

Leo Reid – Secondary Schools Division, 2nd Place

trptych

[4th guest]

You are not the first to make your home here – and you will not be the last.

I watch you bake cake and cookies to greet the neighbours with barely contained excitement and feel the neat *tap tap tapping* of your cane as you make your way down the tiny driveway. There is no garden path and there are no roses for you to stop and smell. Yet.

You are a nice young woman. You have a home in the suburbs and make your bed every morning, fingers twitching over the worn quilt to put it in its place. Your hair is brown as chestnuts and the elegant coiffure that you twist it into daily has been out of fashion for just over a decade. It is the first thing that you remember your mother teaching you. She called them victory curls. The words catch in your throat when you replicate them.

The name tag that you pin to the front of your striped shirtdress reads *Clarissa* in swirling font. It is crisp and neat. Everything about you is crisp and neat.

There is little that you have come with and yet you accumulate as the years go by. The walls are pieced together with portraits of strangers and tapestries of thick cloth. Little ornaments hang in the windows, pretty baubles of stained glass and lead. You have a large window fitted into your bedroom with a pane of art deco painted glass. It takes a few years but eventually the kitchen is repainted and you find someone local to do the splashback over in tiles of green and blue in the summer of 1961. You have carved your place in the world out of grey clay and you have painted it so all that shows is the colour.

You have been here for many years when it happens. I have become used to the soft clinking of crockery, or the flashing disco music that you prefer to jazz. Your slow footsteps on the carpet. You dislike polished floors. The kitchen only has chessboard tiles because they are easier to clean.

It is a relatively normal day, all things considered. The newspaper is left in the letterbox and you go off to your job, making a note to collect it when you return. You have crocheted a new covering for your cane that matches with your chequered dress. The days are getting shorter again and this means that you walk slower than usual, your leg giving you pain and you giving yourself leeway. It is customary that you return with some of your clients' clothing to be altered if you do not finish it all in the day, so you take a large bag.

You have been gone only for a couple of hours before there is a huff of mild exertion, the shattering of peace – what is left of the window is littering the carpet of the sitting room. You vacuumed only this morning.

There is someone here. Someone I do not know. I am afraid. Their heartbeat is unfamiliar, a rumbling hum of redness. It is sticky. Their feet are steady and their steps are even. Their shoes are clean. Their hands flicker in and out of my consciousness. I think their fingers are long and slender. It's not right. None of this is right.

There is someone here, and I do not know them, and I am afraid.

You come back to a house that has been gutted inside out.

You will not be the last. You will not be the last.

[5th guest]

Hello, Aaron.

The first thing that you worry about is that you are here.

I know all your names. I know all the ones you've ever had and all the ones you'll ever use. I can recite them back to you. They are the fallen monarchs in the timeline of your life, little domino soldiers that you slash the bellies of to watch the syntax spill. Sometimes you think that a name that you haven't heard in years is going to rise to the lips of someone long gone.

Every time Dad brings someone home, you look through the keyhole at the shapes that her lips make, waiting and waiting for the right one. They are always tacky from lipstick. It is never the right shade and it is never the right name.

I know you, Aaron. I know you.

You have a mediocre girlfriend with whom you have a mediocre relationship, and sometimes you come home and have mediocre sex. She always leaves. Afterwards, you put on your cassette that you have labelled *simple rage* and I watch you wipe away your tears with white-knuckled fists and swear at yourself for losing control.

It's okay, Aaron. We all lose control at some point.

The cassette player runs down, and the underground rock music of the '80s, your childhood, fades out – and you are inevitably left on your bedroom floor, tears drying on your salt-stained cheeks and snot crusting your nose. If I tore your chest open and felt around for a heart and lungs, I would find swollen organs throbbing in time with your pain. You are so full and yet so empty. You fascinate me, Aaron.

There are dead leaves on the ground and dead people's skin on the window sills. It sits thickly when you swipe your fingertips through it. You leave train tracks in the wood grain and you pause for a moment before sweeping it all away. The particles suspend themselves in the open space between the ceiling and floor.

And that's the second thing you worry about.

You are deathly terrified of being forgotten.

So sometimes there are pieces of you that I take and do not give back. I like the way that your hand grips a pencil, and the uncertain way it shapes haphazard letters, even if you do not. I know it doesn't make your life easier. You wish that you could be better. You write your name on a wall in red Biro pen and shove your bed back into place when you have finished. The shame eats you up from the inside. I can see the bloody chunks it tears out of you with its

curved teeth. And yet – and yet, you have not the heart to wash it away. You are a part of me now.

I cradle the curve of your skull in the rafters and under the kitchen's tiling, smoothing over the harsh jut where the occipital bone meets the parietal. I remember. I endure. You will be safe with me, Aaron.

There are mice in your walls. You call them things. I know the things that they talk about, and I know the names that they call themselves. I tell them where to hide so they'll be safe from Dad's wire traps.

One day, you go for a walk. You do not come back.

[6th guest]

I am alone for a very long time. Not precisely *alone*. The mice are here, and so are the cockroaches and the spiders and even a few intrepid wētā. They chitter and chirp amongst themselves while a forgotten sewing project gathers dust in the basement and a lone cassette tape huddles beneath a loose floorboard, its name faded with age. There are scraps of poetry in the foundations.

I am not as other houses are. For them, people come and go as the tides, inexorable and constant. Houses are defined by the people that live in them. I am defined by the people that no longer live in me.

And eventually – new things. The gate clicks. Fraying thoughts are scattered like scales in the sea. Three sets of feet. The estate agent. Khadija. And you.

The rose bushes are overgrown, is the first thing you notice, endeared. You say it with your hands. *Rose bushes!*

We'll have to prune them back, she says out loud. *Is that a pōhutukawa tree?*

Of course it is.

The estate agent chimes in, eager to get his script in before the first dregs of delight over the plants fade away and the underwhelming sensation sets in: of staring at a house too big for one person and too small for two. *It should have come up on the listing. It might not look like much, but it has the potential to be something very special. With the right investments—*

He defers to you because you are the husband, albeit he is caught off guard by the fact that you do not speak. You spare no attention for him other than a quicksilver smile. You are preoccupied with gazing at her.

I know that pōhutukawa flowers are your favourite.

When you both decide to move in, things move slowly and then all at once.

Before you sleep on your first night, I ask you *what is your name?* and your fingers spell out *h-a-m-z-a* in an elegant twisting movement. I think of Clarissa and her victory curls.

Of course, I knew your name before. I always have. But it is good to meet you, Hamza.

These days you have large trucks devoted to helping people move house. I remember Clarissa and her cardboard boxes, and Aaron with Dad who had not much more. Now there are men that come here to deposit furniture. It takes two people to bear your television through to the front room and to install it on the wall for a little extra cash. I recall what television was in its infancy: the small screens in the grey boxes. Black and white. Distorted sound. Now, you have a flat screen, with crisp audio and highly defined colours. I think of Aaron and his cassette player.

There is a cat with you too, a long-furred little creature with shining green eyes and a slate-grey pelt. He doesn't like the cat carrier. He is distrustful. It is the essence of a new house that a cat is wary of. They are resistant to change. You make soft chirping sounds at him and he comes to you. He will settle down in time. He will grow to love this house as if it were his own. Maybe he does own it, Khadija will say. Her laugh is a well-worn thing, smooth with

little cracks at the edges. Yours is rusted over with quiet uncertainty but no less joyous. I hope to watch the smile-lines carve themselves into you.

Most days you come home first and strip, easing your binder over your narrow shoulders and taking a big sigh, stretching as far as you can. Your collarbones dip in and out with your movements. The binder is just a few shades lighter than your warm brown skin.

Other times it is Khadija who returns before you, her shoulders curved with weariness and her jaw clenching and unclenching. She has a proud jaw and a wide, flat nose. They are some of your favourite things.

She is late home one day. *I found something for Bast*, she says, and she unrolls the little cat-sized prayer mat. *Maybe he'll stop sprawling on yours*. It is densely embroidered with green and blue. You coo over it accordingly and she smiles. Her eyetooth is crooked. She tweaks her hijab back into place from where it's slipped and you go to finish the dinner.

The geometry of your intimacy is a rounded thing. There are pieces of this, too, that I take and store within myself. The twinkle that she gets in her eyes when you are in on a joke together becomes a star in a knot of the wood in the window sills, now devoid of dust. The flexing of your muscles as you take yourself through your daily stretches becomes a warping in the glass of a window that has been smashed and then fixed in a hurry. Your intertwined fingers tangle into and become the electrical currents in the walls.

You are of course not the first to make your home here – and you will not be the last.

For now, though, you and Khadija watch through the kitchen window as Bast leaps at a tūi and startles it into the air. It is a whirl of iridescence in the sunlight. Bast always did have trouble with his balance. She coaxes him back inside and reprimands him for the attempted murder but her hands are soft as she scratches behind his ear. She holds him, and you hold her.

The tūi settles in the pōhutukawa tree and preens itself thoroughly, calming the stumbling trip of its heart, before spreading its wings. It swoops off to places unknown, unseen.