie continues. "She was good friends with Mum and Dad. They've been looking after Tani while I work."

Auntie sounds like she's trying to jab her brother with each word, but he just nods and smiles.

"You must love trees as much as we do," Aisling says, totally oblivious that she's barging into Auntie's battlefield. "You live in a literal forest. It's exactly how I imagine the cottage in *Hansel and Gretel*, if it was made of wood instead of gingerbread, and if the witch who lived there wasn't evil, just misrepresented by the patriarchy."

Clover snorts. "Are you calling Tāne's uncle a witch?"

"NO. I just learn the facts behind fiction. Like, did you know *Hansel and Gretel* was inspired by a real famine in 1314? People in Europe were starving hungry, so parents abandoned their children in the woods, or even ATE them."

Auntie grimaces. "Hell's bells."

"Kia ora, koutou." A matua with a black beard approaches. "This must be the Righteous Eliminators," he says with a chuckle in his tone and a glint in his eye.

"This*is*mymate, Hahona." Uncle Zan shuffles through an awkward introduction that reminds me of how I feel when I'm meant to say something, but hesitate or don't realise in time, so the words tumble out before they're ready. Hahona doesn't seem awkward though. He reaches out to Whaea D first, then Auntie. I notice her noticing the dirt in his nails.

"Ka pai tō mahi, kids." The matua turns to us, offering high-fives, his palm crusted with dirt. "It's choice to see the next generation giving a damn. Makes me think it's all worth it, eh?"

"Are you a kaitiaki of the forest?" Aisling asks.

"Āe." Hahona nods.

"No offense, but what do you actually do?"

"Well, e hoa, at the moment we're working on treatments for dieback."

“But there’s no cure,” I blurt.

“Mmm.” Hahona squeezes his nostrils between his thumb and finger. “That’s one story. But there’s always more than one way to look at things. And it’s hard to find what you’re not looking for, eh?”

“Maybe we should walk now, eat later?” Uncle Zan says, glancing up at the sky.

Hahona nods. “I’m good to go when you are, brother.”

“Is that okay*with*everyone?” Uncle Zan mumbles to no-one in particular, scratching the back of his neck. “Or, we could eat*first*walk*later*?”

“Walking first works,” I say. Not because I want to be the boss, just because I understand what Uncle Zan feels. He doesn’t want to muck around.

“Warm layers on,” Whaea D says in her teacher voice.

“And if anyone needs the wharepaku—” Hahona nods towards a shack on the edge of the bush “—go for gold.”

“Oh-yeah-sorry-uh-thanks.” Uncle Zan seems flustered, like I get when there are a thousand random things to think about and everyone expects me to do the thinking.

“Not leaving without me, I hope?” A wahine in a bright orange polar fleece appears from round the side of the cabin. “Trust this one not to introduce you to his better half,” she says, smiling at us.

“Everyone, this is my better half, also known as Atarangi,” Hahona says. “Or Whaea Atarangi to yous kids.”

Whaea Atarangi reaches out to Whaea D first. The wāhine meet forehead to forehead, then press the soft of their noses together, and close their eyes as though they’re going somewhere very far away.

As the hongi move around the circle, Team TREE's nervous excitement settles further into the ground beneath our gummies. When Whaea Atarangi gets to me she does a double take.

"Geez, there's no mistaking who you are!" She looks from me to Uncle Zan and back.

When I feel the warmth of Whaea Atarangi's nose squish against mine, I don't even worry about Evils. All I can think about is how five-caterpillars ago, this nose was touching Uncle Zan's nose, breathing his air.

Hahona asks the ngahere permission to enter. His tone reminds me to step gently and watch where I'm going. I hold back a little so I can secretly watch Uncle Zan. It's weird. He even walks like me.

Aisling quickens her pace, dragging Zuri along by the elbow as she steps in line with mine.

"Wow, Tan-ya, this land is enchanted. I bet you come here all the time?"

"Nah." I shrug off her too-closeness. It's annoying being disturbed when I just want to observe Uncle Zan. He turns back just as I think his name and half-smiles. Maybe he actually does communicate like a tree.

"Tanae," Zuri whispers. "I think your uncle wants you to walk with him."

Magma rises to my chest. I use the energy to force myself forwards.

Something weird happens when I match Uncle Zan's step. The pressure evaporates and leaves behind a strange peacefulness.

"I'vegot somethingforyou, Tah-Tah."

My old nickname scurries out of the dark place in my mind along with a memory of piggybacks and small bags of chicken chippies.

Uncle Zan holds up a loose fist. Dark sprouts curl below the white knuckles of his long fingers.

"This found me thedayI*first*camehere." He opens his fist, revealing a small stone the colour of golden syrup.

"Woah." I turn it over. Each angle is different. Dark caramel in places, with pale, creamy swirls. "Is this kauri gum?"

"Hold it to the light and look closely," Uncle Zan says, with a happy secret in his eyes.

There's not much light here, but when I hold the gum up, I can see what looks like part of an insect's wing.

"COOL, thanks!" I say, feeling the others' breaths holding us. Smiling.

"So, how did you come up with your team name?" Whaea Atarangi asks.

"I think it's because Tan-ya wants to eliminate all the invisible Evils," Aisling says.

"She means viruses and bacteria," Clover adds. "Made-up words is how we jam."

"Okay, sure. I understand what you're saying. But you know we also rely on viruses and bacteria, eh? Have they taught you kids about symbiotic relationships in school, yet?"

"Oh, is that like yoghurt?" Aisling says. "My mother has IBS."

"You're steering your waka in the right direction," Whaea Atarangi says with a smile. "I'm talking about how different beings work together to help each other survive. Like the bacteria in your gut that break down your food. They eat so you can digest. Win-win."

"I heard," Hahona says with a chuckle, "if it weren't for an ancient virus, us humans would've been born in eggs."

Clover snorts. I'm pretty sure we're both imagining a full-grown person cracking out of a giant chicken egg.

"But people die from viruses and bacteria," Dána Mae says.

“That’s true. And people also die from air and heat and water and other vital stuff when they get in the wrong place. Or when there’s too much in the right place.” Whaea Atarangi pauses for a moment. “The trouble starts when the balance tips too far in one direction and nothing steps in to correct it.”

“So, you’re saying dieback isn’t always bad?” Aisling asks.

“I’m saying—it’s complicated. What’s good or bad really depends on whose perspective you’re taking. And if you were to eliminate all bacteria, humans would be eliminated too.”

“But humans are basically a cancer spreading across the earth,” Clover says.

Whaea Atarangi shrugs. “Perhaps you’ve heard the Whakataukī: *He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata*?”

“Yeah, but who gets to decide that people are the most important thing in the world?” Clover’s tone is bolshy like it gets with Whaea D, even though she only just met Whaea Atarangi. “Why do humans get to be the most important?”

“Tino pai. Don’t be afraid to ask the difficult questions.”

“I have a question—” Aisling’s hand shoots up “—is that why Tan-ya’s mother is dying?”

“Oof.” Clover buckles as though punched in the guts.

Uncle Zan’s fingers find my hand and hold. Not stiffly, like Auntie would. Not in a way that makes me want to cry, like the damsel would. Not confident, like Kuia Jean. Just there.

“Aroha mai. I didn’t know.”

I hold my breath and wait for the well of sadness to open up and turn the forest into a soggy bog.

But the only sound is gumboots squelching out of time.

“What do you see when you look around?” Hahona says after a while.

“Trees?” Aisling offers, as though she didn’t just bring the whole forest down. “And plants everywhere.”

“True. That’s what you see from where you are—individual trees. But if you could see under the soil, you’d notice they’re not actually separate from each other. They are part of one big community of beings, big and small. Dead and alive.”

“I WISH I could see that,” Aisling says. “Do you mean insects and—what do you mean?”

“Well, yes, that’s right. Forests aren’t just made up of plants, they’re also made up of tiny creatures that do all kinds of things, like eat leaves and poo out humus.”

“Bleurgh.” Clover pretends to gag. “My sister eats that shiz.”

“Shuddup, no I don’t.”

“You’re probably thinking of hummus?” Whaea Atarangi smiles at the other grown-ups.

“Yes, I believe she is.” Whaea D shakes her head at Clover.

“Soz about it,” Clover says. “I thought that’s what he said.”

“*Hum*-mus is made from chickpeas,” Whaea Atarangi says. “*Hu*-mus is the organic matter in soil that helps retain moisture. It’s made from broken down leaves and plants and animal kaka. Basically, a superfood in the plant world. But I think Hahona was referring to what scientists call mycorrhizal networks . . .”

***

I hold a leaf skeleton to my eye, and watch my friends pretend to ballroom dance through its lacy threads. Before the adults left us by ourselves to “get lost in once-upon-a-time” for a

while, as Aisling put it, Whaea Atarangi said trees talk to each other. Not with words like humans. With chemicals.

My gaze falls from Zuri's super-white smile, down to the dark collage of soil and leaf litter beneath my feet. It's bizarre to think there are a gazillion connections spreading below us right now, passing secret messages to each other like brain cells. Whaea Atarangi said trees and fungi make a great team, because trees eat sunlight and turn it into sugar, then fungi eat the sugar and give the trees a kind of internet that scientists call the "wood wide web". But the messages take way longer to send and receive than a text or email. Time moves differently in the tree-world.

"Oi, T-for-Tarzan, try this. It's mean as." Clover wraps her fingers around a hefty vine, then launches herself up off the ground with a squark.

"I will if you will," Zuri says.

"Fine."

I consider sanitising first, but I don't want to turn the breath of the ngahere alcoholic. Bush air has the best smell in the world.

"Go, Tanae!" Zuri whoops as I use all my super-strength to launch off the ground.

For a second, I lift and rise. Power charges and tears through my arm muscles as I twist round in a wonky curve. Holding my own weight feels satisfying, but I can only go one orbit before I drop, palms burning.

"Did it hurt?"

"Nah. Kind of," I say, shaking my hands.

Zuri grabs the vine and heaves it towards a rotten log lying next to a patch of bright orange mushrooms.

“Our ballroom shall have paper mâché toadstools,” Aisling declares as Zuri hurls herself off the log. She twists through the air with a squeal, barrelling towards me, hands slipping. Without thinking, I step forwards and catch her.

“Sorry,” I say as she stumbles backwards.

“HAW!” Clover doubles over, choking as though she’s the one who can’t breathe. “The way you stepped into it like a knight in shining armour, and the way she smashed into you.”

“I—thought she was going to fall,” I say, crossing my arms.

Zuri hugs herself and smiles up at me. “Thanks for saving me.”

“Aw. Now, kiss!”

“Shut up, Clo-Clo.” Zuri kicks a clump of rotten stump in Clover’s direction.

“Ow. Show some respect for Papatūānuku.”

“You show some respect.”

“So, Tan-ya, is your uncle your mother’s brother?”

“No, my auntie’s,” I say, trying to hide the fact my chest is all hot and bruised from the slam. “Her parents fostered him.”

Aisling adjusts her glasses at me. “So, you’re not a white Māori?”

“Far, gurl, you never hold back.”

Clover can talk.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Zuri says, reaching for my hand. “Everyone link-up like fun-guys.” She gives my fingers two squeezes to pass on to Clover. It’s a weird game, but at least it takes the focus off me and Uncle Zan. “Okay, now everyone close your eyes and breathe with the trees.”

I sense Clover's eye-roll, but her grip stays firm on my hand. After a few awkward exhales, Ba-bup settles. After a few more, my shoulders soften a bit and I feel quieter. Then, something strange happens. I start to feel like it's not just my energy charging through my palms. Like it's more than me. More than us, even. And the longer I focus on the feeling, the more it expands and spreads outwards, until it's like we've somehow merged with the entire forest.

"Do you guys feel that?" Zuri whispers.

"YES." Aisling's exclamation becomes fission all over my skin.

"You guys are weirdos," Clover sighs. "But yeh."

“Do trees have immune systems?” Farfalle’s voice jolts me back to the ground. I’d almost forgotten she was here.

Since the adults got back from checking on Kai and Lí Xiu, and getting the thing they forgot, I’ve been thinking about Clover’s question the first time I stayed over—whether memories get passed on like genes. Maybe part of me remembers what it feels like living in forests.

“Mmm, kind of, but not like ours,” Whaea Atarangi says. “They don’t have immune cells to fight off infection like we do, but they can build walls around dead cells to protect healthy tissue. Some trees can detect when they’re being eaten, and turn their leaves bitter. What’s even more cool is that they can warn their neighbours, who then react in the same way, even though they have not yet been eaten.”

“That’s incredible,” Farfalle says.

“Totally!” Zuri hugs up to Whaea Atarangi’s side. “I could listen to you talk all day.”

“Aw. If you like that, kiddo, wait until you hear about mother trees.”

Whaea Atarangi says that’s what scientists call elder trees who pull water up from deep in the earth and share it with baby saplings and hungry neighbours who have shallow roots and less access to sunlight.

“That sounds almost . . . altruistic?” Farfalle says.

Whaea Atarangi gives a maybe-maybe-not kind of hum.

“Some people say we shouldn’t project human qualities onto trees—just because they share resources, doesn’t mean they do so intentionally. But I tend to agree with Clover. Us humans are not the only important ones. We can learn a lot from other beings.”

“Excuse me,” Aisling interrupts. “But how will we know if Tāne Mahuta gets sick?”

Whaea Atarangi glances at Uncle Zan.

“He is, I’m afraid.”

“Huh?” Aisling squeaks.

“Tāne’s iwi reckon he only has half the humus he needs to survive the dry months,” Hahona says. “His crown is thinning. Rot has set in from both ends and if it meets in the middle, well, that’s it, kids. Even now he’s already at a significant lean—a heavy whack from brother Tāwhirimātea could knock him down.”

“Far—” Clover gives me a defeated look. “Guess we’re too late, then. Mission failed.”

Whaea Atarangi sighs. “See, that doesn’t make sense to me, eh? From where I’m standing, every living being is always in a vital relationship with death. Our cells are constantly dying, making way for new. The way I see it, death isn’t a ‘fail’. I think the fail is ignoring the fact us humans are nature. There are as many ways of being alive as there are lifeforms. Nature is always in a state of change. We humans are capable of moving into extremes, but we are also capable of moving into balances. We have power here. Our equilibrium comes from living sustainably. And death is a part of that.”

“Also, Tāne’s whānau are supporting him in his hour of need,” Hahona adds. “Te Roroa have brought in truck-loads of mulch and they water him by hand, so his fine feeder roots have a chance to recover. Also, they’ve shielded him with barbed wire and planted ponga and wharawhara close by, to protect him from future tramplings by selfie-hunters.”

“I don’t understand people.” Aisling humphs.

“And they probably don’t understand their impact,” Whaea Atarangi says. “In their minds, it’s only their transgression. One selfie can’t hurt, right?”

“Wrong,” Aisling says. “They could be Carriers of disease.”

“True. But also, it’s not just one selfie, is it? It’s all the selfies that have come before, and all the selfies that come after. Over time, every individual step contributes to a consistent stream of foot traffic. It’s like how one drop of water does nothing, but consistent drops of water can bore through rock.”

“Slow violence,” Whaea D says.

“Exactly.” Whaea Atarangi continues. “You kids should know, our greatest threats don’t appear like they do in the movies. They’re happening all the time, in little ways, right under our noses.”

I roll Uncle Zan’s kauri gum between my fingers as I try to collect every word Whaea Atarangi says, so I can look at them later, in the dark, when I’m by myself.

“How are you treating dieback?” Auntie asks the question that’s been burning the back of my throat since we got here.

“Ah, yes.” Hahona scratches his chin, causing his beard to quiver like black moss. “With old knowledge wrought anew. In the stories of the tūpuna, Kauri and Tohorā were brothers. Kauri was the largest of the land, and Tohorā was the largest of the waters.”

“Tohorā means whale, is that right?” Aisling says.

“Ka pai.”

“I know because of the song: *Tohorā nui!*” Aisling sings in her eerie, high-pitched voice. “*Tohorā roa!*” The sound tickles down the forest’s spine. “*Tohorā tino mōmona!*—we used to sing it at choir,” she says, stopping abruptly. “In English, it means ‘the big whale, the long whale, the very fat whale.’”

Clover blows air through her teeth, but Hahona doesn’t seem bothered by the interruption.

“That is correct,” he says. “Tohorā tried to convince his little brother to come with him. But Kauri was far too attached to the land. So Tohorā promised to visit, and they parted ways with the sharing of gifts. From Tohorā, Kauri received his brother’s cloak of scales. This was to protect him from greedy hands, as Tohorā sensed Kauri, too, was in danger of exploitation. And from Kauri, Tohorā received the gift of his brother’s oil, which turned to blubber under his skin, protecting him from the bite of icy waters . . .”

Hahona holds out a container. “Now, to answer your question, we are borrowing medicine from Tohorā. In the old teachings, strandings represent Tohorā’s attempt to return to the land after sensing the dangers befalling his brother. That is to say, what happens on the surface is a reflection of what is happening below. Both suffer the diseases of the other. In one brother’s death, the other may live a while longer. And when a mighty kauri falls, the forest below soon springs to life.”

Hahona’s story leaves my brain dripping gold.

“Here’s our sick friend,” he says, gesturing towards a lone kauri surrounded by a mesh barrier.

“Does your friend have Dieback?” Aisling’s voice is almost a whisper.

“Āe. We will see what we can do.”

My feet recoil as Pāpā’s arch nemesis swims beneath my soles. Every cell in my body wants to bolt, but I’m probably a Carrier, now.

“It’sokayTahTah—” Uncle Zan’s hand finds mine again.

Hahona drops a spray bottle, then steps inside the barrier holding Tangaroa’s gift. He lays his palms on the kauri’s cracked trunk, presses his nose and forehead into its bark, and speaks words I don’t understand, but I can feel their importance.

With his fingers, he spreads medicine made from the body of Tohorā on the body of Kauri, like Auntie would apply cream to a wound. As he strokes, warmth tingles through my skin. Next moment, Whaea Atarangi's waiata rises up through the ngahere, soothing all the quivering nerves and leaves. The others hum along. As soon as there's silence, my puku lets out a massive rumble.

"Sounds like it's time for a kai," Hahona says with a grin.

By the time we get back to Uncle Zan's cabin, I'm ravenous. The smell of fresh bread makes my mouth water. "Yeast—" Whaea Atarangi points out "—another bacteria that's beneficial to us humans."

"Oi, it's Tāne's Daughter."

Clover points towards Uncle Zan's bookshelf. The photo was taken a few Martian-years ago, when my arms and legs hadn't stretched too far, and I'm running towards the camera with hair falling over my face.

"CUUUTE."

"But, Clover—" Aisling interrupts Zuri's gushing "—why don't we call *you* Tāne's Daughter?"

Clover groans.

"I mean, he's the actual ancestor of your people."

"Seriously? You're going to school me on my people?"

"Sorry, I was just wondering."

"But how do you know how I identify?" Clover raises her brow. "It isn't exactly something you can see."

"True." Aisling adjusts her glasses.

"Nah, not cos you're blind. I mean. Geez. Sorry."

“It’s okay. I’m not offended. And I didn’t mean to be offensive.”

Clover sighs. “Can we just—”

“Yeah—”

“—change the subject?”

Aisling nods enthusiastically.

“Who’s that?” I point at a super-old photograph of a serious-looking man in a stiff chair. He’s bald on the top of his head, but his side-burns boof out on both cheeks, and under his chin.

“Are you going to tell your niece about her whakapapa?” Whaea Atarangi says to uncle Zan.

“You mean, Tan-ya IS Māori?” Aisling speaks my thoughts. I’m not even mad at her. I just want to know. “I wish my ancestors belonged on this land,” she says, “but I’m just Pākehā.”

“A wise man once said, there’s only one place in the whole universe you’ll find a Pākehā, and that’s standing beside a Māori,” Hahona says, putting a hand on Uncle Zan’s shoulder. “The way I see it, we secure our belonging to this land through the awhi we show for Papatūānuku and her children. Yes, there are wounds in this relationship that are ours to heal. There is work to be done, but that’s okay. Ka puta i te whei ao. Ki te ao mārama. We can move from darkness to light. From learning to knowing to creating the world we want to share. That is our mahi. So be proud, cos yous kids are leading the way.”

***

It’s weird saying goodbye to Uncle Zan. The whole visit feels like a dream. I clutch the kauri gum he gave me and let my thoughts drift while the others chatter about the arboreal ball, and Lí Xiu sleeps off her migraine against Kai’s shoulder.

"Poor thing," Auntie says to Whaea D. "She must be worried about her family."

"Yes, I imagine she feels very far away from home right now."

I don't think they're talking about me.

Uncle Zan said my great-great-great-great grandfather moved here from England. There were no aeroplanes back then, so it took a long time to travel to the other side of the world by boat. My great-great-great-great grandfather was married three times, because his first two wives died. Eleven of his children died, too. But his next wife lived, and they had my great-great-great grandmother. My great-great-great-great grandfather spoke Te Reo and worked with Ngati Toa as a missionary. He was also friends with a Nga Puhi chief.

Clover nudges my arm. "So, your ancestor talked up some dodgy land sale and my ancestor threatened to chop his head off," she says with a snort. "Makes sense."

I'm glad *she* thinks it's funny.

"I understand if you don't want to be friends anymore," I say.

"Ow. Get off, oi. You take everything so seriously."

It is serious. So serious, I don't even know how to think or feel or talk about it.

Uncle Zan's kauri gum turns warm in my hand. At least I have this other ancestor. This Rākau Rangatira, as Hahona said. This chiefly tree, Tāne Mahuta. And Tohorā is tuakana to Kauri. They are siblings who share the same cloak. Inside Tohorā's digestive system, there's even this substance that looks like kauri gum. If the whales are my ancestors, then that means I have super-super-super-super strength.

"By the way," Aisling says through a yawn, "sorry Tan-ya for what I said in the bush about your mum."

"That's okay cos it's not true," I blurt.

"What do you mean?"

“The doctors are wrong. Just like we were wrong about there being no cure for dieback.”

The whole van goes silent. And no matter how many caterpillars I put between myself and Team TREEs, all I can feel is their dis-ease circling my roots.

PART THREE

Little~Fish~Macrophage

"Who wants to be the MP?" Zuri looks around our film set (aka the Jones's lounge).

"Huh?" Clover says. "I thought this was for health sciences, not political science."

"My cousin says health *is* political," Aisling offers. "That's why people like us should wake up."

"People like us, what's that supposed to mean?"

Aisling shrugs and pulls a duckface at Clover. "I just know when I grow up, I'm going to do all the missing research."

"Oh, yeah, like what?"

"For starters, my cousin says they know NOTHING about our female bodies."

"Maybe I don't want them to know about me," Clover says. "Did you ever consider that?"

"Yes, but Clo, listen, AFABs are waaay more likely to suffer—wait, do you know what I mean by 'AFAB'?"

Clover gives Aisling a look as though it's obvious. "Assigned fit at birth."

"Ha. But seriously, imagine if you or your auntie or one of your sisters was cursed with an invisible disease and no-one knew how to help, because medicine only cares about malfunctions in our baby-making machines."

"Ew, yuck."

Aisling shrugs at Clover. "Anyway, that's what my cousin says."

"How's your research going to help, though?" Clover glances at me, before turning back to Aisling. "How is anyone meant to be okay? Look at our air. Look at our water. Look at our soil. We are literally being poisoned. And what about the people who are screwed cos

they've got nothing cos their parents had nothing, cos their parents had nothing, cos THEIR parents had nothing—and gee, I wonder why. We live in a literal dystopia run by Lord Farquaads. Is your research going to stop people treating life like a fricken game of Monopoly?"

"Guys, I'm getting stressed." Zuri laughs nervously. "Farfalle's relying on us. Somebody needs to be the MP."

"Oi, Faf, do you want our help or not?" Clover says.

"Huh?" Farfalle looks up from her phone.

"Why do you need a member of parliament?"

"What?"

"It says 'MP' on the script?"

"Oh. Nah." Farfalle reaches for her textbook. "That actually stands for macrophage, but u could totally slay as a politician, sis." She points to an animation of a purplish blob with wonky edges. "They're immune cells that absorb germs and take out your cellular trash."

I'm going to be the macrophage and Aisling's the neutrophil. Clover thinks it's funny making us white blood cells. I don't mind. My role is to gobble up Infectors. Farfalle said she came up with the film idea after visiting Uncle Zan, but while she was talking about forest ecosystems and human immune systems, all I could think about was the fact macrophages gobble up viruses and bacteria. And cancer cells.

"Okay, positions, everyone," Zuri says, scanning her hodgepodge film set. "Where's our virus?"

"Oi, Daphne!" Clover bellows past me.

There's a clomp-clomp-clomp down the hallway, then Daphne springs into the lounge with green paint all over her face and arms.

Clover snorts.

“Oh, you look great, Daph,” Zuri says, reaching into her purple suitcase, then pulls out a handful of cottonwool. “Here, I’ll stick these to your leotard so you look more contagious for the camera. And when I say ‘action’, you’re going to chase Tani around the lounge.”

“*Body*.” Daphne corrects. “It’s not a lounge anymore, Zureee. It’s a giant’s body.” She flutters her fingers over the pink sheet draped between the lamp and a two-seater. “And this is they blood.”

“*Their* blood,” Clover corrects.

“Exactly,” Zuri jumps back in. “And Aisling’s going to try to stop you catching Tani, okay?”

Daphne nods vaguely. “I can chase Tanee?”

“Yes, but wait until I say ‘action’. Okay, so, Clo, you’re the helper-T-cell who alerts the macrophage once the virus gets past the neutrophil.”

Clover blinks slowly. “The what, now?”

Zuri tries again. “It’s all about noticing damage, and working together to protect the whole body. So, when Daphne comes into the lounge, you give Tanae these messages—” she hands Clover a stack of cards, with words like *cytokine* “—then Tanae, you stop what you’re doing and help the neutrophil deactivate the virus. So, basically you help Aisling catch Daphne, then swallow her.”

“But not really. Just in your beanbag puku, Taneee,” Daphne says, giving me a tap-tap. Next moment, there’s an actual tap-tap-tap on the Jones’s lounge door, then several faces peep through the gap with curious smiles.

“Hey, gurl.” The kōtiro in front waves at Farfalle. “Your auntie let us in.”

“Aw, you made it!” Farfalle springs up off the sofa and launches into the danciest round of hugs I’ve ever seen, as more teenagers stumble into the Team TREEs virus scene, causing the floorboards under the carpet to creak, and the Daphne virus to spin in circles. “Ah, finally my worlds collide.” Farfalle looks as though she’s floating on sunshine. “Manawa Ake, meet my little team of eco warriors. Team TREEs, I know I’ve kind of sprung this on you . . . but you’re totally gonna vibe with these gurls and their mission.” Farfalle laughs giddily. “Come on, guys, introduce yourselves! Mihi, this is Tuhnae . . .”

Every lady and germ in the lounge turns to face me.

“Kia ora, Tuhnae.” The kōtiro in front meets my eye.

I force myself not to shrink away from her super-strength gaze. “Kia ora.”

“We heard you’ve been canvassing your neighbourhoods, and you’re planning a recruitment party?”

“Oh. Yeah.” I glance towards Clover. Not sure why she’s cracking up, but she seems to be finding this whole situation hilarious.

“You need more hands to knock, and we’re always looking for more Moving Hearts.” Mihi breaks eye-contact for a moment to include the others. “Team TREEs walk from door to door, but will they hīkoi to the Beehive?”

Mary K. Weaver

Age 12

There are so many things I want to do

But sometimes, there's no room for anything except sickness

Like, it takes all your energy just to not cry or hate everything

Sometimes, the only thing worse than the feeling is thinking it might never-ever stop

Little~Fish~Gets~Schooled

"BACK!" I peel off my shrunken shoes, almost tripping as I attempt to go before my second foot is free. Turning my stumble into a jog, I bound down the hallway towards the kitchen. I can't wait to tell the damsel about Farfalle's film. And Manawa Ake. And about how we're going to unite all Papatūānuku's protectors and become one giant team.

"In here, baby." I guess the damsel's hiding from the light in Auntie's room again. Her voice sounds duller than normal, but that's okay, cos I've got enough spark for both of us.

"You're not going to believe what happened at the Jones's," I say, lowering my voice as I turn the corner into the almost darkness. "Farfalle's friends came over, and—"

The damsel's face twists as though my words are punching her in the head. "Mmm?" she says, re-twisting her expression into a smile I don't believe.

"Uh—" The excitement in my chest short-circuits and sinks into my bowels, while the thoughts that were bubbling a second ago deflate to mangled stickiness. "Umm, so we're gonna share our party, and Farfalle's friends are going to help us knock, and we're going to join their hīkoi and—"

I'm just getting to the part I think she'll like most, about Manawa Ake being about taking action from the heart, when the damsel raises a hand like a stop sign.

"Sorry, baby. I can't listen right now. Sorry."

I enter my room with a silence so big, there's no space for thought or movement, so I just sit on my galaxy bedspread and stare at my fingers. When the atmosphere finally opens, I pick up my phone.

***

“Tan-ya, you are going to LOVE my Nana—” Aisling’s breath seems to burst through my speaker onto my wrist. “She’s going to make the most GLORIOUS arboreal gown. I could ask her to make you a matching waistcoat? And listen, after we march to parliament, we should write a story called *Papa and the Creeper*—oh, hang on—*Yes? What? I’m on a call. Tan-ya. Yes, I will.* Okay—Mum says ‘hi’. What was I saying?”

“Uh—”

“That’s right—So, it’s about a child whose father is god of the forest, and they’re on a mission to save him from an evil creeper. Except the child is part-tree, or they can turn into a tree, like *Animorphs*, but with plants, so maybe ‘Terramorphs’? Have you read *Animorphs*? My cousin gave me her entire collection. She’s thirty-five. You can borrow them if you like?”

I’m still trying to make sense of Aisling’s first question. And, more importantly, my question for her. Except I’m still not sure how to explain it. Mila, the lady who looks like Bic Runga says when you imagine something, your brain acts as if it’s really happening. I’m thinking the way to save the damsel involves imagination and macrophages.

“Tan-ya?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry. I talk fast when I’m excited. What do you think?”

“Uh, maybe?”

Aisling hums to herself, then swallows the tune and continues. “Did you know there was a lady who lived in a tree for TWO YEARS so they wouldn’t chop it down? I think her name was actually Butterfly.”

When she hangs up, I flop back on my galaxy bedspread and stare out the window.

“She’s talking about me,” I say to Whekī.

He listens, hairily.

"I mean, it's pretty obvious, since Tāne Mahuta's my pāpā—"

Something moves outside my door. Ba-bup stops, then restarts.

"Sorry, my daughter, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. May I come in?"

The damsel's face wrinkles as she lowers onto the foot of my bed. She looks at about twenty-percent charge. Her gaze drifts across the colourful planets between us and lands on my face. "You call Tāne Mahuta 'pāpā'? Why is that?"

My cheeks burn. Cos that's our story. That has always been our story.

"You said—" I'm not even sure, anymore. Believing something feels different when you put it under a microscope. Suddenly, it looks a lot less solid.

The damsel closes her eyes. "I'm sorry, baby, I tried to make this easy to understand, but some things are complicated no matter how you say them. Will you give me another chance to explain?"

I shrug, like "okay".

"Your birth was . . . hard. I needed someone strong to focus on. Someone who wouldn't budge. Tāne Mahuta was that "person" for me. It sounds strange, I know, but I have always felt this kinship with trees. I was sick a lot as a girl, and the magnolia outside my bedroom window was the only being who was there every second of the day and night. She wasn't just there. I felt she was *there*. Does that make sense?"

I nod, glancing at Whekī.

"Tāne was there when I first felt love for Zan. We had a moment when you were a toddler, and I let myself believe we could be a family. Xanthe tried to play along for a while. You called him Pāpā. But it was too much. Not because of you. Because of him. That's why Auntie's mad at us—because we made things confusing for you. One day, you woke up

ready to go and see your 'Pāpā' and by the end of the day, he was 'Uncle Zan.' You didn't make the change so easily, huh? Every time we visited Waipoua, according to you, we were visiting Pāpā. I guess Uncle Zan and Tāne Mahuta got mixed up in your mind at some point."

"Was I even born in the forest?"

"No, baby."

"So I'm just an Evil, then."

The damsel's face sinks to an even soggier level of bog. "Of course you're not evil. Why on earth would you think that? Look at how much you care about the world and everyone in it." She reaches for my hand before I can hide it away.

I want to ask if she's the Evil for dumping me on Auntie, but even the thought of saying the words out loud turns my heart to liquefaction. *Blu-shuuup*.

"Is that why you wanted to talk?"

The damsel glances towards my bedroom door as though she wants to call for backup. "Your auntie and I didn't want you to worry unnecessarily, so we didn't say anything earlier. But unfortunately . . . well, have you heard anything about what's happening in China?"

As the damsel talks about this new Infector spreading across the world by boat and by plane, a feeling starts to grow inside my chest. It keeps growing until there's no room to think or move or even breathe.

"YOU CAN'T ISOLATE ME AGAIN." A strange heat rises from my bones and turns shivery-cold as it leaves my skin. "YOU CAN'T—I CAN'T—I HAVE TO KEEP—" The words feel like they've been torn from the back of my skull, pulling fragments of muscle and nerve with them. "THERE'S NO TIME TO—I CAN'T—" The dark rings under the damsel's eyes look like

bruises, which tells me the invisible Evils beating her up from the inside are winning. I can also tell from her expression I'm not a robot anymore. I'm a wild animal.

Little~Fish~in~Distress

Google says scientists don't know what goes on inside rotating black holes. And maybe they'll never know.

One idea is that the centre (the place where time and space shrinks together until everything breaks down and nothing makes sense) spins so fast, it stretches outwards from a single point into a ring. When something spins that fast, the rules of mathematics say the movement would create a force that would push everything away.

A super boundary. DO NOT ENTER.

But the rules of mathematics also say the gravitational force inside the black hole would be so strong, anything that came close to the boundary would be pulled inwards.

So, if the rules are right, that means within the super boundary of a rotating black hole, there would be pulling and pushing for infinity. They say, if you could look into this place of pushing and pulling, the entire history of the universe would flash before your eyes in a single blink.

The problem for black holes is, all this pushing and pulling would make their insides "catastrophically unstable". That's what the astrophysicists say. They say black holes shouldn't actually exist. But they do exist.

How?

Adults are supposed to know things.

But I keep hearing the word: uncertain.

Our future on Earth is uncertain.

We're uncertain if this treatment will work.

((((((((((((We're uncertain how long she has . . .))))))))))))

They don't even know what to do now the whole world's gone viral.

***

"The Joneses are happy for you to stay with them," Auntie says as though a wild animal didn't just tear through the house smearing invisible blood and guts across the walls. "That way, you could be with your friends and continue knocking, unless the government decides to put the country into a lockdown. Though, if you go, you will not be able to change your mind. The risk would be too great."

I know what she's not saying. If the damsel gets the corona virus, that's it.

But what Auntie doesn't seem to realise is if I don't keep knocking, that's it, too.

Auntie says it's my choice. But she doesn't say how I'm meant to make a choice that's lose-lose.

***

They say all the Carriers in Aotearoa are in quarantine. But the truth is there could be Potential Infectors anywhere. So while everyone else acts normal, the ones with poor immunity have to isolate. It's hard to imagine whole cities of people stuck in their houses hiding from Infectors, but that's what's happening for Lí Xiu's family.

The space between sleep and wake fills up with voices, like hundreds of children talking at once. As my eyelids grow heavier, a familiar voice speaks above the rest:

Nay-Nay! You must dig deep. All the way to China!

I don't want to ignore Mama after all the silence. But there's no way I'm digging towards the virus. My super-strength isn't real. I probably don't even have double immunity. I bet that was just another story the damsel made up to make me feel better.

Mama's long front teeth nip my brain. *Stop sulking, Nay-Nay. It's time to face the boggy woggies!*

Next thing, I'm crawling through the centre of the earth. When I finally get through the fiery golden-orangey-red magma, there are more layers of stone. Suddenly, I see myself from a distance, like I'm a character in one of the damsel's old computer games. Not human. Not realistic—just a little animated brick-person, moving rigidly horizontal and vertical. Finally, I get through the layers of rock to the level of soil, with roots tentacle-ing out, like upside-down tree-tops.

Whaea Atarangi was right. They're sending messages to each other through networks of fungi, all lit up like glow worms. My brick-brain is so solid with each thought, I lose track of up and down and end up going sideways into a cemetery. Panic takes over for a moment, then animated-brick-Mama yoinks me up by the scruff of my neck and trots me towards the surface in a series of high-pitched computerised *dings!* dodging urns and caskets planted in the soil like strange seeds. I squeeze my eyes closed. Next thing I know, I'm in the middle of a child's bedroom. They're playing with a doll that has a faceless wooden head. The child seems happy to see me, then their smile fades and I realise it's me, but from Before. Except my arms and legs turn into branches and stretch outwards, until they burst through the walls and ceiling, out through crowded cities, across land and sea. Finally, they reach Waipoua forest, where microorganisms shimmer in the air like bioluminescence. I feel Tāne Mahuta's breath become my breath, and my breath become his breath: *Of course we ARE whānau, e kare. Our limbs reach outwards, but our hearts remain close in. Start close in . . .* Ba-bup*.*

“Nah, man, I get it,” Clover says. “Don’t worry about the knocking. We got you. Let us know if you need anything, eh?”

I was sure she would tell me I was being stink and that I should choose to come stay with her so we could have a Studio Ghibli marathon or something, but she didn’t say “jokes”, she just got real serious and said, “kia kaha, brutha.”

That was the first moment I realised I was scared. The second was when Auntie washed all our groceries with Dettol. The third was when I saw hospitals on the News with corridors full of dying people.

***

I’ve been “the gurl in the bubble” before. But this feels different. Even though I’m inside, my mind keeps creeping out over the fence. Doing missions by myself doesn’t feel like it did before. It’s like playing with a flat balloon. There’s no energy or whatever to make it float. And there’s this forbidden thought that’s starting to feel like a rule: my mission won’t succeed if I keep all my secret thoughts hidden.

***

Aisling holds her phone very close, so I can only see her face in fragments. The quarter with ringlets falling over one eye of her glasses. Or the quarter with her nose and fast-talking mouth.

“So, you could’ve stayed with the Joneses?”

“Yeah. But I’ve got to save the damsel.”

It’s weird to hear myself say the words to human ears.

“The damsel?”

“Yeah, you know, the damsel in distress?”

“Okay. You have my FULL attention.”

“Do you want the fairy tale version or the scientific version?”

“Fairy tale.”

“Once upon a time,” I say, feeling oddly calm, “there was a castle.”

Aisling sighs, happily.

“No. Not THAT kind of castle. Ugh . . . imagine a bunch of empty boxes stacked on top of each other, filled with weird tubes and machines and throwaway plastic,” I say. “But worst of all, there are sounds and smells and lights that never sleep. No-one ever really wants to visit, because the air smells like dying Evils drowning in lukewarm soup.”

“Bleurgh—” Aisling screws up her face “—I know exactly what that smells like.”

“Yeah. And the castle is full of wizards covered from head to toe in plastic, so they kind of look like robots. And they’re always tired, because they have to work non-stop to try to break all the curses that cause the damsels and man-sels to be in distress.”

“That’s funny. I mean, I’ve never heard of ‘mansels’ before. Carry on.”

“So, the reason there’s so much distress is cos there are Evils who don’t care if their missions make everyone else sick, as long as they get what they want. And they’re not actually invisible. They’re just people who kind of turn themselves invisible so they can hide from the blame. The wizards feel bad, because they don’t have the power to magic everyone healthy, so they spend all their time fighting the distress flooding the castle. Sometimes their potions are like: *Abracadabra, you’re healed*. And sometimes they don’t work or they make people even sicker—”

“I think I know what you’re saying—” Aisling interrupts for the gazillionth time “—if a potion is strong enough to kill the Evils, it might kill other Invisibles too, like the ones Whaea Atarangi was talking about. The ones that help us.”

“Exactly,” I say. “So even though the wizards have lots of tricks for seeing inside skin and bone and blood, sometimes they don’t see a solution. That’s why I need your help saving the damsel in distress.”

Something moves through the gap in my door. Ugh. Not again.

“Of course I will help you. But Tan-ya, listen—”

I can’t listen. All I can do is think back over what might have been heard by the eavesdropper.

“Sorry. I*gotta*go,” I say, ending the call as my door opens further and the damsel peeps in.

“Heya.” She looks almost normal in her apricot dressing gown.

I move my legs so she can sit on the end of my bed.

The damsel smooths the lumps on my galaxy bedspread. “I bet you’re missing your girlies?”

“Mm.”

“You know, you can still change your mind?”

“That’s okay.”

She stares into my eyes, like she’s searching for the truth.

“Did I hear you say something about a damsel in distress?”

My blood goes cold.

“Were you talking about me?”

I look down at my hands.

The damsel sighs. “It’s hard having a dying mother, huh?”

I roll fluff from my duvet between my thumb and finger.

“I understand why you’d see me that way, but is it okay if I share my thoughts?”

“Okay.” I roll the fluff under my thumbnail.

“That’s really not how I see myself.”

“Sorry.”

“Listen to me, baby, you have nothing to be sorry about. It’s just . . . I’m worried if that’s how you’re thinking about me, well, I can only imagine what you’re thinking about yourself.”

“I was just trying to—” the words hit against the door in the dark place in my mind.

“Save me?” Her hand finds mine. “I get that. I really do. But, Tania, listen, you know you can’t change what’s happening inside my body, right? Nobody can. Not me. Not the doctors. Not anyone. And that’s okay.”

“NO,” I blurt. “It’s the opposite of okay.”

She thinks for a moment.

“My body has worked hard under difficult conditions for many years. Now, she’s telling me she can’t do it anymore. Eventually, every body reaches a point where they have had enough. Some of us don’t take as long to reach that point. And this is happening a lot sooner for me than any of us would like—but that is not your fault. It is not because of anything you did or didn’t do.”

Electricity pulses from the tips of my toes to the hairs on my head. Like the ~~damsel’s~~ words have magicked my body into a billion pieces, hovering in the shape of a person.

Next thing I know I’m out of my bed and out of the door and out of the house and down in the garden and sniffing back snot over Mama’s cage.

"*Please*." The word is rotten and pointless and makes no sense. I close my eyes. I can feel the squish of my bare feet in the dampness of the grass.

My cheeks feel the sting of moving air against salty wet puffiness. My fingers sense a moment of resistance before the blade of paspalum tears from itself. My arms feel the weight of the hutch's lid as I lift the roof off the sleeping box. Mama warbles in a language I don't understand, but the sound is understandable. I move slowly and carefully and after several long caterpillars she accepts my offering. And the next. And the next. And the next. Soon, she's in my arms. Against my chest. Hiding in the crook of my elbow. Auntie sees, but doesn't say anything as I carry Mama into my room.

"Here you go, Māmā," I say, placing her on Mum's chest.

She sniffs the air and noses around.

"Aw, hello, little one. You know, I always wanted a kitten." Mum swirls a finger around a golden-peach rosette. "So, what's your name, sweetie?"

"Kitten," I say, unable to take my eyes off them together.

"Ha. Well, there you go. I got my wish."

Tears stream down my silence. When Mum notices, she folds me back under my galaxy bedspread and we wait quietly for Kitten's chirps to soften.

"I'm sorry this is happening," she says, kissing the side of my head. "I wish I could be the one to stay with you and watch you grow up."

"I'm never having a baby. Or a wedding dress."

"That's okay." Mum sighs. "There are so many choices ahead of you. But all we ever have is one moment at a time. Sometimes, that's a blessing. When things get tough, it can be easier to focus on one moment at a time. One breath at a time. One step at a time."

“But I don’t want to do that without you here—” The dangerous words come out in a shake.

“I know.”

“Are you awake, bub? Your friends are here.”

“Huh? But they know I’m in isolation.”

I lift my arm and sniff. Ugh. Rank.

There’s a field of onion weed growing in my arm pits. My hair’s greasy. My eyes are crusty. My clothes are sweat-stained and wrinkled. Nothing looks or feels right, but I want to see what’s going on, so I slither from the warm dank of my galaxy bedspread and slug off the side of the bed. My skin buzzes against the bottom sheet, reminding me about the forbidden bumps I found yesterday. I’m not happy they’re breaking rule number three, but at least they’re not Evils. The book Mum gave me says it’s normal to feel bumpiness under your nipples, and not just for girls.

My yawn smells like poo and my bones feel hollow as I slop into the living room.

Mum’s holding Kitten by the window.

“Come and see what your girlies have done.”

“Kai goes by ‘they’,” Auntie corrects.

“Ah, yes. Kai and the girlies.”

Team TREEs are outside the window with letters painted on their foreheads:

WE ♡ YOU!

And suddenly, after days and days of nothingness, I know exactly what I need to do.

Not-a-Birthday-Present Diary:

I am a plant-animal-human-robot in a galaxy made of cotton

smoke from Australia

spreads like Mum's cancer cells into my soggy bog

till my lungs choke like hospital corridors

or kids puffing poison apples

or hearts ba-booming inside the well of sadness

it's everywhere

and

it's not just me

“Māmā?” I whisper, not sure if she’s awake.

“Hey, baby.” Mum lifts her blanket for me to crawl in. “What’s up?”

“I just—” The moment stretches in my throat until my eyes water “—if it’s okay to die, then was it wrong for me to go knocking?”

“Huh?” She brushes the hair out of my eyes. “You mean with your girlies?”

I nod into her shoulder.

“Why would that be wrong?”

When I don’t answer, she gives me a squeeze.

“You did what you needed to do, Ika Iti. I’m proud of you for talking to your neighbours.”

“But are you . . . scared?”

“Of dying?” Mum kisses the side of my head. “I was. But I’ve had a lot of time to think.”

“About what?”

“Well, you remember how we used to do yoga together?”

The memory glows warm. Before we left Home, we had a fire bath under the stars and searched for constellations until the cast iron tub burnt our bums. Then we had cocoa with cream and gingernuts. Before bed, Mum laid out the mats and Tibetan singing bowl in the middle of the lounge while I lit two big yellow candles that made the room smell like honey.

“Yeah?”

“Do you remember my favourite pose?”

“Um—” I burrow my face deeper into the sleeve of her nightie “—the one at the end?”

"Savasana." Mum sighs, luxuriously. "Total relaxation after so much effort. Did I ever tell you its other name?"

I shrug. "Maybe."

"Pose of the corpse."

I shudder. I'm glad I didn't know that Before. It would've given me the hebejebes.

"It's a different way to imagine death than what you see on TV, eh?" Mum says. "They make dying look scary, but it can also feel like a relief at the end of a long, intense yoga session. After working so hard to hold a gazillion poses, and move through all your aches and pains and struggles, your body finally gets to let go of everything."

"But, aren't you afraid of not existing?"

"That's a strange thought, isn't it?" Mum says. "I wasn't afraid the last time I didn't exist, so I imagine it won't be scary this time."

"Huh?" The words twist around with my mind.

"Before I was born, I didn't exist either. When I think about it like that, two things happen at once: first, I realise I cannot remember nonexistence. And second, I feel like I have always existed."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Hmmm. Well, I guess humanity goes on, one way or another and carries everyone who's ever lived along with it, in a sense."

"That's weird."

"There are so many weird and wonderful things you can ponder about life and death. Some people believe there's more to us than our bodies. They think part of us remains after death. Some people keep their ancestors with them forever. At their side. At their back. Or leading the way."

"Like ghosts or like memories or . . . ?"

Mum shrugs. "There's no way to speak for everybody. The important thing is that you get to decide what kind of relationship works for you."

"I want you here."

"I know, I want that too."

She looks grey when she's tired like this. Less human, more alien.

"You know what helps me when I'm having stink thoughts?"

I shrug.

"Well, first I write the stinkers down. Then I write down all the things I'm grateful for. Even the smallest things. Maybe we could have a go?"

Mum seems really excited, so I nod.

"I'm grateful my daughter is here with me. I'm grateful for my best friend's awhi. For the work she does and all that she gives to others. I'm grateful for this new pillow. I'm grateful for painkillers. I'm grateful for my memories—I was so afraid I'd lose them, but they're still with me and I can replay them anytime. Tania doing somersaults in my belly. Baby Tania gazing into my eyes for the first time. Tania through all her stages. And I'm grateful for the time-travel I can do, imagining future-Tania. I'm grateful for the experiences that I have had because of my unique set of circumstances. I'm grateful for the Joneses. I'm grateful for lip balm. I'm grateful for books. I'm grateful for all the words I've been able to write. I'm grateful for Kitten, who gives off a remarkable amount of heat for such a little creature. I'm grateful no one heard my massive fart this morning."

"I did."

"Bummer." Mum smiles at me with eyes glistening.

"Literally," I say.

“Okay, smarty-pants, your turn.”

I know that look. She can barely keep her eyes open.

“I’m*grateful*for*you*.”

Little~Fish~Polaroids

Farfalle's friends are helping team TREEs today. It's weird knowing they're knocking without me, but okay. Zuri has already sent a gazillion pics.

"Good morning, sunshine," Mum says, waving me over to the sofa, where she and Auntie are looking through a shoebox of photographs.

"Who's that?" I say, pointing to a gangly teen with a shy smile, even though I know the answer.

"Uncle Zan," Mum says. "He looks a bit like how I imagine you'll look in a few years."

"When you're dead?"

"Tani!" Auntie scolds, but Mum chortles.

"I see you've inherited my dark humour."

"Who are they?" I say, pointing at the old people standing in front of Auntie's house.

"My parents." Auntie reaches for the photo. "This used to be their home. When you were little, you called them Nanny and Koro. They adored you."

"Aw, my bestie has always been stylish." Mum holds up a photo of Auntie wearing a dress that looks like it's made out of rubbish bags.

"Oh, God."

"Look at that pout." Mum teases.

"I didn't know you're a model?" I say.

"*Was* a model." Auntie cringes. "I took myself so seriously."

"Why are you dressed in rubbish bags?" I say, ignoring the fact she still takes everything seriously.

“It was for a trash-to-fashion competition. Xanthe made the dress, I just wore it. I honestly thought I’d get *discovered*.”

“By who,” I say, “the garbage collectors?”

Mum snorts.

“Oi, cheeky.” Auntie crinkles her smile into a fake frown. “No, the men in suits.”

“Did you win?”

“Nah.”

“Aw, look at you, baby.” Mum passes me a photo. I’m squatting on the grass with a bare bum and a wicked grin.

“Just before that photo was taken, I found you pooping in the lavender,” she says. “You were fingerpainting . . .”

“Ugh! Talk about bum germs.” At least the grossness gets everyone laughing.

“So, are you getting buried, or what?” I say.

Auntie glances from me to Mum, then picks up another photo with a quiet smile.

“Yeah, that’s something I’ve been thinking about, actually. I’d like to be kind to Papatūānuku. She’s been very good to me.”

“We should put you in a mushroom death suit,” I say. “That’ll clean you up and break you down for recycling.”

Mum snorts. “Is that right? Tell you what, how about we go on a mission on behalf of the Mushroom Kingdom right now. I hear Princess Peach needs saving.”

“I thought you didn’t like damsels in distress,” I mutter.

“Ha! You learn quick, my daughter. I don’t think I need to worry about you.”

***

“You were normal, today,” I say, as Mum strokes my forehead. “It felt like you were better.”

“I’m sorry, baby.”

I bite my bottom lip to stop the trembling.

“It’s not fair, not fair at all.” She wipes the wet from my cheek.

No matter how deeply I sob, there’s always more sadness to come. The feeling goes on and on for eternity. But my energy for staying in it ends, leaving just a dull thumping in my head. My face is covered in snot. It’s all over Mum’s dressing gown and my pillow and my hair. I feel like I’ve been crushed, then squished back into a shape that’s not even half-right. Mum cleans me up with her hanky, then brings my head back onto her lap.

“How does it feel after a good cry?”

“Better—and not better,” I mumble, ignoring the boniness of her thigh below my cheek. I don’t like thinking of her bones.

“That’s good enough. And sometimes good enough is all we have.”

After a while, Mum shifts my head. “Sorry, my leg’s going to sleep.”

I roll away from her and rest my eyes towards the outside darkness.

“There are a thousand things I’d like to tell you, my daughter.”

“Like what?” I say, rolling back to face her. Mum stretches out her leg and gives it a rub.

“You can hold yourself on the inside.”

“Huh?”

“You can hold yourself using your imagination. And once you learn to talk to yourself with kindness, you’ll never be alone again, because you will always have yourself.”

“That’s weird.”

“It works. There will be so many people here to love you, Tania. But if you learn to love yourself, too, you can be your own best friend.”

“But I’ll just want you.”

“Okay, let’s try something,” Mum says. “Close your eyes. Imagine you are holding a little baby-Tania. Now, imagine you are that little-baby, feeling wrapped up in the warmth of big-Tania’s arms. Are you imagining that?”

“Sort of. It’s hard.”

“It gets easier, I promise,” Mum says, brushing a damp strand of snotty hair out of my face. “Now, I want you to imagine my arms making a massive bear-hug, wrapping around big-you as you hold little-you.”

I don’t tell her I’m thinking about how her hugs *used* to feel, when her arms were soft and squishy.

“The more details you focus on, the more real the feeling will become. I like to imagine my mum holding me. And her mum holding her. And her mum holding her, going all the way back to the beginning of time. It makes me feel safe and strong, because I’ve got all their energy blanketed around me. Even when it’s just me. You could imagine them too, if you like.”

“But I don’t know their faces.”

“That doesn’t matter. The great thing about having an imagination is you can make people look however you want them to look.”

It’s weird imagining the big hug that goes on and on.

“And one more thing—when it’s hard to talk nicely to yourself—on those real stink days—you just let me do the talking for you, okay?”

“Okay.”

Mum gives my back a tickle.

“Promise?”

“Okay!”

“Do you know what I’ll be saying?”

“What?”

“I love you to the moon and back.”

***

I dream I’m floating towards a massive cumulonimbus cloud. It looks like cotton, but my fingers pass straight through. Then I realise it isn’t a cloud, it’s a lung.

Little~Fish~Level~4

"At least now everyone will have to wear masks," Auntie says, wiping the bananas.

Level four also means no more knocking for team TREEs. But it also means no more Potential Infectors visiting Waipoua Forest.

***

Everything seems so much quieter outside, now. The roads are empty. The verges are growing buttercups and dandelions. There are no engines or roadworks. There are no vape clouds to dodge. No aeroplanes in the sky. Everything's weirdly still. I count the teddy bears in the windows. Mum's right. The world is very big and very small at once, especially when you're living on screens. Zuri sends me a gazillion jokes each day and records herself cracking up, which kind of makes me smile.

***

Clo: Hey gangsta. Cant believe im stuck with Faf for…how long Auntie Cindy sayin?

T: dunno

Clo: so bored. imma call u soon. U heard of pitcher plants?

***

"It's literally a toilet, not even joking," Clover says. "So mountain shrew perch on the rim to lick the sweet nectar, then they crap in the bowl to mark their territory. It's one of those win-wins: the shrew gets a feed and so does the plant. Imagine evolving to be shat on. Hold up. Sending you a pic."

She wasn't even exaggerating. The pitcher plant's rim is a wide oval, set over a large bowl, and there's even a leaf sticking up behind, where the cistern would be.

"How do you even find this stuff?"

“You know how we were talking at your uncle’s? Guess it made me curious about weird relationships.”

I sense Clover’s mind moving in a certain direction.

“So, is he actually your uncle?”

“We’re actually related,” I say.

“Yeah, that’s obvious. He looks just like you and talks like you and acts like you—”

“It’s cos I was grown from his gamete.”

“Man, science is bomb.” Clover lets out a sigh. “Guess it also *created* the bomb, tho. Hey, if you get bored, you should check out the chat. We’re getting messages from all over the motu. Man, young people really want someone to listen to them.”

Not-A-Birthday-Present Diary:

There are two worlds happening at once

the world where Mum's alive

and the world where Mum's dead

they are zooming towards each other at super-speed

and I'm stuck in the infinity between them

where I can't really do or think or feel anything

because

everything could end or begin at any second

Little~Fish~Observes~the~Chat

WHY2005: anyone out there? Lol

((((((Tanae the Invisible is here))))))

Clo: yo

ButterflyGurl4ever: Heya!

WHY2005: Hi

ButterflyGurl4ever: What's up?

WHY2005: im bored af… parents STILL working

ButterflyGurl4ever: are they essential workers?

WHY2005: ye

WHY2005: either they working or they fighting lol

ButterflyGurl4ever: aw, I'm sorry. U okay?

WHY2005: ¯_(ツ)_/¯ just hope they don't catch it, yk

ButterflyGurl4ever: yeah, for sure

WHY2005: like are we in the apocalypse rn? lol

Clo: things are pretty whack

WHY2005: fr. i feel like a loser lol like wat??? U ok. stop being drama queen

Clo: nah don't feel bad

ButterflyGurl4ever: if it makes u feel better, we're getting messages here every day, eh Clo?

You're not alone @WHY2005

Clo: 100%

Clo: we get it

WHY2005: I feel like sumthin wrong with me tho

ButterflyGurl4ever: I think it's pretty normal to feel that way at the moment

Clo: Yeah. It's true.

Clo: sometimes panic jumps me. Like I'll just be doing whatever and suddenly I remember things are seriously wrong and I feel like they'll never be okay again

((((((That's exactly how I feel whenever I think about Mum))))))

ButterflyGurl4ever: It's like being winded, eh, sis? But from the inside

((((((Farfalle feels it too?))))))

Jacinda says we're a team of five million. That is more people than I can imagine, even when my mind stretches as far as it will go. But I still hope everyone in the team gets what they need to be okay

*****

Where will Mum's memories in her head go?

The memories of before Before

the time when I was here but don't remember

if she's not here to remember

will that "us" disappear?

*****

I said I wanted to go with her.

Mum pinched the runny snot from my nose between her thumb and finger, then wiped it on the sleeve of her apricot dressing gown, which made me snort and blow a snot-bubble

*****

We were meant to have our TREEs party today, but all I can think about is how the air in the living room feels different. It's like Mum was stolen overnight and swapped for this really sick person

*****

I thought Aisling would be super disappointed about the ball, but she's more bothered about not seeing her Nana.

"Can she just change her flight?" I say towards my speaker.

Aisling humphs for the gazillionth time.

"YES, but who knows when? Anyway, Mum said I shouldn't complain to you. I just wish she booked for earlier. It's all because of this stupid operation I was meant to be having."

"Operation?"

"Oh, don't worry. Just to fix my sinuses. They don't drain properly and always get infected. It's normal for people with cystic fibrosis."

"Huh?"

"Listen, I didn't say, because I don't want everyone to treat me differently. But I'll tell you if you promise not to make a big deal of it."

"I hate big deals."

"Thought so. Do you want the fairy tale or the medical tale?"

"Medical," I say.

"So, it's a recessive condition, which means both my parents were carriers. Basically, I have trouble breathing and digesting food because my body creates too much mucus that creates blockages and causes infections. You've probably noticed it makes my poo smell REALLY bad. It's okay, you don't have to say anything. But promise me one thing: if you have any questions, ask me. Don't ask Google, okay?"

"Okay. Hey, Aisling?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about your Nana, but I'm grateful you're safe."

“Thanks.” Aisling lets out a wistful sigh. “Me too.”

“Hey, is it okay if I tell you something?”

“Always.”

“But it’s like . . . sad.”

“That’s okay.”

“The doctors weren’t actually wrong.”

I scrunch a few caterpillars before Aisling’s breath puffs through my phone again.

“Tan-ya?”

“Yeah?”

“I wish they were.”

“Yeah.”

Mum doesn't look like herself anymore. All the special looks she gave me have gone. Now, it's just the same look for everyone. Pain. When she opens her eyes, I look for signs of her, but both the mums I knew have gone. The Mum Before and the Mum After. This is the next Mum. (((The last Mum.)))

The last time she opened her eyes, she looked straight at me, reached for my hand and said, "Tāne".

For a second, she was the first two Mums. But then she was gone back into outer space.

I'm waiting for her to die. Sometimes, I think she has, because her chest pauses. But then it rises again, pulling in hard. She can't eat. She can't drink. She can't even wake up.

***

Mila wears a full-on suit when she visits, like some kind of astronaut. She reckons Mum can still hear us, so I tell her our stories. Mila says it's her job to make Mum as comfortable as possible. The drugs help with that. They stop her body feeling pain as all the systems that worked together to keep her alive slow down, getting ready to stop.

***

Sometimes, when a tree dies, it stays standing, because the trees nearby pump its roots with sugar and water. For years, the dead tree might look alive, but actually, it isn't growing at all.

Sometimes, I want to keep Mum's body alive forever, so she's there when I want a cuddle, but then I remember she has no energy to be anything more than a body. There's no room for nice feelings or adventures. She can't even look at me and see I'm hers.

Most of the time, she's just reactions. Reactions to light. Pain. Touch.

Auntie says it's how we begin—a bundle of senses, reacting to the world around us. Nothing complicated. Just pure feeling.

It's weird. I do kind of see Mum as young all of a sudden. Maybe it's because she has shrunk into herself.

Little~Fish~and~Mother

"Tania." Auntie's voice is soft and heavy.

Half-asleep, I follow her into the living room. Mum's face is orangey-pink from the glow of her favourite Himalayan salt lamp. Her mouth is open, pulling in breath. Her eyes are partly closed, and kind of sunken into their sockets. The bones in her chest are moving up and down. Not like a human anymore. Not even like an animal. Like a machine.

Auntie asked me if I wanted to be there when it happened. She said it's okay not to be, but I don't want her to go without me here.

"You can come closer if you like," Mila says.

I take a few steps, then freeze.

Auntie puts her hand on my back. Prickles rise up behind my eyes, but I let her move me to the bed. Next thing, I'm climbing in beside Mum. My Māmā. Tears and snot wet the sheet under my cheek. A palm finds my back again. I pretend it's Mum's hand. And Mum's warmth sinking through my shoulder blades. I imagine her smiling over me, the way she used to when her cheeks were soft. When her arms felt like the warmest hugs. When she rubbed my back as I drifted to sleep, imagining we were flying around the universe, visiting all the different planets. And when I asked if we could really do that one day—fly around the universe—she said we already had.

"All the tiny little parts that join together to form every part of the universe—all those little tiny parts that join together to make you and me, they have always existed, and they'll never stop existing. Isn't that amazing, my daughter? We are recycled star dust."

Little~Fish~A~Wake

“Excuse me, Tan-ya, but did you know the ‘wake’ was invented so people could make sure the body was actually dead?”

“Geeze, way to be sensitive, oi.” Clover would’ve blown air through her teeth, but she has stopped doing that since Covid.

Aisling’s “sorry” blasts through my speaker. “I just know, because I’m Irish.”

“So?” Clover rolls her eyes. “What does that have to do with anything?”

I point my phone back towards Mum’s biodegradable basket so the others can see.

“I’m pretty sure she’s dead,” I say, panning over Mum’s body. No-one has noticed my last baby-tooth nestled in her ear, ready for her to take me on her last big adventure.

“But it’s also to celebrate the person’s life,” Aisling continues. “And to say goodbye.”

“Aroha, Mary,” Farfalle chokes. She hasn’t stopped weeping since we started the zoom.

“The first wake was in Ireland two-thousand-years ago,” Aisling says. “So, maybe around the time Tāne Mahuta’s seed was germinating.”

It’s weird thinking about that. I wonder what the people who were alive back then thought about two-thousand-years in the future. Did they imagine people like us trying to protect a mighty tree that was just a sapling? Did they imagine all the life and death and life and death (and life) that would keep happening after they died?

“She looks so peaceful.”

“Yeah. It’s weird, though,” I say to Zuri. “I keep waiting for her chest to rise. Then when it doesn’t, I feel the urge to inhale for her.”

“But she doesn’t need oxygen anymore.” Aisling’s words bring us back into silence.

At least all the squiggles of pain and discomfort have gone from Mum's face. But she doesn't look like she's sleeping. Her chest would rise and fall. Her eyelids would flicker. Her air would heave in and gush out in snorts and whistles.

I tried looking at stories about souls and spirits and all that, but my thoughts didn't want to stay with the words. Maybe I just want everything and nothing to be true all at once.

It's weird. Since Mila said Mum's heart had stopped, I've had this up-in-the-air and down-in-the-ground feeling. My eyes and nose are running all the time. But somehow there's room for it. Life suddenly feels way bigger with death in it. And I want new clothes.

Little~Fish~Tihei~Mauri~Ora!

Kuia Jean's eyes turn bird-like when she calls. The sound is full in the centre, with little wobbles around the edges, where a single sorrow goes rogue and wails above the rest, but she doesn't seem afraid. It's weird being back at Home without Mum, at the same time, it kind of feels like she's here. Hahona and Whaea Atarangi brought a trailer full of saplings for Manawa Ake and Team TREEs to plant, so when we return this land, it will already have started to heal. I imagine the new roots reaching down and think of Mum's body in the ground, wrapped in the biggest hug there is: Papatūānuku's hug. There are so many things that happen when you die, because there is so much life everywhere. Even when billions of pieces fall apart, billions of other pieces move together. People appear with red eyes and sad-smiles that might even burst into laughter. Because all the feelings you can feel when you're alive come out when you die. They fill the lounge. The hallway. The bathroom. The car. Anyone who's there has to walk through them. Sit with them. Talk over them.

As Kuia Jean calls, I hear anguish rise up from deep within the well, but she doesn't try to stop it, she just gives sound to all the sadness in the world.

I glance out through a warp of tears. It's weird. All the eyes around me have turned into mirrors somehow looking exactly how I feel.

Kuia Jean's voice fades as though she's walking further and further away from the well of sadness, until there's just a distant vibration. For a moment, I feel as big as I really am. Or even bigger. For a moment, I feel real.

"Aroha, sweetheart." Karen lets the others take the weight she was helping to carry and pulls me into her arms.

Kai guides the taonga onto the grass and lifts the covering:

In loving memory of

Mary Katherine Weaver

Little~Fish~Turns~13

Auntie said they're called Barefoot shoes, because they feel like you're not wearing any.

I don't like the pressure of "happy" birthday.

But I feel like wearing my new clothes.

I yank on my new trackpants and Clover's orange "hello world" tee.

It's obvious I have a moustache. It's obvious I have hairs on my arms and legs. When you're alive, stuff just keeps growing. I could get rid of it, but I secretly like the way it feels.

"Oh, you look cool!" Auntie squeezes me into a side-hug so we're both facing the bathroom mirror. "Love that colour on you."

"Thanks. Nice dress," I say. It feels weird noticing Auntie out loud. But it *is* a nice dress. Auntie smiles.

"I'm proud of you, bub."

The mood follows us out the door. Down the steps, around the Jones's letterbox.

Auntie knocks on the yellow door, even though we don't have to knock. Some rules are hard for her to let go of. I guess some rules are hard for me to let go of, too. Like rule number three. I'm still not going to "turn into a woman". But I guess it's okay getting bigger and older. It would be weird if everyone else grew up and I stayed the same.

"Taaaa-neeee!" Daphne comes running, then stops and asks the way I taught her. "May I jump?"

"Sure." I hold out my arms.

"How old did you turn?"

"Thirteen."

“Woah! Take me to the kitchen. There’s a surprise in there. Me and Farfalle made you a cake. Sorry your mum died for your birthday.”

Auntie bites her lip. It is funny, for some reason.

“Yeehaw—” Clover appears in the hallway “—bring it in, bro. I know you hate surprises, but act surprised. Zuri went full party-planner on you.”

I hear a snorting from the darkness in the kitchen. Someone saying, “Shhhh!”

The wonky “SURPRISE” comes from all directions. Including from Daphne, who’s right by my ear. Goodbye to another lot of hearing cells. She slides down my side and rushes to point out the cake.

I scan the room.

Everyone who loves me is here. Even the invisible ones. Like Uncle Zan. He’s too shy for parties with people, so we’ll have a party with the trees next time I visit.

The good thing about having invisible people who love me is that they’re not stuck in bodies, so they can appear in even the smallest places. And they can travel at the speed of thought, to any part of the universe. Mum feels like a sun shower on my back.

The book she gave me is right. Having a body means there are so many feelings to feel.

“How about a waiata,” Kuia Jean says when I’m covered in hugs.

“I know. The happy birthday song! I’ll start, cos I know it from Kōhanga.”

“Everyone knows that song.” Clover rolls her eyes.

“*Rā Whānau ki a koe*—” Daphne sings as fast as she can to prove she knows the reo. Guess she got her voice from her mum.

I’ve been thinking about what I got from my mum. Most importantly, I got life. And storytelling. She said I can have her diaries from when she was a girl. When I’m older, I can

have the rest. I haven't looked at anything yet. Auntie says there's no rush. They'll be there when I'm ready.

"Earth to Tāne?" Clover gives me a cheeky grin. "We're asking for your consent to sing happy birthday, cos no-one wants to break your rules, or whatever."

I shrug.

"It's okay," I say. "The rules can change."

In loving memory of Mary Katherine Rogers “Gran”

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