



home:
new
writing

home

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edited by thom conroy

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the art of the essay

Welcome to *Home: New Writing*. It's the debut volume of what will be an annual publication of the best of New Zealand essay writing by this country's most accomplished writers, both established and emerging.

The series marks Massey University Press's serious intention to help further an intelligent national cultural conversation, to showcase the work of New Zealand's many fine writers and thinkers, and to support the art of the essay.

The Press is indebted to Dr Thom Conroy, the editor of this volume, and to the twenty-one other writers whose essays are published within it.

Nicola Legat
Publisher

introduction

**opening
doors with
our feet**

In the last year, home has been on our minds. From the haunting sight of the three-year-old Syrian boy Alan Kurdi lying dead, face down on a Turkish beach and news of New Zealanders living in their cars, to the crashing of the Canadian immigration site following the US election and international concerns about the accelerated melting of the Antarctic ice sheets, many of us have been thinking about what it means to be at home. With 65 million people currently displaced globally, the notion of home is more relevant and yet more fragile than ever before. At the same time, home is a form of knowing that contains the reasoning for its own preservation. Home is also a necessity, one of the ‘physiological needs’ that forms the base of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, as well as an essential experience in our definition of self.

For all of home’s centrality, you would think we might know a bit more about it. Home seems intimate, near at hand. It suggests a place, as my daughter says, where we open the doors with our feet and close them with our elbows. And home is such a universal topic that our depictions of it are often expressed in clichés. At the same time, the experience of home is profoundly subjective. Each of us has a recollection of a home of some kind, and many writers find themselves returning to the subject over the course of their oeuvre.

In New Zealand there can be an inherent difficulty in articulating conceptions of home, especially for Pākehā writers. In ‘Writing Here’, the introduction to *Extraordinary Anywhere: Essays on Place from Aotearoa New Zealand*, editors Ingrid Horrocks and Cherie Lacey link Pākehā reticence about place to an underlying anxiety about ‘displacing’ Māori voices:

For many Pākehā, settlers and newer migrants, the strength of emotion connected to New Zealand, to a sense of home here, doesn’t find easy expression.

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Many of us are aware that not being tangata whenua means that we don't have a natural, or prior, claim on this place, and so there can be an obstacle between emotion and language — we can find ourselves coming up short, at times inarticulate.

One of my early worries about this collection was that a version of this inarticulateness might surface in some of the essays. If nothing else, I was concerned that many essays on the same topic might turn out to be similar — a disquieting prospect, given that my intention was to spark new dialogue about what an expanding sense of home might mean to us here and now in Aotearoa.

Those worries turned out to be groundless. As the essays began to arrive in my inbox daily, I found myself overwhelmed by both the eloquence and the diversity with which the writers had approached the topic. It wasn't long before I found myself stretched, and when this happened I understood that we were on to something. As I read, I became aware of — dare I say it? — learning something. Because the procedure was so deeply pleasurable, I didn't recognise that any edification was occurring, but by the time I had read through the essays in *Home* I understood that I had become educated on the subject.

So what did I learn? I learned, first of all, that home is primary, shaping and visceral. As Brian Turner says near the beginning of 'Southwards to the Always Talking Sea', 'the word *home* registers more powerfully than just about any other'. Home is omnipresent and nonetheless elusive, slippery. It can be embodied in a material object, as it was for Ian Wedde's great-grandmother, whose linen sampler, brought from the Danish town of Haderslev on the South Jutland peninsula, remained an enduring fragment of a faraway home. This sampler, Wedde writes in 'How Not to Be at Home', 'represented her and uttered her'.

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At the same time, home is ephemeral, as we learn in Laurence Fearnley's 'Sniffing Out the Neighbourhood: A Scent Map of Home'. For all of us, home is contingent, although some of us are more aware of this contingency than others. For Bonnie Etherington, a New Zealander growing up in West Papua, home was a function of mobility. In 'Never Coming Home', Etherington remembers her mother observing that 'home is where our suitcase is'. I learned, too, that home can be a form of knowledge, such as the life-saving technique for catching turtles that Gina Cole's Fijian grandmother teaches her in 'Na Noqu Bubū'.

The essays in *Home* are wide-ranging, heterogeneous, cacophonous forays across the globe and deep into every nook and cranny of our country. In spite of the diversity of the collection, however, there are threads that bind, hints of commonality that unite us. Writing of the distinction between home and house in her introduction to *At Home in New Zealand: History, Houses, People*, historian Barbara Brookes acknowledges that 'it is the infusion of memory that is the key ingredient that makes a house into a "home"'. Memory implies a journey, a return. Whether the essay's subject is directly about travel, as it is for Lloyd Jones in 'Proximity' or Sue Wootton in 'Homing', the idea of home always carries this notion of return — if not along the miles of the earth, then along the winding tracks of whakapapa as in Paula Morris's 'Greys Avenue'. 'Home,' Ingrid Horrocks realises in her essay 'Oscillations', 'might also contain movement — both physical and emotional. Home might contain, rather than be threatened by, yearnings, by elsewhere.'

As I read the drafts of these essays, I was reminded that home is innately political. It is, as Jones makes clear, the first site of politicisation: 'home is where all the early prejudices are seeded'. If home signifies belonging, it also contains the power to exclude. In her essay 'To Tatau or Not To Tatau — That Is the 'Afakasi Diasporic

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Question’, Selina Tusitala Marsh collides with the politics of home during an encounter at her PhD graduation ceremony. Although Marsh felt like she was ‘beginning to be at home in a university setting that was becoming more Pasifikised’, her sense of belonging is interrupted when an older Sāmoan man, who ‘had an air of authority and seemed to be someone of repute’, shames her for not knowing Sāmoan.

Home is a migration, albeit a tentative one, and contemporary politics has made it all too clear that any kind of migration is a profoundly partisan affair. Discussing the fate of asylum seekers to Australia under the plan of Operation Sovereign Borders, James George links this modern project of ‘protecting the sanctity of white Western civilisation from the hordes’ to the originating idea of home. ‘It is a fight,’ George writes in ‘Returning Places’, ‘over the concept of home: who has the right to name it, to feel it, and who doesn’t.’

Perhaps what most beguiles about home is its capacity to remain aloof, closed off, impervious to any final reckoning. Etymologically speaking, home is akin to *haunt*, derived from the Middle English *hom*. Haunting suggests the uncanny return, the journey that is, somehow, never completely accomplished and never completely grasped. In ‘Home Without Now and Then’, Elizabeth Knox sets out into the native territory of home — the enigmatic hinterland of memory — only to find herself in a distorted landscape, a fleshly presence in the shifting province of shadows. She writes, ‘I’m in the wrong place. I can’t call to find out where I should be.’ In ‘The Red in My Mind’, Martin Edmond traces the unlikely migration of a circus elephant, Mollie, from Uttaradit near the Thai–Lao border to Singapore to Perth to Ohakune, where she consumes tutu and perishes. Edmond’s essay is an expedition across rainforest, open sea and railway, but he also travels the strange circuits of memory — his own and that of other eye witnesses — to arrive at Mollie’s final resting place. And yet this return is haunted by the

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mystery of all that remains absent. ‘Some things cannot be explained. They can only be told,’ Edmond writes.

The beach on the Mangawhero, where Mollie ate the tutu, is still there. So is the tutu. Across the other side of the road, in sight of the site of the Braileys’ house (it has been trucked away), there is a slight depression in the grass; and Celeste says that it is half here, and half under the road itself, that the bones lie. When you stand there, you hear the Mangawhero flowing over stones as it makes its way down from the mountain; but all else is quiet.

For all its familiarity, something in our conception of home remains secret, at arm’s length, irretrievably lost.

It bears noting that the essays which follow are, according to one or another definition of the word, ‘non-fiction’. From the Latin *exigere*, the word ‘essay’ conveys connotations of ‘trying out’ or ‘venturing forth’, making an attempt of one kind or another. *To essay* also suggests the act of ‘weighing’ or ‘testing’, as if to ascertain the quality of something. Essaying, then, is a tentative act, an attempt infused with the idea of understanding as a process of evaluation and discovery. In ‘A Natural Utterance for the Era’, a recent article commissioned by the Academy of New Zealand Literature, Lawrence Patchett declares ‘it’s an exhilarating time to write non-fiction in New Zealand, and to read it’. It’s my hope that readers of this volume will second Patchett’s proclamation as they frequent both the familiar and the far-flung haunts of *Home*.

Thom Conroy
Editor

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