

The Last Place I'll Look

James MacTaggart - Ngāi Tahu

I looked for you at home but you weren't there. I arrived late and the house was already shut against the cold, front door closed but unlocked. I left my bag on the doorstep and wandered around the yard, kicking through leaves and eyeing the state of your lawns.

I ambled back and forth until I was sick of the sight of overgrown hedges and drizzle had started to soak through to my skin. I found your axe stuck in an old log. Bad way to treat an axe, but it looked as if it'd seen worse. It came with me as I wove through piles of damp wood, heading back to the house. Figured you might be inside, seeing as how the front door was unlocked. Figured I might also be fooling myself.

No harm in hoping, and your coat was hanging on a piece of driftwood in the porch so that was a good sign. I danced an awkward jig on my way into the kitchen, trying to twitch the water off the back of my neck. The curtains were pulled and the coal range was full of ashes. Not such a good sign given it was colder in there than it was outside. I opened a few blinds and parked up at the table, thinking I must've picked the creakiest seat of the bunch.

I thought about opening a beer and I thought a lot about walking back to the state highway and hitching the hell out of there. I thought about lighting the coal range, but the only paper I could see was a stack of your old crossword puzzles and burning them just seemed a bit wrong.

My thoughts didn't stop, they churned sluggishly around my head like a broken watermill, creaking more than the kitchen chair. I grabbed a piece of pounamu off the table on my way out, rolling it between my fingers as the thoughts kept rolling behind my eyes. Figured I was done fooling myself.

I looked for you at the urupā but you weren't there. I took a shortcut, across the lagoon, so I arrived with wet socks and sand in my shoes. The rest of me coped a lot better thanks to your oilskin coat. It smelt like sawdust and linseed oil, and the water made a dripping curtain off the edge of the hood.

The gate squeaked on my way into the cemetery, I could probably make my fortune going door to door around the village with a can of CRC. I mumbled a karakia under my breath, giving thanks for food. It was the only one I knew, and there was no one around to judge.

You weren't there but Mumma was. I couldn't find any flowers, so I'd brought a handful of toetoe stems. I stood, because there was nowhere to sit without getting a wet arse, and I talked. I told her a funny story about the fella that I caught a ride home with, and a less funny story about how my car had broken down a few days earlier. I whinged about my job and I bragged about my veggie garden, and then I whinged a bit more that she'd never given me the secret recipe for her pea and ham soup.

I talked until my pacing had worn a muddy track into the grass, and the clouds had leached a little more colour out of the world. I talked until I couldn't get past the lump in my throat and then I blurted something about how I wished she could meet my baby girl. The squeaky gate ushered me gone and I washed my hands in a puddle as I left.

I stopped outside the urupā, kicking stones and watching a pūkeko bob between the graves. I stared past the dripping curtain, beyond my bundle of toetoe to where headlights slid through the gloom. I was close to the edge of the village, right by the main road, but my feet turned the other way. Figured it must've been something she said.

I looked for you at the beach, cutting over paddocks and across the lagoon, conscious of how strange I probably seemed to anyone watching me skulk around the village on a day like today.

I kept to the edge of the lagoon, following a line of foam where the tide marked its journey onto dry land. Well, slightly dryer land, if the pattering against my hood was anything to go by. I moved between tangles of driftwood and clumps of marram grass, hunched inside your coat, pounamu clenched in my fist.

It'd stopped raining by the time I reached the coast so I took off my hood. You'd always loved this place of shingle and shells, where you could walk in a straight line for hours with nothing but salt and solitude for company. I preferred the river, the gentle flow of a current rather than the hammering beat of waves. You would come here to rest, whereas the noise made me restless.

I looked for you at the beach but all I could see was driftwood you would've carved and stones you would've collected. My arm tensed and I almost threw the pounamu into the sea. I swore at the waves and the wind snatched away my words. I kicked the sand and the wind just blew it back over my jeans.

I figured my anger was a waste of breath and coming here was a waste of time. I spat and the wind returned that to me as well. I turned to leave and the noise faded, the gusting dwindled to a silence that made me pause.

A congregation of plovers emerged from the quiet, passing overhead with a single piercing cry that followed them up the valley. I heard the rustle of harakeke and the moan of air in a hollow log. I felt a wave break against the shore like something thudding in my chest, like a hand on my shoulder.

I saw tracks through the tussock where you'd carried me on a wheelbarrow and a stump where we'd sat and joked that it'd be me carrying you in a few years' time. I cleared my throat, and I remembered my uncle telling me how I got that habit from you.

I figured a wet arse didn't matter much at this stage, so I lowered myself onto a piece of wood, blinking against the sting in my eyes. I stayed there until the sky was black and water was lapping around my shoes.

I looked for you at the beach and I found you, Dad.