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The Spider and the Lizard

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On Easter Friday, my father awakes to a buzzing metropolis. Barefoot children cycle up and down the streets, boom boxes blast Sublime and Six60, and a boat on the back of a trailer trawls slowly through the streets with children on the back waving like small kings as the dirt from the road rises behind them. A man guts a fish in the last measures of summer. The smell of scales and blood floats on the wind.



The only problem here is that our country is in lockdown. The day before lockdown began, my father woke to the empty streets of Tūrangi as he has done for the past fifteen years and will do until he dies. He and many like him value the seclusion of this place. The mountains whose love story makes up the landscapes, the lake so wide and deep that we call it an ocean. As a child living with him, we would roam freely through the villages that linked together to form our town. On late nights in winter, I would lie in the middle of our road and paint patterns in the stars, making new constellations. The whare, the face of the women, the baby wrapped in swaddling. Even the stars in this place were secluded.

The kids at school tell me we're poor.

I ask my parents if this is true:

*"If you go outside in the off season
you own every house,
every backyard,
every climbing tree.*

Everything you see is welcome to you."

I look up and see that some stars
have haloes filled with nothing
but deep blue space.

In the emptiness, I see
they shine the brightest.

But summer belonged to them. Belonged to wealthy out-of-towners whose simple getaway homes were our complex lives. When summer came we would make fences from the scrap wood around our home, pack up the car and drive to our far-away secret beaches. Us kids would don overalls and gumboots, and with machetes we would cut our way deeper and deeper



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into the bush surrounding our home until we could no longer hear their music mixing with our landscape.

In the small hours of Easter Friday morning, Turangi is overwhelmed with wealthy holiday-makers who sneak their way along the island. They are lizards from the underworld bringing city germs. Little black feet running wraith-like through a small Māori community that brought me up to be who I am today; that supported my father through heart surgery, through multiple crises; and, whose lands and rivers fed us under the korowai aroha of Tūwharetoa when food was easier to hunt than money.

Our brothers and sisters of iwi such as Ngāti Porou, Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, and Tūhoe have worked to protect the borders of their rohe by only allowing residents to enter, stopping the spread of this virus that echoes, throughout history, all the diseases brought to our takiwā. But in Taupō, the lizards of Hine-nui-te-pō come. These lizards do not see my father. They don't see boundary lines, and they don't see us.

Here in these invisible edges
you weave nets in the air,
hold them together with questions,
with concern,
with roots that dig so far into the earth
that magma shoots through them
to burn the sheets
of the sick in the cities.
With lungs so deep
that their breath
blows the ashes
far out to sea.

The iwi blockades are simultaneously applauded and ridiculed by the government and various arms of power, yet the invisible webs of the iwi hold the lizards at bay. We, as Māori, are pūngāwerewere: spiders that form webs in the corners of the marae. We, as kaitiaki, protect our spaces from intruders who bring us harm by nourishing themselves in spaces that don't belong to them, spaces only we are allowed to occupy. Sometimes just having a protector means you don't need to use them. Webs sit empty in the corner of my room, but at night I sleep with no fear of insects taking my blood or leaving worse things behind. I am safe, and in their papa kāinga so are our elders.

For us urban Māori, we too cannot return. We have been touched by the lizards, the marks of little black feet, seen through the eyes of the pūngāwerewere, remain on my hands. I see them, microscopic tā moko



showing where I've been. At this time, I was meant to be on one of our marae back home in Te Wai Pounamu. I was going to sneak out on the last day of the wānanga and go back to my tūrangawaewae, the one place I am always allowed to stand. I was going to be there, in the place my ancestors had been and still are. I was going to breathe easier for a little while. But I can't, and of course I accept this. Because I'm used to not being able to get what I need. We are used to not being able to go where we choose.

In this place you are alone
your veins full of witnesses
for each note you sing
in the blanket of time
that you tuck over them all.¹

Inside me are all the places I come from. I feel them move in cycles of rest, preparation, and fulfilment. Now I feel them stretch out along the landscape inside me. Mountains cloaking themselves with a kaitaka of snow, knowing that for now their job is just that: to be mountains we can return to when the black footprints of the lizards no longer cling to our skin. Where I'm from, we are known for our visions, and we are known for holding peace within ourselves. Years ago, I dreamt of a river with the bodies of women in white dresses lining its sides. There was a smell of sugar burning and strange music in the currents of the river as it moved towards the ocean. I asked my old people and they told me this was an influenza dream, a time when we lost many of our people. But now I can't be sure. So many of those women had skin like mine. Like Rakaunui, the full moon. But they too had the hair of our ancestors. Thick black ropes, spreading out and dangling their ends into that river.

The smell of burnt sugar
mixes with water and loam.
Vapours spreading like a sickness,
in colours of mist and river spray.
The women are in white cloth
that rests gently on the skin.
Water vapor pressing
on wherever bones jut.
The shoulder blades,
the ribs,
the most angular points

¹ From the author's poem, 'In This Place'.



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of the hips.²

Time is a circular thing. It winds back over itself in a never-ending loop. We spiral around in it, creating whirlpools that hold us in space, that hold us in memory. I cannot return home. But I am at home in my body because this is a space I hold tino rangatiratanga, and so do my ancestors. In the winds of my lungs and in the rivers of my veins, they are always at home. They are always fighting those little black marks that pool in the lungs and that move through the blood like debris. And through all of this I will share the lands of my body with them. I will protect all the iterations of my whakapapa across the land by being mana whenua in my own body and staying within it until one day, when it is safe to do so, I will take this body home.

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² From 'Influenza' due to be published in 2021 as part of the collection 'Tōkū Papa, Victoria University Press