Contortions: An Exploration of the Feminist Personal Essay as Neoliberal Resistance

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Abstract

In this thesis I examine the personal essay form and how it is used by women writers to resist ideas of neoliberalism, in particular, the position of ideal neoliberal subject or the 'girlboss'.

In the critical component, entitled '"Resisting the Girlboss": Neoliberal subjectivity and the feminist personal essay', I draw from sociologist Elizabeth Houghton's definition of ideal neoliberal subjects as self-enterprising individuals, who 'actively seek to invest in' themselves and find success in a competitive world. Through a critical examination of *My Body* (2021) by Emily Ratajkowski, *Blueberries* (2020) by Ellena Savage, and *Rangikura* (2021) by Tayi Tibble, I explore how the personal essay is used as what Michel Foucault labels a 'technology of the self' – a tool through which subjects can be agents of their own subjectivity. I demonstrate how these texts resist the position of ideal neoliberal subject through techniques of reflection, recognition, and humour, as well as use of cultural themes and experimentation with form. Additionally, I demonstrate how the personal essay form appeals to neoliberal values, which allows it to serve as a 'trojan horse' through which writers can further project stories of neoliberal resistance.

In the creative component, a collection of personal essays entitled 'Contortions', I too use the personal essay as a 'technology of the self' to explore, and in many cases, resist my own position as ideal neoliberal subject. Similarly to the texts analysed in the critical component, these essays employ techniques of reflection, recognition, and humour to generate resistance towards neoliberal values. The essays in 'Contortions' also exemplify the experimentation that is possible with the personal essay form, and how this can work to strengthen the resistant techniques used.

Dedicated to all of the women who've shaped me.

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Part I: ‘Resisting the Girlboss’: Neoliberal subjectivity and the feminist personal essay

Introduction:

In late 2021, TikTok user @carol.ine posted an eight-second video of herself on the social media platform – taken from a low-angle and comedically close to her face – in which she dramatically told the camera: 'Listen, I can't give any more information, but I fear I may have girlbossed a *bit too close* to the sun.' When I first watched the video, it made me laugh out loud. I was twenty-two years old and girlbossing hard – competing my way up the first few rungs of the corporate ladder, juggling my master's degree, attempting to get to the gym at least four times a week, as well as making time for the countless other things I identified as opportunities to better myself. I quickly understood @carol.ine's self-deprecating humour, as I too felt my girlbossing behaviour was sending me hurtling, full speed towards the crippling heat of burnout. Unsurprisingly, I wasn't the only one who could relate. At the time of writing, there are over thirty-one thousand TikTok videos in which other women have built upon @carol.ine's joke, using her monologue to highlight the embarrassing, awkward and sometimes dangerous situations that their own girlboss tendencies have generated.

I open this thesis with the notion of the girlboss in order to show how this expression can be recognised as the colloquial term for something else – the ideal neoliberal subject. Sociologist Elizabeth Houghton describes ideal neoliberal subjects as self-enterprising individuals, who 'actively seek to invest in' themselves and find success in a competitive world (623). I apply this definition to the notion of the girlboss, which as a gendered and binary term, will often be discussed throughout this thesis as it is applied to women using she/her pronouns. The role of ideal neoliberal subject is one which also often considered gendered. Rooted in a Foucauldian approach to neoliberalism, one which sees free market rationality applied to all facets of society, many feminist scholars have asserted that women, particularly young, middle-class women, are constructed as its ideal subject (Budgeon 85; Gill 443; Koffman and Gill 87; Rich 501; Scharff 108). Sociologist and feminist theorist Rosalind Gill explains that this is because 'to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen' (443).

In this thesis, I will explore the ways in which select women writers – *My Body* (2021) by Emily Ratajkowski, *Rangikura* (2021) by Tayi Tibble and *Blueberries* (2020) by Ellena Savage – appear to resist their position as ideal neoliberal subjects, or the notion of the girlboss, through the use of personal essay. The ideal status of the girlboss is revealed in dominant western culture's tendency to frame her as an aspirational figure – as portrayed in Elite Daily's article '12 Steps to

Make Sure You're Becoming a #GirlBoss, Not a Mean Girl' as well as *Girlboss Radio*, the career self-help podcast marketed at women. A notable aspect of culture where the ideal neoliberal subject has been glamorised is in contemporary women's writing. Back in 2013, Sheryl Sandberg, then chief operating officer at technology-giant Meta, fronted the women-focussed career self-help book *Lean In* (2013). The following year, the founder of fast-fashion retailer Nasty Gal, Sophie Amoruso wrote a tell-all of her journey as a fashion entrepreneur in her memoir *#GIRLBOSS* (2014). Both works epitomised a certain kind of feminism, pushing the neoliberal doctrine that individual women are capable of dismantling inequality through means of self-improvement and personal responsibility. The latter even managed to coin the term 'girlboss' for the successors of such a culture.

However, in recent years there seems to have been a cultural shift in the conceptualisation of this term. Contemporary culture reviewers have labelled the girlboss as capitalism's 'cruellest trick' (Abad-Santos) and 'a sexist Trojan horse' (Spratt). Events like the movement on TikTok highlight that there is a vein of resistance among women towards the position of ideal neoliberal subject. In order to define 'resistance' for the purpose of this work, I will be borrowing from communication theorist Angela Trethewey by using the term to refer to the 'moments where resistance crystallises in isolated acts or gestures in the context of on-going power relations' (283), with said 'moments' including the creation of written texts.

This thesis seeks to explore how a trend of resistance may have manifested itself in contemporary feminist writing, as particularly portrayed in Ratajkowski's *My Body,* Savage's *Blueberries* and Tibble's *Rangikura*. The thesis is housed within the discipline of creative writing, with particular attention towards feminist theory and writing practice. However, within this scope, I will be primarily focused on the feminist work of resisting the neoliberal subject and how this operates in my key texts. When considering my choice of texts for this research, I have been mindful to select works that were aligned with the resistant work of feminism – either written with the intention of being a feminist text or perceived as such. I also want to demonstrate both the expansiveness of the personal essay form as well as a diversity of narrative voices. Given that neoliberalism is often critiqued as Eurocentric (Bargh 15; Bay-Cheng 332; Gill 443), the inclusion of Tibble's work is particularly important to showcase how a Māori perspective impacts the way in which the neoliberal subject is resisted.

To fully contextualise the notion of resistance in these texts, I will begin this study with an explanation of the position of women as ideal neoliberal subjects. This will include a definition of subjectivity and an overview of neoliberalism, in which I will highlight Julie Wilson, the author of *Neoliberalism* (2018), and her neoliberal 'truths' as a framework for measuring resistance in the key texts. Following that, in the section titled, 'Writing, resistance, and the personal essay as

‘technology of the self’’, I will give an overview of writing as resistance, and in particular, the use of life writing in feminist resistance, arriving at a definition of the feminist personal essay. This section will end with a justification of how the personal essay serves as an example of Michel Foucault’s ‘technology of the self’ – a tool through which subjects can be agents of their own subjectivity. These notions will ground the following sections of analysis, in which I focus on select personal essays from *My Body*, *Blueberries*, and *Rangikura,* and the ways in which they work to resist the position of ideal neoliberal subject. Finally, in my discussion section I will consider why the personal essay form is particularly useful for women writing in resistance of their neoliberal subjectivity. Ultimately, I aim to demonstrate how the neoliberal appeal of the personal essay allows it to serve as a ‘trojan horse’ through which writers can project stories of neoliberal resistance.

Women as ideal neoliberal subjects:

Subjectivity, in cultural theory, is considered as the process through which an immersion in culture shapes our perception of self and reality. French philosopher Michel Foucault, one of the early theorists behind the concept, defines subjectivity as ‘the way in which the subject experiences himself in a game of truth where he relates to himself’ (461). In a critical essay on subjectivity theory, Assistant Professor at the University of Kashmir, Farooq Ahmad Sheikh, clarifies that referring to ‘someone as a subject’ is a way of acknowledging that ‘the person is not an isolated entity’, but part of and affected by a larger cultural system (12). While there are several varied interpretations of subjectivity, research for this thesis will be grounded in those where it is considered constructed, as opposed to ‘fixed and timeless’ (Sheikh 2). Renowned gender theorist, Judith Butler speaks of subjectivity as ‘a journey of the self with neither a point of departure nor arrival’ (235). This notion of a person’s position as subject being everchanging is shared by philosopher Julia Kristeva, who states that ‘the subject does not perceive itself to be ordered and knowable’ – instead, ‘it feels it is constantly under threat, disrupted, in a state which is as tempting as it is condemned’ (1). Understanding subjectivity as changeable in this way helps to make room for the notion that a subject’s positioning can be resisted.

The term neoliberalism has become one of the most popular ‘buzzwords’ when discussing the state of our current world (Cotoi 109). In my research, I’ve encountered the term used in reference to a historical period of time (Saad-Filho and Johnston 1), a political project (Harvey 2; Wilson 22), a mode of governance ruled by specific economic reform policies (Steger and Roy 12-14), and a cultural phenomenon or ideological system (Brown 3; Treanor; Wilson 6). In *Neoliberalism*, Julie Wilson defines the titular term as ‘the set of social, cultural, and political-

economic forces that puts competition at the centre of social life' (2). At the root of this definition is Foucault's concept of governmentality. Well known for his theories surrounding power and knowledge, Foucault uses governmentality to refer to the expansion of power beyond the 'organized political', and inclusive of the 'active consent and willingness of individuals to participate in their own governance' (Huff). In Foucault's words, 'the market creates the exchange values and also the natural truth of economic and government processes', which then in turn feeds 'the value of public power acts' (qtd. in Cotoi 113). In this light, neoliberalism refers to the process by which the prioritisation of 'the self-regulating free market' and its values of 'competition and self-interest' (Steger and Roy 12), now shape a world where 'the market is, or ideally should be, the basis for all of society' (Wilson 2-3). This makes neoliberalism a useful term for capturing the current zeitgeist of dominant culture.

In a neoliberal society, the ideal subjects are those who live in accordance to its ideological system – a position that many suggest is best upheld by women. Described as self-enterprising individuals who 'actively seek to invest in' themselves and find success in a competitive world (Houghton 623), the ideal neoliberal subject appears to accept what Julie Wilson describes as the fundamental 'truths' of neoliberalism. These are summarised as the following: 1. 'The individual's freedom to choose' is always top priority, 2. society is best ordered and governed by 'market competition', and 3. 'individuals are personally responsible for their lives and outcomes, not the powerful structures that govern them' (52). Several theorists (Budgeon 85; Gill 621; Koffman and Gill 443; Rich 501; Scharff 108) allude to the idea that these ideological 'truths' of neoliberal society – choice, competition, and self-regulation – are in some ways, in more effect in the lives of women. Feminist theorist Rosalind Gill proposes that 'to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self' (443). In Gill's later research alongside Koffman, they argue that this is particularly the case for women who are young and middle class (87). I will refer back to choice, competition, and self-regulation throughout the analysis of *My Body*, *Blueberries* and *Rangikura*, arguing that the varying degrees to which the works reject these truths shows resistance towards the position of ideal neoliberal subject.

To contextualise why these works may be resistant to the 'truths' of neoliberalism in the first place, it is integral to note the critique that a society ruled by competition negatively impacts disadvantaged or marginalised groups. Feminist scholar Laina Bay-Cheng states that 'neoliberal policies and ideology are fronted by a rhetoric of freedom and fairness' while they in fact, work to 'constrain liberty and perpetuate injustice' (333). Neoliberal culture places value and emphasis on one's freedom to make individualised choices. But for those who belong to marginalised communities such as Black, Indigenous and people of colour, queer people, and – central to this

thesis – those who identify as women, this perceived freedom to *choose your own adventure* is problematic. These communities are grossly impacted by structural inequalities – particularly in terms of wealth and resource distribution.

The individualised facet of neoliberal ideology is crystallised in the mantra 'work hard and you'll succeed', a turn of phrase which journalist Zoe Beaty condemns in an article for *Refinery29.* The piece features a quote from life coach Harriet Minter: 'The whole 'we have the same 24 hours as Beyonce' thing is, for want of a better word, bollocks…because we don't all enter the workplace on the same playing field.' This is true in that marginalised peoples often don't have access to the same opportunities as more privileged demographic groups. Exemplary of this is in the fact that there is a 13.5% gap in pay between women and men (OECD), due to a number of factors including that men have better access to education – with 'more than two-thirds' of illiterate people in the world being women (UN Women). It may then seem perplexing as to how a culture that works against women can simultaneously position them as it's ideal subjects. However, as Professor of British Politics, Louise Dalingwater concludes in her research on neoliberalism and gender inequality in Britain, the successful indoctrination of individuals into neoliberalism results in 'those who are clearly losing out in the neoliberal economy' viewing 'inequalities as 'natural' or 'justified' (10). It appears to be precisely the fact that marginalised peoples are disadvantaged by neoliberalism that requires them to take responsibility for themselves and work harder – just as neoliberalism intends.

Writing, resistance, and the personal essay as 'technology of the self':

The act of writing has long served as a form of activism or resistance for marginalised peoples. In 'Why We Must Write', Nigerian-British writer Amina Mama states that 'for those who do not fit, who must live with the constant unease of being different, writing provides a way of clawing back the heavy tarpaulin's of one's subjection' (19-20). Mama's vivid metaphor communicates writing's capability to gift those who practice it with the agency to construct their own narratives when it comes to identity. This is the ethos behind literacy initiatives such as Writing Our Lives (WOL) – a community programme in Syracuse, New York, that supports 'urban youths' from a variety of marginalised backgrounds, to write through the 'inequalities and inequities they witness and experience in their schools and communities' (Haddix et al. 261). Similarly, the Sweatshop Women Collective in Australia works to give voice to 'women from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds' through the provision of training and employment in creative writing (Sweatshop Literacy Movement Inc.). The work of resisting and reshaping perceptions can be completed through various written genres and forms, with a powerful example in life writing.

In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives*, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith explore the use of life writing to 'effectively humanise' collective causes and issues (qtd. in Martínez and Belén 488). Life writing is an expansive genre – inclusive of autobiography, memoir, diaries, personal essay, and writings that regard a person's memories, experiences and emotions. Schaffer and Smith suggest that the genre's tendency towards a first-person narrative allows 'the individual 'I' […] to stand for a community of others – an individual voice raised for those either silent or silenced' (qtd. in Martínez and Belén 488). A notable example of this effect is in Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947), where the first-hand account of a young person's experiences of World War II have become symbolic of the wider mistreatment of Jewish people during that time. Although in later research, Schaffer and Smith explain that because of today's abundance of media, we are now seeing 'a multiplicity of voices…which co-create the testimony in a decentralised fashion' (228). This suggests that life writing has become less about an individual speaking out for a silenced group, and more so about the stories of many individuals, writing to broaden the knowledge of what it means to belong to said group.

Women have a strong history of using life writing to resist against the perceptions and limitations enforced on them as a collective. In *Mediating Memoir*, Australian writer Kath Kenny explains that 'feminists have long used a form of memoir – the personal testimony – to highlight the contradictions between normative expectations and representations of women and actual women's lives' (222). From the personal articles that helped stir suffrage action (Norquay), to the global impact that Malala Yousafzai's memoir, *I am Malala* (2013), played in the activation for international women's education rights, life writing has proved a powerful tool for women's liberation. During the era of Second Wave feminism, those within the movement coined a term for this practice of writing against the confinements of what was considered womanly, referring to it as 'consciousness-raising' (Kenny 223). Of course, one of today's 'normative expectations' (Kenny 222) for women to resist through writing is the notion that they are neoliberalism's ideal subjects. The longstanding relationship between feminists and life writing has carved a strong practice for the women like Ratajkowski, Savage and Tibble – the authors of the key creative works that I'll be analysing for this thesis – who offer examples of writing resistance in their texts.

Like much of today's culture, contemporary feminism has been impacted by neoliberalism. As I have explored, the feminist movement has been one of history's most influential forms of collective resistance. And in recent years, feminism has made a striking 'comeback' (McRobbie 4) in terms of its relevancy in mainstream culture. This is highlighted by the fact that all three authors of the key texts in this research have either marketed their work as a feminist text, or have had their work perceived by critics as such. Although, distinguishing what is and is not considered feminist thinking in today's terms has become increasingly difficult. Feminist theorist Catherine

Rottenberg states that contemporary feminism is full of a variety of 'very different and conflicting manifestations', including those informed by neoliberalism. Of course, it should be noted that there are many contemporary feminists who are steadfastly resisting neoliberal ideas. An example is intersectional feminism – a manifestation of the movement that is rooted in Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. This version of feminism prioritises women who experience oppression based on intersecting characteristics (e.g. race and class) and are often left out of neoliberal feminist narratives. It could be said that even these forms of contemporary feminism have been born out of the need to resist neoliberalism's pervasive touch.

In today's media landscape, 'the market is colonising feminist themes' in a way that often sees neoliberal ideologies disguised beneath feminist motivations (Rottenberg). Both postfeminism and neoliberal feminism hinge on the notion that 'women are now endowed with full options of choice and agency' (Gill 443), with the ability for women to be denigrated for making the wrong choice as well as the perpetuation that individuals are responsible for mitigating the inequalities they face (Rottenberg). Also within this landscape are forms of feminism that only seek to uplift particular groups of women – such as white feminism or trans exclusionary radical feminism. Underlying these manifestations is the celebration of neoliberal values such as competition and individualisation. And in the context of a wider culture which prioritises such values, this then lends itself to the re-popularisation of feminism – where being positioned as a feminist is in itself, a competitive edge. These multiple veins of feminism work to praise a version of the girlboss (ideal neoliberal subject) as an example of womanly success. Previously noted written works such as *Lean In* and *#GIRLBOSS* tell tales of women succeeding in a neoliberal society, disguising that an adherence to neoliberalism is an adherence to a system that does not work in women's favour. This complicates the work of women who are interrogating the position of ideal neoliberal subject, creating confusion within the movement about the true status of the girlboss – is she aspirational or dangerous?

The personal essay is considered a 'disruptive' and resonant form (Freeman and Le Rossignol 385) – qualities which lend themselves well to writing resistance. As the name suggests, the personal essay is widely understood as dealing with what is unique to the author (Atwan; Freeman and Le Rossignol 384; Holladay 84). However, it seems that scholars and writers of the genre have trouble defining the personal essay beyond that. Some label the personal essay as autobiographical, or a study of the self (Holladay 84, Harris 939); while others suggest that the personal essay is an autoethnographic form for the way that personal experience is used to make a greater statement about the human experience or as a study of culture (Ellingson and Ellis 446; Harris 936). American author Annie Dillard states in 'To Fashion a Text', that the personal essay is 'all over the map […] there's nothing you can't do with it. No subject matter is forbidden, no

structure is prescribed. You get to make up your own form every time' (qtd. in Freeman and Le Rossignol 385). In an interview for *The Garrett: Writers on Writing* podcast, *Blueberries'* author Ellena Savage articulates the personal essay's lack of structure differently, stating that the essay 'can encompass and […] consume all other forms'. It is apparent that the personal essay is widely recognised as fluid and unpredictable, which lends itself well to the portrayal of unexpected or resistant ideas.

The fluidity of the personal essay also generates the opportunity for writers to experiment with its form. American novelist, William Gass muses that:

> …the hero of the essay is its author in the act of thinking things out, feeling and finding a way; it is the mind in the marvels and the miseries of its makings, in the *work* of imagination, the search for form. (37)

Robert Atwan, the founder of *The Best American Essays*, somewhat summarises this description with the assertion that 'the best essays show that the name of the genre is also a verb'. Understanding the personal essay as more of an action than a form then opens it up to include works that span multiple genres and presentations. For example, one of the key texts in this analysis, Tayi Tibble's *Rangikura,* is widely classified as a book of poetry. However, it can also be understood as a personal essay for the way in which it often uses the essaying 'I' to deal with what is personal to the author. Tibble herself confirmed in an interview for *Stuff* that she is 'navel-gazing' in these poems, stating that 'I'm not just writing about myself, I'm writing about multiple generations of people'. Understanding the personal essay as 'a verb' or action thus lends itself to be expressed in a multiplicity of forms. I will further discuss the personal essay's experimental capacity and how this is observed in the key texts throughout this thesis, particularly in 'The Personal Essay as Trojan Horse'.

It's also useful to note here the similarities between the process of crafting the personal essay and the process of resistance itself. Elizabeth Reid – an academic and the first advisor on women's affairs to the Australian government – writes of her early involvement in the feminist movement, stating that they fostered resistance 'through a process of reflection on [their] individual experiences and feelings', which then generated 'a shared reflection' (12). The development of the personal into something shared could also be used to describe the nature of the personal essay. And so informed by the personal essay's lack of structure and its seemingly innate connection to the act of resistance, for the purpose of this research I will be defining the feminist personal essay as the following: writing that 'explores…real and tangible' issues for

women, 'refined through the intimate perspective and curiosity of the writer' (Freeman and Le Rossignol 384).

In the case of studying how the personal essay is used to resist subjectivity, it is useful to categorise it as an example of Foucault's 'technologies of the self'. Houghton explains that 'individuals can be understood as active subjects who construct themselves through processes of self-constitution, recognition and reflection' (617). Foucault's technologies of the self are the various practices and forms by which this process of self-construction is played out. Foucault refers to these 'technologies' as the:

> …operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being which individuals make in order to reach a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. (Foucault qtd. in Houghton 617)

In the personal essay, often through the use of the narrating 'I', we can see the author as a subject in the process of working out how the way in which they choose to move through the world is 'shaped by larger social and cultural narratives' (Houghton 618). In this way, the personal essay functions as a technology of the self through which writers can explore and construct their own subjectivity. As part of this, Foucault suggests that technologies of the self can be used to navigate 'the acceptance or refusal of rules' (qtd. in Houghton 618). In other words, the personal essay can function as a way for writers to affirm or resist their position as subjects.

Resistance in Emily Ratajkowski's *My Body*:

Emily Ratajkowski has been talking about feminism since the moment she entered the public radar as the naked, dancing brunette in 'Blurred Lines' – a song by Robin Thicke, T.I., and Pharrell. After modelling throughout her teenage years, Ratajkowski first gained notoriety at twenty-one when she starred in the video for what *The Guardian* labelled 'the most controversial song of the decade' (Lynskey). Even though 'Blurred Lines' topped charts globally in 2013, peaking at number five in New Zealand (Hung Medien), the pop-hit was subject to widespread criticism. In the music video, Ratajkowski and two other female models dance near naked around fully clothed artists. This strange display of sexual power imbalance in 'Blurred Lines', paired with lyrics that belittle the importance of consent – e.g. 'I hate these blurred lines / I know you want it' (1:06) – saw the song labelled online as a 'rape anthem' (Horeck 1105). The student union at University College London went as far as to ban it from campus (Lynskey) and years after its release, co-writer and producer Pharrell admitted in an interview with *GQ Magazine* that he was

now ‘embarrassed’ by the song’s lyrics. Back in 2013, Ratajkowski told *Esquire* that she didn’t think the video was anti-feminist, instead stating she thought it was ‘celebrating women and their bodies’. Since then, Ratajkowski’s alignment with a version of feminism that prioritises sexuality and agency has been well documented (Ditum; Gillbride). In a 2021 video for *The New Yorker*, she states that she has become ‘the posterchild for choice feminism’, a neoliberal mode of feminism that puts a women’s right to choose above all else. Ratajkowski dissects this position in her debut essay collection, *My Body.*

My Body explores ‘the tension between empowerment and objectification’ (Gilbert) that comes with Ratajkowski’s career as a model, but it’s classification as a feminist work has proved a point of contention among critics. In her review for *Harper’s Bazaar*, Marie-Claire Chappett praised Ratajkowski for writing ‘with curiosity, intellect, and an acute awareness’. However, others deemed what was marketed on the back cover as a ‘profoundly personal exploration of feminism’, to be ‘solipsistic’ (Ditum; Gilbert). Ratajkowski states in *My Body*’s introduction that the intention was for it ‘to examine the various mirrors’ she has viewed herself through (6-7). The twelve essays work to form a sort of non-linear memoir, analysing the various experiences and relationships that have impacted Ratajkowski’s perception of herself and the evolution of her feminist thinking. However, a failure to aptly involve her work in wider feminist discourse saw many doubt its success as a work of activism (Ditum; McDonald; Wiseman). In a review for *The Atlantic,* Sophie Gilbert stated she ‘longed for [Ratajkowski] to turn her gaze outward’ in her essays. However, the ‘solipsistic’ nature of *My Body* suits itself well for the purpose of this thesis, for analysing its effectiveness as a technology of the self.

In Houghton’s description of the ideal neoliberal subject, the willingness to compete is one of its defining traits (623), one which Ratajkowski works to resist in the opening essay of *My Body*. Titled ‘Beauty Lessons’, the first essay in the collection is made of twenty-three vignettes, experimentally presented as numbered lessons. In one of those lessons, Ratajkowski states that she ‘never prayed much’, but did pray for beauty: ‘’I want to be the most beautiful,’ I’d repeat over and over again in my head’ (13). It’s important to note that in her prayer, it is not that she wishes to simply be beautiful, but to be the *most* beautiful. This highlights an ingrained sense of competitivity. Ratajkowski shows to resist this tendency in lesson fifteen, addressing a moment from childhood when she told her mother ‘They’re just jealous, Mama!’, in response to her ‘complaining about the way some women had treated her’ (20). The narrating Ratajkowski then reflects on the fact that her mother often retold this story:

> She recites this story as a charming testimonial to my sweet and perceptive nature at a young age. It wasn't until I was older that it struck me: How had I already been introduced to the concept of competition between women before I had even learned to read? (21)

Reflection is one of the processes in which subjects can be active in the construction of their subjectivity (Houghton 617). So, while the question is left open-ended, its inclusion sees the essay working as a 'technology of the self', as it begins to navigate 'the acceptance or refusal of rules' (Foucault qtd. in Houghton 618) associated with the ideal neoliberal subject.

There are more examples of this in the lessons that follow, as the reflections of Ratajkowski's narrative voice become increasingly self-critical of the way she compares herself to other women. In the final lesson, she visits her therapist after becoming physically pained when her husband remarks that 'there are so many beautiful women in the world' (26). In response to being asked by her therapist, 'what if you're not the same as other women', Ratajkowski's inner narrative voice becomes self-berating: 'Of course, I know this! I hate women who compare themselves to women! I am not that way!' Yet aloud to her therapist, she says, 'That is how the world works: everything is ranked. One is always better than the other' (27). Here, Ratajkowski's narrative voice contradicts her actual dialogue, with one refusing competitivity and the other accepting it. Similar to lesson fifteen of 'Beauty Lessons', this internal conflict demonstrates Ratajkowski as in the process of navigating her position as ideal neoliberal subject.

Resistance towards the neoliberal 'truth' of competition in particular continues in the essay 'Toxic'. This piece offers a reflection on a female friendship Ratajkowski had as a teenager, with a fellow young model named Sadie. In the beginning, the essay is heavily underpinned by competitivity. This is visible in the fact that Ratajkowski introduces Sadie as a character through direct comparison with herself:

> She had more of a fashion model's body than I ever did; she stood at 5'9' and weighed no more than 110 pounds, whereas I was considered short and curvy (a 'swim girl,' my agents told me when they took my measurements). (62)

The essay is centered on the ebbs and flows of their friendship as 'competitors rather than allies' (79), but it is also intertwined with Ratajkowski's reflection on the rise and fall of Britney Spears – whom she 'idolized' (68) – in the public eye. Britney is used as a motif for the negative impacts that competitivity can have on women, and the narrating Ratajkowski dissects how the media's treatment of Britney was in part an influence on her own tendency to view women as competition: 'Gossip magazines made visual diagrams comparing Britney to her antithesis, Christina Aguilera'

(70). By the end of the essay, Ratajkowski writes that her and Sadie had a natural drift after high school, followed by a brief rekindling over social media. In the description of an adult Sadie, Ratajkowski highlights the similarities between them rather than making a comparison, like the fact that they 'now lived in two of the same major cities' and knew 'some of the same people' (81). This reveals an evolution in the narrating Ratajkowski's perspective, showcasing a resistance both towards competition and her position as ideal neoliberal subject.

However, not every essay in *My Body* is resistant to neoliberalism. In 'Bc Hello Halle Berry', Ratajkowski demonstrates the perception of herself as commodity. The essay is focused on a time when she was paid to stay at and promote a newly opened luxury resort in The Maldives. In the opening scene, Ratajkowski wakes up and the first thing she does is put on a bikini from her own line of swimwear, asking her husband, S, to take a photo of her in it. Ratajkowski posts it to her Instagram page, doing the dual job of promoting the resort and herself, aligning her with the description of the ideal neoliberal subject as a 'self-enterprising individual' (Houghton 623). The narrating Ratajkowski states that 'the suits generally don't sell as well if there's no photo of me in them' (84), acknowledging the selling power of her body and demonstrating the ultimate act of the entrepreneurial subject – to position the self as commodity. Sociology professor Joseph Davis states that self-commodification is encapsulated by the practice of 'personal branding', 'a strategy of cultivating a name and image of ourselves that we manipulate for economic gain' (41). Ratajkowski knowingly uses her 'personal brand' power in this scene to turn her image into 'a decent amount of cash' (86), actions which demonstrate her as a self-enterprising, neoliberal subject.

Throughout 'Bc Hello Halle Berry', Ratajkowski's narrative voice is defensive of her decision to position herself as commodity. In the scene where S is taking a photo of her, Ratajkowski's narrative voice states, 'I figured it would be stupid to use my body to promote some rich guy's bikini line instead of my own' (92). Here, she admits to her complicity in the neoliberal system, yet excuses herself by alluding to the idea that there is no alternative to commodifying her image in the first place. Eva Wiseman critics this in her review for *The Guardian*, stating that Ratajkowski often 'returns to the concept that her power lies in her body, without interrogating the idea that her body could also walk away'. This perceived attitude is further exemplified when Ratajkowski is conversing with her husband, S at the beach. 'I'm trying to succeed in a capitalist system,' she states, 'But that doesn't mean I like the game' (91). Here, Ratajkowski expresses an intention for her complicity to be perceived as a form of resistance on its own. However, the scene also portrays the characteristic of the ideal neoliberal subject to resist other moral possibilities, in part due to the desire to present all of their actions and practices as freely chosen (Brown 5; Gill 438). In both her dialogue and narration, Ratajkowski

returns to the idea that she is choosing to work 'the system' of neoliberalism (91), failing to acknowledge that in doing so, she behaves as its ideal subject.

Ratajkowski closes *My Body* with 'Releases', an essay about the transformative experience of being pregnant. The piece opens with a recurring nightmare in which Ratajkowski is fighting with a 'presence' only to find 'no release' (221). This sets up the objective of the scenes that follow. From throwing water balloons against a wall with her therapist (224), to being physically exerted on a bike ride and realising 'it doesn't matter what I look like' (228), this essay weaves together moments in which Ratajkowski experiences a sense of emotional 'release', with the final one being the act of giving birth. This narrative is significant as before this piece, the power that Ratajkowski gains from her body is primarily explored in other essays as being related to financial gain. Examples of this include the behaviour analysed in 'Bc Hello Halle Berry', as well as the aptly titled 'Transactions', in which Ratajkowski successfully trades her appearance alongside wealthy men for free tickets or cash cheques. Both of these essays model the way in which neoliberalism reconfigures social relationships on the basis of market relations. 'Releases' is the first time in *My Body* that the narrating Ratajkowski turns her attention to the ways in which her physical form is a source of power *beyond* the context of herself as a commodity – a pivotal moment of neoliberal resistance.

A change in Ratajkowski's perspective of her body is perhaps most strongly communicated in the final scenes of 'Releases', in which Ratajkowski describes going into labour with and birthing her son. In these moments, Ratajkowski praises her body for things like being 'resilient' (231) and knowledgeable (232), which contrasts with the tone of positive comments directed at her body throughout the rest of the book. Phrases like 'sexy' (77) or "glistening skin of my hips" (98) found in earlier essays extol Ratajkowski's body exclusively for its appearance. This change in vocabulary during the birth scene signifies Ratajkowski's self-perspective shifting as her body becomes more to her than something off which she profits.

The essay then closes with a scene of Ratajkowski holding her son for the first time. The final lines read: 'The mirror was pushed to the side, but I could still see the place where he emerged. My body' (233). This is a call back to the essay 'Bc Hello Halle Berry' in which Ratajkowski mentions one of her 'favourite pieces of art' by Hannah Black – an audio recording 'comprised of famous women singers, mainly black, singing the words "my body" over and over' (92-3). Similarly, this essay ends with the lines: 'The whole of the ocean stretched out before me, and yet I felt trapped. My body' (98). In 'Bc Hello Halle Berry', Ratajkowski behaves as the ideal neoliberal subject, so the use of the word 'trapped' to describe how she feels here associates a negative sensation with this position. In contrast, 'Releases' Ratajkowski resists the ideal neoliberal subject, and the final line is focused on the positive accomplishment and wonder of

giving birth. The difference in language used in these two similar essay endings, works to highlight how much the narrating Ratajkowski's view of her body has been positively transformed through a resistance to neoliberal thinking.

As a collection of essays which teeters between moments of neoliberal resistance and the narrator as the ideal neoliberal subject, it is symbolic for *My Body* to end with a point of resistance like 'Releases'. I'd like to return here to the idea of the personal essay as technology of the self, used by the subject in the process of working out how they choose to move through the world. With this in mind, the presence of both resistance and adherence to the position of ideal neoliberal subject in these essays is revelatory of Ratajkowski's changing subjectivity throughout the life moments she is reflecting on. For the collection then to close with what is arguably its most resistant essay, communicates that in the process of using these personal essays to navigate her subjectivity, Ratajkowski appears to have finally come to the position of a subject who is potentially resistant to neoliberal ideas.

Resistance in Ellena Savage's *Blueberries*:

Ellena Savage is an Australian writer and academic whose genre-crossing work explores themes of political and cultural criticism. Savage has been widely published both in Australia and internationally, including stories, essays, poems, and as described on her self-titled site, 'in-betweens'. Many of Savage's pieces deal explicitly with contemporary culture, including a 2016 article for *The Lifted Brow* – where Savage was also a co-editor – in which she wrote an essay commenting on the 'power imbalances and creepy social hierarchies' of Australia's literary community. Between 2011 and 2016, Savage contributed to Australian online journal, *Eureka Street* with a monthly culture column. This included a piece called 'Looking for Depth in the Selfie', in which she interrogates the selfie as a facet of capitalism. Savage's tendency to situate herself in cultural conversation is characteristic to her wider work, including her debut essay collection, *Blueberries*.

Described by journalist Isabelle Sacks as 'a book that almost dares you to try and categorise or assign it a genre', *Blueberries* is an experimental work packed full of explicit critiques towards neoliberalism. The work was shortlisted for the 2021 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and longlisted for the 2021 Stella Prize. Fellow Australian writer and academic, Alix Beeston summarises *Blueberries* as evoking 'the pressures and forms of complicity that govern the lives of young white women in the patriarchal, neocolonial, neoliberal place called Australia'. Savage accomplishes this through fifteen essays, which move through place, time, form and perspective in such a way that they are each entirely unique. While other Australian women

writers have praised Savage for her 'sharply analytic eye' (McGregor), and use of 'personal experiences to help interrogate broader concepts and debates' (Moran), Iranian American writer, Arya Roshanian critiques the work for being told through an 'overwhelmingly privileged' lens, due to Savage's whiteness. This tension between privileging from and adhering to, as well as offering critique of the neoliberal world in which Savage moves through, is front and centre in *Blueberries.*

The ideal neoliberal subject is someone who 'actively seek[s] to invest in' themselves (Houghton 623), behaviour which the narrating Savage expresses in the titular essay, 'Blueberries'. In this piece, Savage offers an astute examination of elitism and gender inequality in academia, set against her experience attending a writing workshop at an arts college in the US. Each new paragraph begins with an elaboration of the piece's opening phrase, 'I was in America at a very expensive writers' workshop' (41). This repetition grounds Savage's musings on why she is there, which develop throughout the piece from being 'for the purpose of furthering my career as a writer-scholar' (41), followed by 'working on my social mobility' (57), and then 'working on my writing by working on my cultural capital' (57). Within these statements is the belief of the ideal neoliberal subject that one should constantly be working on and investing in the self for the purpose of competition.

Contrastingly, these moments in which the narrating Savage adheres to neoliberal thinking are wrapped within a greater narrative of resistance. A focal point in 'Blueberries' is the 'gender-neutral toilets' at the American liberal arts college Savage is attending, towards which she makes several condemning statements:

> …and I suspect that this is what is meant by hegemony… 'championing' issues that serve to empower individuals within a cloistered class environment rather than upend the economic inequity that is the foundation of institutions like it… (44)

Similarly to the articulation that neoliberalism as a whole is 'fronted by a rhetoric of freedom and fairness' while in actuality it 'constrain[s] liberty and perpetuate[s] injustice' (Bay-Cheng 333), the gender-neutral toilets are observed by Savage to perpetuate a false rhetoric of freedom and fairness in a university that still only prioritises the privileged. Or as Savage articulates throughout the essay, the 'elite class' who can afford the thousands of dollars to attend. These statements in 'Blueberries' which condemn neoliberal thinking thus contradict with the narrating Savage's self-investing attitude.

There's further evidence of Savage's conflicting perspectives and behaviours in the essay 'Portrait of the Writer as Worker (after Dieter Lesage)'. In this piece, Savage's experience working as a 'writer-investor' is used to reveal the complexities and difficulties of writing as a career.

Narrated in third-person, Savage repeatedly refers to herself using the metaphor of 'investor': 'You are an investor' she tells herself and the reader, 'You are building a diverse portfolio' (211). Here Savage borrows directly from economic market language in the use of the term 'investor' to articulate her identity, both exemplifying the way in which the market infiltrates all aspects of society in neoliberalism and directly acknowledging her behaviour as ideal subject. Another example of this is the way that Savage regularly refers to herself in this essay as if she is her job. In the opening sentence and then frequently throughout, Savage writes:

> You are a writer and you know what that means: you don't do it for the money. You don't do it for the money, which is a great reason people have to not pay you for your writing. (211)

These ways that Savage refers to herself in this essay exemplify the self-enterprising behaviour of the ideal neoliberal subject. However, the way in which the piece is delivered in a deadpan tone – with short sentences and little use of adjectives – communicates that Savage's reference to herself are intended to be facetious. Humour is a well-documented tool in feminist resistance (Mushtaq 35; Ringrose and Lawrence 1; Weaver et al. 231), and Savage's use of humour transforms the implications of her language in this piece to appear that she is actually critiquing these behaviours.

Humour is used to similar effect in 'Notes to Unlived Time', an essay which demonstrates defiance towards the neoliberal truth of self-regulation. In this piece, Savage contemplates a multitude of topics including time, memory and the question, 'why write?' (198). In one of several points Savage makes in attempt to answer that question, she notes:

> Is 'self-care' a neoliberal scam promoting individualistic coping strategies in the absence of broader social obligations or the possibility of radical structural change? (Well, yes, I say to myself as I slip into my fourth late-night bath of the week, thinking about my next semester of unemployment.) (19)

In this excerpt, Savage simultaneously condemns 'self-care' as a 'neoliberal scam' and then facetiously uses the example of indulging in a bath to demonstrate how her thoughts and actions contradict each other. Savage then furthers this by articulating that she views such self-care activities as frivolous yet has 'secretly […] started buying aspirational oils and serums' (208). Rosalind Gill states that neoliberalism establishes for women, it's ideal subjects, that 'it is imperative that all one's practices (however painful or harmful they may be) be presented as freely chosen – perhaps even as pampering or indulgence' (441). The way in which the narrating Savage

communicates shame towards these practices as well as identifies neoliberal thinking as part of their origin is thus, in resistance of the ideal subject.

Resistance towards the ideal neoliberal subject's self-regulating behaviour is furthered in the essay, 'Turning Thirty'. The prose in this piece is experimentally presented as a series of bullet points, which appear as the narrator's realisations about life as a woman and the pressures of domesticity that come with it. These initial bullet points are the interjected by two other sets of bullet points, creating a unique and fragmented prose:

- How did I get here without first learning to wear pastels?
- Or be thin?

    + I think, *I should have spent the past ten years learning how to tolerate exercise*.

    + And then I think, *What's so fucking good about pilates?*

        – What did *getting on your knees to disappear* ever get anyone? (158)

Here the strange bullet pointed form works to reveal the narrating Savage in conversation with herself; reflecting and questioning her own expectations of what life should be at thirty. As I have discussed, reflection is one of the processes through which subjectivity is constructed (Houghton 617). This excerpt demonstrates reflection being used by the narrator to resist self-regulating exercise habits. In this, the essay can be seen to be working as a technology of the self.

Similar to Ratajkowski's work, *Blueberries* has moments where the narrating Savage both adheres to and resists the position of ideal neoliberal subject. What sets *Blueberries* apart, however, is that the narrating Savage often recognises behaviour that aligns with neoliberal thinking. Houghton states that recognition is one of the processes through which subjects can be active in the construction of their subjectivity (617). Returning once again to the personal essay's function as a 'technology of the self', being able to recognise neoliberal rules helps the subject to navigate the 'acceptance or refusal' of them (Foucault qtd. in Houghton 618). As has been demonstrated, much of the resistance in *Blueberries* is found in the moments that Savage critiques her behaviour as it aligns with that of the ideal neoliberal subject. I argue that this in itself is resistant to neoliberalism, as its ideal subjects are those who believe in its truths and are resistant to other moral possibilities (Brown 5; Gill 438). Also notable however, is that without the acknowledgement of the ways in which the narrating Savage does behave in line with the ideal neoliberal subject, there would be no room for this behaviour to be humorously critiqued.

Therefore, the inclusion of the ways in which the narrator does not resist neoliberalism, is paradoxically part of how *Blueberries* works to resist the position of ideal neoliberal subject.

Resistance in Tayi Tibble's *Rangikura*:

Tayi Tibble is a wahine Ngāti Porou and Te Whānau-ā-Apanui poet who has carved 'a space for herself in the New Zealand literary community' (Carruthers), with a body of work that fuses together themes of popular culture, whakapapa and feminism. Tibble's debut collection of poems, *Poūkahangatus* (2018), offers an exploration of what it's like to be a young Māori woman in modern-day Aotearoa – a journey in which te reo Māori and The Pussycat Dolls' lyrics sit side-by-side, harmoniously on the page. *Poūkahangatus* went on to become the source of many accolades, including winning her the Jessie Mackay Prize for best first book of Poetry at the 2019 Ockham New Zealand Book Awards. In a review for the New Zealand Poetry Society, Wellington writer Stella Carruthers praised the way that *Poūkahangatus* 'celebrates the feminine voice and its contemporary concerns', creating 'a place for people who are often not given the chance to speak'. Tibble continues to bring these concerns to light with the feminist tone of her second poetry collection, *Rangikura* – published in 2021.

In an interview with Tibble for *Stuff*, Jane Ussher states that in *Rangikura* 'Tayi's gaze extends in all directions', offering a poetic exploration of Tibble's relationships with lovers, friends, ancestors, and first and foremost, herself. In that same interview, Tibble describes her intention for the poems to pay 'tribute to modern Māori culture' using 'humour, sexuality and friendship'. The collection is in three parts, with the first and third dominated by free verse poems told in the first-person. Part two then breaks this formula with 'Little', a series of third-person prose-poems that tell of an affair between a young, Māori woman and an older, Pākehā man. The three parts are then enclosed within 'Tohunga' and 'My Ancestors Ride wit Me' – two poems which, as the title of the latter suggests, pay playful tribute to the influence that Tibble's cultural heritage has had on her identity as a 21st century Māori woman. *Rangikura*'s intimate nature has been the highlight of critical commentary from some of Tibble's fellow New Zealand poets. Paula Green referred to the work as an example of 'poetry as life', and Kiri Piahana-Wong praised the way that 'the personal is political' in this collection. It is this reception of *Rangikura'*s poems as handling themes simultaneously relevant to Tibble as an individual, and her wider peer group of Māori women, that makes it fitting to analyse as a personal essay.

Before discussing how *Rangikura* resists the positioning of women as ideal neoliberal subjects, it is essential to first give brief context to the relationship between te ao Māori (the Māori worldview) and neoliberalism, given that the book is written by a wahine Māori. Associate

Professor at Victoria University of Wellington's School of Māori Studies, Maria Bargh, states in *Resistance: An Indigenous Response to Neoliberalism* that 'neoliberal practices threaten Māori worldviews' (15). In te ao Māori, people, earth and its resources are viewed as interconnected. This is exemplified in the concept of whakapapa, the Māori word for genealogy which directly translates to 'the process of laying one thing upon another' (Ngata 6). Whakapapa suggests 'kin relationships' between us as humans, as well as with our wider environment (Walker 4). Contrastingly, neoliberal thinking sees this relationship as 'market based' (Bargh 15), with the earth and its resources positioned more so as capital to be lost, gained, or traded. Bargh acknowledges that this underlying disparity between te ao Māori and neoliberalism can make it difficult for the ideas to coexist, making the resistance of neoliberal thinking essential work for many Māori (15-16). Additionally, Māori are alongside women as a marginalised group for which neoliberal ideas of competition and agency, 'perpetuate injustice' (Bay-Cheng 333). For Tibble as a wahine Māori, the extent to which *Rangikura* is resistant to neoliberal 'truths' is relevant not only from a feminist perspective, but also from a cultural perspective.

Rangikura demonstrates resistance towards the ideal neoliberal subject's tendency to compete in the way that female relationships are depicted positively. One example of this is in the poem 'Can I Still Come Crash at Yours?', a piece which reflects on a friendship between the narrating Tibble and another girl, who both bonded over their desire to be 'wifeys' (19). While the verse-like prose is often focused on the boys that the two girls had 'trained [their] eyes to pick out' (18), the true love story is between the two friends. This is made apparent in lines like, 'we exchanged vows, not to them but to each other', or 'on the nights we all crashed together marae stylez gazing up at the same stickered roof I turned to you' (19). In these intimate moments, the narrators focus moves away from the boys they are with and towards the friend. The piece opens with the phrase 'we were only girls' (18) and is narrated in the second person throughout. Only in the final paragraph are the narrator and friend referred to separately as 'I' and 'you'. The effect of this narrating 'we' is that the experiences of the narrator and the friend are told as one, reducing room for the narrator to make comparisons between herself and the friend. This narrative style works to solidify that the female friend in not viewed through a lens of competition, a perspective which resists that of the ideal neoliberal subject.

Similar to the nature of *My Body,* there are moments in *Rangikura* that the narrator is shown to behave as the ideal neoliberal subject. One such moment is in the poem 'Hot Hine Summer'. The piece is broken into three pages of free verse, each beginning with the phrase '4 the' – '4 the skux' (37), '4 the daddy' (38), and '4 the atua' (39). The verses that follow detail the ways in which the narrator makes changes to the way she behaves and looks in order to please each of the named characters. For example, Tibble writes:

4 the skux I bought fresh sneakers every month.
Let my hair curl real trip hop. Fed my ass fat
with slutty foods: pineapple and cranberry juice. (37)

Returning to Rosalind Gill's reasoning for asserting that women are positioned as neoliberalism's ideal subjects, she states that it is because 'women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct' more so than men (443). The actions of the narrating Tibble exemplify this practice of self-regulation in the context of trying to 'win' fondness from the three male characters.

However, this self-regulating behaviour is immediately brought into question in 'Hot Hine Summer', as it is shown to be harmful to the narrator. In the changes that were made '4 the atua', Tibble writes the following verse:

Started wearing lipstick on my chin
and the places I thought
were too fat I now thought were too thin. (39)

These lines express that as the narrator regulates and transforms the self, she is never completely satisfied with the results. In fact, with the transformation of 'wearing lipstick on [her] chin' (39), the narrator only discovers new aspects of her appearance to fix. This demonstrates how self-regulation leaves those who practice it stuck in a constant loop of desire to work on and change the self. Houghton states that the process of recognition is one way in which subjects can be agents of their own subjectivity (617). Through recognising the harmful results of her self-regulation, the narrating Tibble brings into question the ways in which she behaves as a neoliberal subject. In depicting the negative outcome of self-regulation in 'Hot Hine Summer', the poem is framed as resistant rather than affirming of the position of ideal neoliberal subject.

What is unique to *Rangikura* in comparison with the other key texts in this thesis, is the significant way in which this work resists neoliberal ideas by honouring the concept of whakapapa. As has been stated, whakapapa is the Māori word for genealogy, and there are many explicit references to Tibble's ancestors throughout *Rangikura*. They are introduced from the very first line of the opening poem, 'Tohunga': 'visionary like my ancestors I / saw a sky of whales / a pale people' (11). Throughout the piece, the narrating Tibble repeats the phrase 'like my ancestors I', using this recurrent comparison to communicate how her lineage and cultural history lives on in the way she navigates her life today. In 'My Ancestors Send Me Screenshots' and 'My Ancestors

Ride wit Me', Tibble's 'ancestors' feature as characters. In these cases, Tibble writes about them as if they are truly experiencing modern life with her, like in this verse from 'My Ancestors Ride wit Me':

> My ancestors ride wit me.
> They twerk on the roof of the Uber
> as I'm pulling up late to the party. (91)

However, this can also be read metaphorically, as Tibble's suggestion that as a wahine Māori her cultural heritage and whakapapa are with her in everything she does. Wilson states that 'neoliberalism asks us to be self-enclosed individuals in charge of our own fates' (4), meaning that its ideal subjects are those who champion individualistic thinking. Through acknowledging that how she experiences the world is influenced by the history of her ancestors, Tibble works to oppose the hyper-individualism that is characteristic of the ideal neoliberal subject.

The acknowledgement of ancestral knowledge is a recurrent theme in *Rangikura*, with frequent use of te reo Māori and references to Māori culture weaved throughout the work. Particular examples of this are in the pieces, 'Mahuika' and 'Hine-nui-te-pō'. The titles of these works are each named after a different Māori goddess – Mahuika, a fire deity, and Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of death. Tibble references the origin stories and characteristics of these goddesses in these works in order to describe her narrating self and her experiences. For example, in 'Mahuika' Tibble writes:

> The river evaporated
> at my touch. I was
> way too hot. But even so
> I'm no Mahuika I'm
> Hine-nui-te-pō.
> The kind of girl who knows
> what's up before the sun slows. (16)

In this verse, we can see these stories from Māori mythology being used as a tool through which the narrating Tibble is able to create meaning in regards to her own identity. The inclusion of Māori mythology, stories which have been handed down through cultural lines, is another example of how whakapapa is honoured in Tibble's work. In this way, *Rangikura* can be seen to further resist the individualistic nature of the ideal neoliberal subject.

It is no coincidence that the neoliberal resistance present in *Rangikura* is heavily aided by Tibble's Māori culture and heritage. As has been acknowledged, there is a significant disparity between neoliberalism and te ao Māori, which would of course frame Māori culture as resistant towards neoliberal values. Referring back to the idea of the personal essay as a technology of the self, used by the subject in the process of working out how they choose to move through the world, Tibble's knowledge of te ao Māori plays an integral part in the navigation of her subjectivity within *Rangikura*. The inclusion of te reo, mythology and other Māori knowledge throughout the work demonstrates that Tibble has a thorough understanding of her indigenous culture. Therefore, it is presumable that this knowledge would have an impact on her 'acceptance or refusal of rules' (Foucault qtd. in Houghton 618) associated with the ideal neoliberal subject. As a wahine Māori, who for which neoliberalism creates disadvantages based on her position as Māori and as a woman separately, it is significant that the unique perspective of the Māori culture helps to generate resistance in *Rangikura.*

The Personal Essay as Trojan Horse:

Ratajkowski, Savage and Tibble, among other contemporary writers, are contributing to the personal essay form at a time in which it has been described as 'having a moment' (Matthews). American writer, Jackson Arn states that 'since 2011 […] essays have outsold mainstream fiction and outranked it on best-of-the-year lists', and currently, the wider genre of 'memoirs and biographies' is the top selling category of paper books on Amazon (Smailes). There have been various attempts to explain why the personal essay has gained such traction in today's cultural climate. Philip Lopate, essayist and editor of *The Contemporary American Essay* puts it down to modern readers craving 'humane, authentic voices' (qtd. in Arn). According to Claire Murdoch, the head of publishing at Penguin Random House New Zealand, within this surge is a particular 'hunger for first-person narratives of women' (qtd. in Matthews). However, it bares unpacking that the personal essay form has surged in popularity at the same time as neoliberalism.

The personal essay has many features which align it with neoliberal culture and perhaps most notable is the individualistic nature of the form. Arn writes that 'the self endures as a subject for the twenty-first-century essayist, partly because of its ability to inspire powerful, moving art, but mostly because it's cheap'. This comment moves along the same vein as the author Jia Tolentino's remark about the personal essay's ability to gain 'viral audiences' cost-effectively. Both suggest that the answer to why the personal essay is a popular form for writers and publishers alike is because the self is an easy subject matter to employ with little to no research time. I argue that the self also endures as a topic due to its neoliberal appeal. As I have

discussed, the narrating 'I' of the personal essay is useful for telling stories of resistance. However, paradoxically to its demonstrated use of resisting the ideal neoliberal subject, the narrating 'I' of the personal essay also 'insists upon the primacy of the individual' (Emre) – much like neoliberalism. This has been a theme in the primary texts of this research, with both Savage's *Blueberries* and Ratajkowski's *My Body* labelled as 'solipsistic' in reviews (Beeston; Gilbert). Yet despite select critics who condemn the individualistic nature of the personal essay, the widespread popularity of the form speaks to the way in which it appeals to greater neoliberal culture.

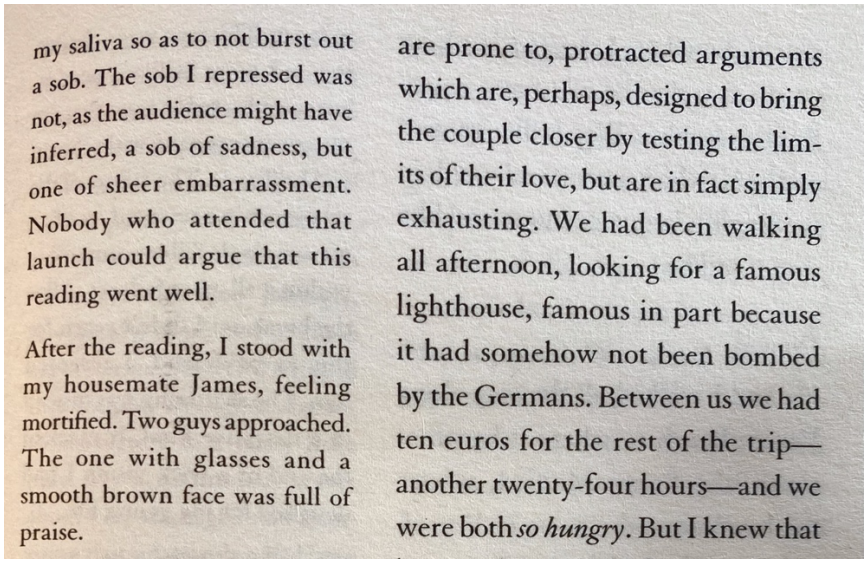
Related to the neoliberal appeal of the personal essay is the usefulness of the form for the practice of self-branding. As I have argued, the ultimate act of the self-enterprising subject is to situate themselves as a commodity, and the practice of 'personal branding' is a facet of this behaviour (Davis 41). An example of how this practice is ingrained in contemporary culture is in the phenomenon of the social media influencer, a role which relies heavily on self-branding behaviors in order to obtain both cultural capital (followers) and financial capital (sponsored posts and brand deals). Discussion of the influencer may initially appear removed from the topic of the personal essay; however, it is relevant given that popularity online is often a precursor to publishing written work. Emily Ratajkowski's celebrity status before publishing *My Body* exemplifies the influencer-to-author pipeline, but other more conventional influencers have done the same. Past *Love Island* contestant, Molly-Mae Hague's memoir, *Becoming Molly-Mae* (2022) provides an example of this. To publish stories that focus on oneself and one's experiences, as is the case of the personal essay, can be viewed itself as a practice in self-commodification. If the self is the subject of a written work, the packaging and promotion of such stories for capital gain – whether that be financial or cultural – exemplifies the use of the self as a commodity to be consumed, in this case by readers. The ability for individuals to commodify their experiences through the use of personal essay, as well as other forms of life writing, positions it as useful in a self-branding project.

It may appear contradictory to point out the ways in which the personal essay form appeals to neoliberalism in a thesis focused on demonstrating how the form is used to resist such thinking. However, the personal essay being a distinctively neoliberal form can also be viewed as useful for those who are employing it to write resistance. The personal essay has gained popularity in neoliberal times, in part thanks to the way the form perpetuates individualistic storytelling and the commodification of personal experience. This popularity also means that those who write in this form are more likely to be published by established publishing houses. Nigerian-British writer Amina Mama sees publication as the ultimate form of resistance:

> The reflective process is this act of rebellion, carried out in and for itself, within one's own head, or in one's immediate community…The ensuing act of publishing is more than this. It offers a more assertive, more powerful push against an intellectual regime. (20)

While the act of publishing commercially can be advantageous to anyone using writing as a form of resistance, it is interestingly so for those using the personal essay to resist neoliberalism. Given that neoliberal notions of individualism (resisted in *Rangikura*) and commodification (resisted in *My Body*) are promoted by the personal essay, using the form to resist such ideas is thus paradoxical. For writers like Ratajkowski, Savage and Tibble, the personal essay functions as a trojan horse, through which they can use its popularity to share resistance against the same neoliberal notions that prop up the form.

For those seeking to amplify resistant work through publishing, the fluidity of the personal essay form and the room for experimentality that it creates serves as a competitive advantage. Referring back to Annie Dillard's comment that 'there's nothing you can't do' with the personal essay (qtd. in Freeman and Le Rossignol 385), this attribute makes it easier for essayists to set their writing apart through how they use the form. This is illustrated in the way that Savage plays heavily with form throughout *Blueberries.* One example of the collection's experimentation is in the piece, 'Holidays with Men':



my saliva so as to not burst out a sob. The sob I repressed was not, as the audience might have inferred, a sob of sadness, but one of sheer embarrassment. Nobody who attended that launch could argue that this reading went well.

After the reading, I stood with my housemate James, feeling mortified. Two guys approached. The one with glasses and a smooth brown face was full of praise.

are prone to, protracted arguments which are, perhaps, designed to bring the couple closer by testing the limits of their love, but are in fact simply exhausting. We had been walking all afternoon, looking for a famous lighthouse, famous in part because it had somehow not been bombed by the Germans. Between us we had ten euros for the rest of the trip—another twenty-four hours—and we were both *so hungry*. But I knew that

Fig. 1. Ellena Savage, 'Holidays with Men', p.117.

Here, two separate essays appear alongside each other in a double column layout and in different sized fonts. One is a reflective commentary on the other, which is acknowledged as a previously written piece. Combined however, they create a new essay. Another already noted example is in 'Turning Thirty', which is presented in fragmented bullet points that read like interjections or edits

of Savage's own storytelling. These essays exemplify part of the range of experimentation available to writers of the personal essay.

A trend in this experimentation that isn't visible in the key texts, however, is the optimisation for social media. According to a 2021 report by Horizon Research, at least 30% of New Zealand readers discover books through social media (54), a trend which seems to have impacted the ways in which writers experiment with form. Take for example, British activist and influencer, Florence Given's *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* (2020). The feminist manifesto is broken down into twenty essays or chapters that are traditional in the sense of how they are written, but experimental in their visual presentation. Given utilises colourful pages, various fonts and illustration in a way that has enabled her to take pages of the book and flip them into social media appropriate posts. This demonstrates that the experimentation allowed by the personal essay form also lends to its neoliberal appeal, as its ability to be appropriated for social media is useful in the context of a self-branding project.

Returning focus to the key texts in this thesis, it is interesting to note that much of the resistance towards the ideal neoliberal subject found in these essays is enabled by the experimentation of the form. Firstly, I've established that the fluidity of personal essay form opens it up to include works that span multiple genres, particularly in Tibble's *Rangikura.* As has been discussed, in *Rangikura*, the perspective of te ao Māori helps to generate resistance towards neoliberalism in the work. A key part of that expression in these poems is the unique threading together of English and te reo Māori. In the poem 'A Karakia for a Humble Skux', the form even mimics the repetitive, chant-like form of a karakia (Māori prayer). While this piece doesn't outrightly resist the neoliberal subject, it does work to honour Māori culture and therefore resists the eurocentrism of neoliberalism.

In the other two works, *My Body and Blueberries*, the experimentation with form appears to strengthen the reflective process that is part of the personal essay's function as a technology of the self. For example, in both 'Yellow City' and 'Turning Thirty', Savage breaks up her prose with bullet-pointed interjections. As has been analysed in the latter essay, the bullet points are what communicate the narrating Savage's reflections on and, in the end, rejection of her own self-regulating behaviour. In Ratajkowski's essay 'Beauty Lessons', the way that the story is told through numbered lessons rather than traditional flowing prose has a similar effect. The numbered lessons allow the narrating Ratajkowski to jump through the timeline of her life and seamlessly connect moments from childhood and adulthood. This allows space for Ratajkowski's adult narrating perspective to reflect on and resist her learnt competitivity. These texts offer key contemporary examples of how the personal essay's fluid and experimental form aids its function as a technology of the self. This relationship shows that the neoliberal nature of the personal

essay form not only helps to increase chances of writers publishing their resistant work, but also helps to enable the resistance within the work itself, solidifying the notion of the personal essay as a trojan horse for neoliberal resistance.

Conclusion:

The role of ideal neoliberal subject is a complicated position for women to uphold. As Gill states, women are required more so than other genders 'to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen' (443) – behaviours that certainly champion neoliberal culture, but do not champion the situation of women. I argue that resisting the position of ideal neoliberal subject can be considered feminist work, a notion which has anchored this analysis of *My Body, Blueberries*, and *Rangikura*.

This research project sets out to explore the ways in which the personal essay form is used by women writers to resist the position of ideal neoliberal subject, or what I argue is colloquially known as the girlboss. I argue that writing has long been used as a form of resistance by women, among other groups of oppressed peoples. When it comes to writing resistance using the personal essay form in particular, the frequented use of a narrating 'I' and the fluidity of its form were noted to enhance its appeal. However, what is most integral to this discussion is the demonstration that the first person storytelling of the personal essay form offers a clear example of what Foucault theorises as 'technologies of the self' – a tool through which subjects can negotiate their own subjectivity by enacting refusal or acceptance of particular rules. In this classification, the personal essay becomes a particularly useful tool in the context of resisting the position of ideal neoliberal subject.

The navigation of rules associated with the ideal neoliberal subject is front and centre of all three texts in this research. To articulate what exactly these rules are, I use Julie Wilson's neoliberal 'truths' as a framework. She summarises the rules of neoliberalism as the following: choice, competition and self-regulation. These three concepts are used to analyse the degree to which neoliberal resistance is manifested in the key texts.

In my reading of *My Body,* I discuss how there is a strong theme of resistance towards the neoliberal truth of competition throughout many of the essays. In particular, Ratajkowski uses the process of reflection as a method of resistance. However, in contradiction to this, other moments in the collection show Ratajkowski to adhere to the self-enterprising behaviour that is characteristic of the ideal neoliberal subject – even defending these choices at moments. I argue that the presence of both resistance and adherence to the neoliberal truths that govern the neoliberal subject is revelatory of Ratajkowski navigating her subjectivity through the use of these

essays. It is then significant that the collection closes with a pivotal moment of neoliberal resistance – an essay in which the narrating Ratajkowski discovers power in her body beyond the context of herself as commodity. In this is a rejection of the self-enterprising behaviour that was defended earlier in the work. Considering these essays as technologies of the self, it would appear they have been used to navigate away from the position of ideal neoliberal subject.

In *Blueberries*, there is a similar theme in that the narrating Savage both adheres to and resists the position of ideal neoliberal subject. However, the moments at which the narrator is shown to align with neoliberal values are never without recognition. Savage uses humour to particular effect throughout the essays, offering self-critique of moments in which the narrator appears to behave as the ideal subject. Paradoxically, the inclusion of the narrator's neoliberal adherence is what makes room for the condemnation of these behaviours. In *Blueberries* we see the essay functioning as a technology of the self, through which tongue-in-cheek style recognition of neoliberalism's effect on the narrating Savage is the text's strongest weapon of resistance.

In *Rangikura*, the resistance towards the position of ideal neoliberal subject is heavily aided by te ao Māori and Māori culture. As Tibble is a wahine Māori poet, I have discussed how the conflict between the Māori worldview and neoliberalism frames the resistance in this text as important from both a feminist perspective and a cultural perspective. It is interesting then that Tibble's knowledge of te ao Māori plays an integral part in the navigation of her subjectivity within *Rangikura*. Of particular interest is the way in which the work acknowledges whakapapa and how this is resistant to the individualistic nature of the ideal neoliberal subject.

The resistance towards neoliberalism in these texts is by no means straightforward. More often, it has been shown as part of the greater process of which these texts work as technologies of the self, through which the authors are able to navigate their subjectivity. However, while it has been demonstrated that these texts are resistant towards the position of ideal neoliberal subject, it cannot be ignored that these moments are housed in a neoliberal form.

In the final discussion of this essay, I demonstrate that the personal essay form appeals to neoliberal values through its individualistic storytelling and the way it can be used to commodify personal experience. Additionally, the fluidity of the personal essay form also lends to its neoliberal appeal, as it generates room for experimentation that can be useful to differentiate one's work, particularly in the context of a self-branding project. The way in which the personal essay appeals to neoliberalism has helped it to gain popularity in neoliberal culture, which in turn, potentially increases the chances of personal essayists having their work professionally published. This is the ultimate way to write resistance, given it effectively broadcasts any resistant work to an increased audience. With this in mind, the act of publishing can be advantageous to anyone using writing as a form of resistance. However, for writers like Ratajkowski, Savage and

Tibble, using the personal essay to resist neoliberalism, the publication of the personal essay functions as a trojan horse, through which writers can promote stories of resistance against the same neoliberal notions that prop up the form.

This thesis then demonstrates that not only does the neoliberal nature of the personal essay help to increase chances of writers making their resistant work public (through traditional or self-publishing forms such as social media), it also helps resistance to occur within the work itself. The experimentation of the form has been noted as useful to differentiate one's work in the context of a self-branding project, appealing more widely to the neoliberal truth of competition. However, it is also revealed to help deliver the resistant work in the key texts. In *Rangikura,* experimentation enables the expression of te ao Māori that generates resistance in the work. It also enables the reflective process that is part of the personal essay's function as a technology of the self in *My Body* and *Blueberries*. The experimental quality of the personal essay reveals the true extent to which it is a trojan horse for neoliberal resistance. Those who use the form to resist the position of ideal neoliberal subject, effectively hijack what can otherwise be considered a facet of neoliberal culture – writing from within neoliberalism in order to resist against it.

While this thesis has been focused on the resistant work of women, there is opportunity for further research on how the personal essay form is utilised by other groups of peoples who are adversely impacted by neoliberalism. The discoveries of this research, particularly in the analysis of Tibble's *Rangikura,* suggest that there is certainly opportunity for further study into how writers of Māori descent use the personal essay to express their culture as resistance.

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Bridging Statement

When I first set out to write this thesis, I had no idea what neoliberalism was. I had, however, been referred to as a 'girlboss' on many occasions. In the course of my research for this thesis, I have recognised the neoliberal subject in my own work, described as a self-enterprising individual who 'actively seek[s] to invest in' themselves and find success in a competitive world (Houghton 623). Indeed, many feminist scholars (Budgeon 85; Gill 443; Koffman and Gill 87; Rich 501; Scharff 108) believe that the ideal neoliberal subject is a position best upheld by young, middle-class women – those like myself.

Writing this thesis came at a time in my life where I was beginning to question my girlboss tendencies. They had led me towards a state of burnout, and so I made the (somewhat cliché) move to quit my job, leave the city, and start anew on an island. With this change in lifestyle, I suddenly had the room to reflect on my self-enterprising behaviour and began to recognise it as something with the potential to be resisted.

The critical and creative components of this thesis are united by a common research question – how do women writers resist their position as ideal neoliberal subjects, or the notion of the girlboss, through the use of personal essay? In the creative component, titled 'Contortions', I seek to answer this through applying key theories and techniques observed in the critical analysis towards my own resistant work.

I borrow Julie Wilson's 'truths' of neoliberalism – competition, choice, and self-regulation – as a key framework in my critical essay. The way in which these 'truths' have manifested themselves in my experience of womanhood so far is a major theme throughout 'Contortions', with moments in which I become aware of them, and in some cases resist them, front and centre in the work.

When I started writing 'Contortions', much of my focus was on how these truths have impacted my perspective on my body. 'Dog Food' is about an intense friendship I had as a teenager, exploring the ways in which striving for the male gaze at times proved dangerous for my narrating self and other female characters. While 'Night Cream' uses the motif of an anti-aging night cream to explore my desire for control. Both of these pieces offer critique towards the intense self-regulatory practices that neoliberalism pushes on young women as its ideal subjects.

In Ellena Savage's *Blueberries*, the themes of class and social mobility (the process of shifting ones social status from one to another) are both prominent. I took inspiration from Savage's work for 'The Journalist' and 'Eggs Bene', particularly drawing similarities between her essay 'Portrait of the Writer as Worker (after Dieter Lesage)' and 'The Journalist', where I explore

how attending University influenced my social mobility, at times obscuring my background as I'm pushed into other social categories.

In my critical work, I argue that the personal essay has the capacity to function as (the Foucauldian concept of) a 'technology of the self'. While I analyse how this is the case for *My Body*, *Blueberries* and *Rangikura* in the critical essay, I also aim to demonstrate how I too use the personal essay as a technology of the self in 'Contortions'.

In my analysis of *My Body*, I observe how Ratajkowski uses reflection – one of the processes through which a subject can be self-constructing (Houghton 617). I also use reflection to navigate my position as ideal neoliberal subject, with much of the resistance in my creative work coming from the lens of my narrating future self. This is particularly the case for essays 'Dog Food', 'Rule of Thirds', and 'Eggs Bene', which all focus on events from my teenage years. This process of reflection is also present in my research methods for these pieces. I spent hours trawling through old messages on Facebook, where I found evidence of events that occurred in the years I was writing about. I employed direct quotes from these messages in 'Dog Food' and 'Rule of Thirds', while also using them to spark clearer memories. I also unearthed an abandoned Tumblr blog (digging around for passwords and access codes sent to forgotten emails) and a "private" Instagram account. This excavation of my digital footprint was a major reflective process for me, allowing me to reconnect with the voice of my younger self as well as inform my narrative voice.

In the essays that offer more present memoir, I utilise the process of 'recognition' – another method for constructing one's subjectivity (Houghton 617). In the critical component I observe this at work in *Blueberries*, in which Savage often uses humour in her recognition of her neoliberal adherence. I also utilise dry humour to similar effect in my work – 'The Journalist', 'Night Cream', 'Toxic Shock', 'Eggs Bene'. Similarly, in the piece 'Fantastic Breasts and Where to Find Them', I use the imaginary to critique self-regulation practices, namely plastic surgery. Humour and fantasy elements helped me to effectively recognise and critique my neoliberal behaviour.

The final major bridge between the critical and creative components of this thesis is the experimentation with form present in both the key texts of the critical essay and 'Contortions'. I experiment with a fragmented, vignette style essay for 'Dog Food' and the titular essay, 'Contortions'. The latter is also an example of a braided essay, as it weaves together personal vignettes and paragraphs of critical theory. 'Rule of Thirds' is a lyric essay which blends together elements of prose, poetry, quotes, and archival messages to create a flowing and unpredictable form. The creative component also includes essays which are also classified as poetry, similar to

Tibble's *Rangikura*. 'Uma Thurman' and 'Insatiable' are both inspired Tibble's free-verse, sometimes rap-like style. I also took inspiration from the numbered paragraph style of Tibble's 'Little' and Ratajkowski's 'Beauty Lessons' in order to format the prose poems in 'Toxic Shock'.

I note in the critical component that the resistance in *My Body*, *Blueberries*, and *Rangikura* is by no means straightforward, and is instead part of the greater process of navigating one's subjectivity. The same is true for the resistance in 'Contortions', which through the process of writing, I have gained a wealth of knowledge about myself and the way in which I navigate this neoliberal world.

Part II: Contortions

Toxic Shock

i.

I woke up in the night a lot in the weeks before it came. I'd patter downstairs to sit with my dad in our empty café – two patrons of the night. We'd stare out into the carless car park, soaked white in lunar light. "Maybe it's the moon," he liked to suggest. And with my body bursting fresh downy hair and my once ridged baby-teeth now whittled into smooth edged fangs I thought yes, Dad, maybe this is the moon's fault. I was becoming a creature of the night – a werewolf, a vampire, a ghost of a child, a woman. One who would come to spend nights like these dancing drunk atop tables or slaving over a laptop or having great sex. We were destined to know each other well, the moon and me. But for now, my body only knew how to howl at it.

ii.

After thirty something cycles the pain finally comes like being licked by barbed wire. It would have hurt a lot less to have a sizzling metal stick pressed firm into my abdomen. At least according to the farmers, it doesn't hurt the cows that much. Why not hold me down and brand me a woman that way then? Instead, I take this monthly electrocution – curled up in a ball, snarling – like a champ.

I always thought pain was your body's way of telling you that something's wrong, that an *ouch* translates to *do something*! But according to my doctor, pain for me translates to "just bad luck," and a repeat prescription for Naproxen.

iii.

The moon moves in eight phases while I move in four. We both repeat our cycles once a month. Sometimes in sync like the sisters we are. For me a new moon comes paired with a throbbing belly that births thick clots of rotten wine. Hot and heavy. That barbed tongue again. Rummage for a pad. Peel it. Stick it. Flush away the red sea. Straight to the medicine drawer. Boil the jug. Pop one pill two pill three pill four. Hot water bottle filled and squeezed and plugged. Climb the stairs to bed. With each step comes a needle to the stomach. Some sick sort of acupuncture. Lay down.

Curl up.

Try to breathe.

Grip that hot water bottle like the life raft that it is and hold on.

Wriggle your toes because for some reason that helps.

Breathe some more.

And then be thankful. Because at least it means

you're not pregnant.

iv.

What brand of bleeder are you? Do you prefer to shove something in it or patch up the violence each month? What about wings or no wings or applicators or do you give an actual fuck about the environment enough to have a silicone catch-all to play tug of war with when your belly is rippling fire. Are you regular? Or super or sporty or barely there. Maybe you like the ones with cheetah print, or the kitschy little fun facts printed on the wrapper? Maybe Aunt Flo is just as much a material girl as the bloody rest of us. And who can really blame her? Perhaps it's true that the only cure to this relentless stabbing is made from organic cotton and swaddled in a baby blue box.

vi.

My friend tells me she sleeps with a tampon in. I wince, remembering a story I read in a Crème mag, about a model who did the same. She woke up however long later from a coma to the news she was no longer a leggy blonde. That might have been the moment I learnt to fear my own body. Twelve years old. Yet to have my uterus rip me a new one each month. Yet to have friends fall victim to pills or lesions. The kinds that make them lose their ability to bleed or feel happy or have babies. But it's not a big deal, right? We're not even supposed to want to be mothers anymore. At least that's what I told myself at sixteen, as I held my friend's hand at the nursing

clinic. She squeezed back. Legs spread while they fished around inside her for a sign of something growing.

iv.

I've been stifling my body's growls for many moons now, with a tiny pale pill called birth-control. So, when a doctor tells me that coming off it is the first step to finding out if my pain is more than just bad luck after all, I hang up the phone in tears. What if I've secretly become something else beneath the gauze of progesterone? What if one night I wake to find the real me clawing her way out of a forced slumber? I take the three-month hormone detox as prescribed anyway and wait in terror for her to arrive – barking, insatiable. But she never comes. And so, they send me to the ultrasound clinic where I tell myself that they'll definitely find her, snuggled up against one of my ovaries and pretending to protect it. I go in hoping that the technician will spot the welts from where she's dragged her claws across my uterus and say matter-of-factly, 'ah, there's our culprit.' But instead, the technician plucks off her gloves and diagnoses me with 'nothing out of the ordinary'. I leave the room the same as I entered – waiting for the next cycle.

Dog Food

“What little girls learn is not the desire for the other, but the desire to be desired.”

- Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*

…

I want a boy to want me so bad that I spend twelve dollars on an exfoliating scrub and thirty minutes in the shower shedding my layers. It’s hard work that leaves my legs hot and raw and shiny. Like fresh meat. Still, my best friend Lola would say it’s not enough. The week before, I’d sat on her bathroom floor counting tiles while she shaved her pussy in the shower.

“Keep me company,” she told me, and I obeyed. Like I obey when the boy I want tells me that we can’t see each other IRL, despite the fact he’s already seen more of me than most.

“You’re too young for me,” he says. “What would my friends think?”

Honestly, I don’t even know my own opinion of me.

…

We’re fourteen and Lola already knows everything there is to know about desire. Skinny jeans, Victoria’s Secret body spray and fabulously infantile skin. This is the recipe that earns her an entire call list of eighteen-year-old men who sit ready and waiting to purchase us something for the weekend. A box of watermelon cruisers or a cask of Smirnoff and cranberry or sometimes, if we have major plans, a pack of Winnie blues.

I let her tug me through town on the invisible leash she calls friendship. We march through Nelson’s four-street-wide CBD to reach the park across the road from the Super Liquor where we watch until a beat-up car rolls into the parking lot – that’s our guy. Lola struts across the road, the exact change in babysitting money folded in hand. I follow.

The boy is barely twenty, but to us he looks full grown, peach fuzz and all. Lola wears a flippant smile and sparkling eyes as she makes the transaction. I just hover at her side, dumb as a dog wondering how we always get away with never paying them anything extra.

…

Lola's mum is a *cool mum* whose motto seems to be *out of sight, out of mind*. Lola's bedroom is testament to that; a sleepout in the far corner of her family's backyard. Outside is a patch of dead grass, the designated nighttime piss spot. There's a pair of broken steps leading up to the stiff sliding door, which opens to reveal a bed stacked high in fluffy pillows, among other mismatched furniture and a dehumidifier.

Lola's bedroom is our friend circle's safe house. At sleepovers, her double bed manages to comfortably fit four or five of us. When someone needs somewhere to stash alcohol before a party, Lola leaves the door unlocked. On the nights we go out, Lola pulls personalised fits for us out of her clothes and lets us straighten each other's hair with her flat iron so that we all end up looking just like her. When our friend gets kicked out of home, the sleepout is the place she runs. It's where I seek refuge with school night sleepovers when my parents are mid-divorce.

"You're welcome here any time," her mum tells us all.

…

I haven't even turned sixteen when Greta and I are declared the only virgins left at the lunch table. The rest of our friends take turns sharing sex stories, while they tend to chippie snack packs and suck on apples. First times, funny times, bad times. Stories of mothers made unassuming voyeurs, sticky headbutts and popping boyfriends' cherries, forcing them to feel like the boys that they are.

"And then he picked me up and fucked me against the wall," Lola claims nonchalantly, peeling open the red wax of a Babybel cheese. When the girls look at me and Greta, they know we have nothing to add. Their eyes swell with –

Something. Jealousy? No, pity more likely. On a related note, Isabella proposes a competition of sorts between Greta and me.

“Bets on who will lose theirs first?” she raises her eyebrows.

…

The year I lose all my baby fat I ask Lola to paint my face for me. In my grandparents Mount Roskill bathroom, she chooses for me sensuous shades of brown and mauve that make my blue eyes shimmer in such a way that I can’t recognise my own stare. Lola applies the same colours to her own skin before we catch the train to Sylvia Park. As we whir away from the city, I catch a glimpse of my strange eyes again in the window. At the mall I get myself a pretty bralette and a photo of me eating noodles in my new face. Lola says I look amazing. When I upload it to Facebook it gets more likes than any profile photo I’ve ever posted. In real life, a boy tells me in the dark comfort of someone’s backyard that it looks like I’m wearing a lot of make-up.

“You don’t need it,” he says. I try to seem flattered while I search for my reflection in the lidless wine bottle on my lap.

…

I’m sitting cross-legged on my bed with my mum sat in front of me, her face poised in a way that guides its wrinkles into place. *Pluck. Pluck. Pluck.* Her tweezer pulls are rhythmic, knowledgeable. The heat builds in my forehead as I sneak watery glances between the plucking. I witness my eyebrow hairs fall like downy snowflakes on the towel. The towel my mum will later whisk out from under me and shake out over the bathtub, leaving bits of me to be lost down the drain. The tears begin to fall now too.

“We’re almost done,” my mum states in a tone that suggests she too can’t wait for this to be over. At this point my brow line feels like the bubbling crater of a volcano. The threat of an eruption seems imminent. Through leaky eyes I can see my dad appear in the doorway.

“Her eyebrows were perfect as they were,” he says, before begging, “Please don’t take too much off.” Mum shoos him away as I lay there wondering, *but how much is too much?* I picture Lola and her near-bare brows, the ones she has to fill in every morning before school. There doesn’t seem to be a limit, at least for her.

…

Lola never was a stranger to scandal, in fact, the two seemed quite close. But something is different when the boarding house video comes out. The footage – grainy, voyeuristic, incriminating – is marked by the shrill background laughter of teenage boys. It's a laughing track from hell.

The video is thrown around a dirty web of private messages and group chats – *you can't see her face, but it's definitely her.* It doesn't take long for us all to see it and for Lola to become our town's own version of Kim K. She doesn't let us feel sorry for her though. Instead, she convinces me that the only way I should feel about it is jealous. At this point, the idea of statutory rape was just a phrase we'd throw around to mock the girls with boyfriends two years above us, the girls who really, we envied.

Lola holds her head up high through it all. Higher and higher and higher until she drives herself dizzy.

…

I'm sat in the passenger's seat of our parked car when a raggedy man walks past and locks eyes with me. He pauses, puts two fingers in the shape of a V up to his mouth and jerks his tongue from side to side. My dad, who's sat beside me, tears off his seatbelt and leaps from the car.

"Why the fuck are you making faces like that at my fucking daughter," he roars and chases him off down the street. By the time Dad gets back to the car, I haven't moved a muscle, paralysed in fear of the strange man's desire.

…

Often the youngest girls at the party, my friend group arrived at such things in the protection of a pack, giddy with Midori and body glitter. One night I take part in a drunken confessional with a handsome older boy who compliments me on my deepest insecurity.

"I think you're the perfect height," he says before leaving with a girl his own age. I leave feeling seen for the first time.

I leave in a taxi that Lola calls for us, back to her house with one of our guy friends. I leave no trace of myself in the bed as the two of them start making out. I never pluck up the courage to actually leave though. I stay. Even after I whimper for them to stop and Lola flattens me with the words, *you can walk home if you want.* She knows that I can't. And I know that she doesn't really want me to either. She holds me hostage there, curled up on the edge of her bed, just in case this boy can't be trusted. Just in case she needs my protection. Just in case.

The next morning, the three of us wake to find exploding group chats and an angry post in the Facebook party page: *Who the fuck punched a hole in my wall? My parents are soooo pissed.*

Just like that, the situation in bed is forgotten, already replaced by another drama.

…

The first time a boy touches me like that he doesn't even kiss me. He just shoves his fingers in me and tries to jimmy me open like I'm the front door to his house after a big night out. The night we'd had prior *was* a big one too, shut down early by probing neighbours. A bunch of us ended up at this boy's house instead. I'm now the one being probed as the others sleep sprawled on the couches and floor around us. His fingers are blunt, searching, stubborn.

"No." I mutter this a few times in a voice which is drunken and soft and not really mine.

He ignores me.

"What about Greta?" I try the fact that he's supposed to be seeing one of my close friends, but the question is a mistake.

"I don't care," he mutters and in doing so, dodges my only bullet. I give in. It feels good for a moment. Then I feel guilty. Then confused. *This is just what it's like to be wanted,* I tell myself*. And you want that, don't you?*

In the morning one of our friends fires me a cheeky grin and a, "Good night last night?*"* I roll my eyes at him like it's nothing. But when I get home, I scrub my body until it's raw and with hot tears like holy water, bless my newborn skin.

…

“You’re supposed to help me!”

It’s my first year of flatting and a girl in my friend group, Eliza, has an alcohol-induced panic attack on Courtenay Place. Her long, slim legs stomp violent circles around the loudly dressed cops. I watch her scream and thrash, wild yet nonetheless beautiful.

“You’re supposed to help girls like me,” She points accusatory fingers at the police officers. “But instead, you just let a *rapist* walk into that bar?”

By now several bar goers have stopped to gawk. One of the cops throws a look at me and my other friend as if to say, *sort it out girls.* I put my hand on Eliza’s arm in an attempt to soothe her, but she lashes at me with the back of her palm.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

I stumble and let go. Her eyes are swollen with something I’ve never seen before.

…

I’m wearing a baby-pink lace bra when I send a photo of my left boob to the group chat.

Lol do you guys think he’ll like this?

…

People are always looking at Lola. But when she starts excusing herself to the bathroom after every meal, none of us even look up from our plates.

…

I’m sitting in bed at my Mount Cook flat when the boy who filmed the boarding house video pops up on my Netflix home screen. Except he’s not really a boy anymore. In the ad for the streaming platform’s latest reality venture, he stands among other young men, and women, with a glistening

torso and pearly-white, L.A. style fangs – the perfect monster. I stifle something in my throat. Is it vomit or a growl?

…

When the boy I want finally wants me back, he invites me op shopping.

At first his face appears alien compared to the one I know from inside my phone. I avoid taking a proper look at him while we slouch through the racks. We sift, sort, and pick through wobbly hangers that hold on to shirts that smell like other people. Taking turns, we disguise our genuine feelings in joking gestures.

“This would look so good on you.”

“No! This would look so good on *you*.”

Then somewhere in between the Sally’s and the Hospice Shop, the sky falls open. It bleeds big droplets from its belly. They smack the concrete, turning it violently from one shade of grey to another. He pulls out one of those foldable umbrellas that he’s been carrying around all afternoon, and like Superman, puffs out its wings to protect me. A nylon forcefield. It’s too small to cover the both of us, but stubbornly, we walk together under it anyway. The rain eventually stops when we part ways outside the petrol station near his house. Oil dances in rainbows at our feet as I grasp a proper look at him – milky skin, thoughtful eyes, and a shoulder soaked wet for me.

A few months later Greta loses the competition.

…

For my twenty-first birthday I organise a tour through Martinborough – Wellington’s wine country. I hire a coach and fill it with friends and enemies dressed in linens and florals. We drain countless bottles of Sav and eat oil-soaked breads and take sloshed photos by the grapes. My flat mates arrange for me a round of twenty-one shots – tiny plastic glasses brimming with wine or beer. As the tradition goes, everyone I’ve invited takes a turn reciting an anecdote or compliment as I down what seems to be a sip of alcohol. By the time it gets to my friend Madi’s turn, I’m wobbly and burping. She stumbles along on a vino fueled tangent about my inspiring body positivity.

Something about body hair. About me not giving, “A fuck what people think.” I laugh along and pretend to recognise the person she’s talking about.

…

When Lola and I have the final fight it’s over something so trivial I can’t even remember the details, only that I was the one to end it. The final blow sent over Facebook Messenger would have, to her, read something like: *Frankie removed you from the group.*

Some days later, in my English class, the errand girl brings me a letter – a pink envelope with my name in glitter pen on the front. I open it and the familiar sick-sweet scent of Victoria’s Secret body spray falls out, along with the weight of the word *bulimia*.

The timing of our fall out makes me feel like it’s my fault. I’m told later that this wasn’t an original response. Girls in the year above us throw their hands to their mouths in horror when they eventually find out. *Oh my god, I said she looked amazing last mufti day.* When I read the letter from Lola, I feel so sick that I run to the toilet stalls and throw my hands down my throat. Later I will learn how to be myself.

The Journalist

The party you're going to is in an affluent suburb, full of influential people who can afford the two million dollar median buy in. It's a suburb of shiny windows and immaculate lawns, gated driveways and those flash trampolines with the mesh walls. It's a safe suburb, with little to no streetlights because wealthy people are never bad people, of course. Because when has the dark ever been something to fear when you have money? It certainly isn't here, in Seatoun, an eastern suburb of Wellington, where your friend Isabella is hosting her twenty-first birthday party at her mum's house.

The streets are quiet, quiet, quiet when you roll up in your flatmate's nineteen-ninety-something Toyota Starlet. Lauren, who's car it is, has the worn out speakers on full blast. This is her version of hospitality – to turn the music up so loud that the four other ladies squeezed in here, including you, can't hear that her car is begging to take its last breath.

"Oh shit, sorry it was the last one," Skye shouts from beside you in the middle seat, looking down at her phone. Lauren yanks the steering wheel right into a u-turn and for a moment, you're flung flat against Skye's warm shoulder. She's flung against Daisy, who's shoulder is then pushed up against the cool glass of the window. Toni, in the passenger seat, quickly holds her mint green Pal – a cheeky road bev – out in front of her and her outfit in an attempt to avoid the unavoidable spillage.

In the corner of your eye, you spot a fleck of golden light. It's a nervous resident peeling open their curtains to get a peek at the hoodlums harassing their safe suburban street. The gesture makes you flush as if you've just been told off for being somewhere you're not supposed to be.

"This next one on the left," Skye shouts confidently this time. Loz turns the wheel more gently and then here you are, at the wide mouth of the shared driveway that leads up to Isabella's mum's house. She parks the rusting Starlet between a pair of freshly painted white lines on the side of the road. Daisy pipes up from the back seat.

"Are we not going up the driveway?"

"Nah," Lauren says, pulling her keys from the ignition. "Isabella said there's not much room up the top for us."

When you get out of the car it's just dark enough to see the stars. Back home in your central flat, the light pollution means that when you look up at the sky the only thing you can see are bright, bulbous clouds. Here, you can hear the ocean, which is only a couple hundred metres away.

Everyone's in heels, which click-clack on the smooth concrete driveway. Clackity heels, hungry ocean, but still no sounds of a party. The twenty-first is 70's themed, so you're all dressed for the occasion. You've borrowed something expensive to wear from a friend's sister, who shoved it in your letterbox for you like it was a ten cent envelope. You've gone for a Cher-inspired look – a tiny singlet and flared pants in a matching glittery gold, paired with paneled leather platforms and white hoop earrings. Your midriff is out à la Cher too, which you kind of regret. Now you'll have to stay sober enough to keep your tummy sucked flat all night.

"God, I forgot how high up it is," someone says as the house finally comes into view. As you get closer, you can make out the shape of mingling bodies shifting in and out of view. There's the damp sound of people's voices all amalgamated into one muffled tone. You spot a few heads and shoulders that have escaped outside. Daisy, Lauren, Skye and Toni all charge on up the stairs towards the door. You feel compelled to stay and watch for a moment, but you follow your mates instead. You wonder what it says about you that you feel more comfortable here, on the outside looking in.

The first thing you notice inside is the gigantic, light-up disco dancefloor where the lounge was last time you were here. Each square is a different colour that appears to pulse in rhythm with the music playing. It looks expensive. Nobody's dancing on it yet, but you are early.

You look past it, to the corner, where there's a dude with a bleached mullet hovering over a desk with a laptop and some decks – the DJ. He's a familiar face, but you don't know him: he's a paid DJ. How much is he getting paid to stand there and be a glorified remote control? You seriously doubt this ABBA remix is his usual style. On his face it's obvious that he's bored shitless. But you think hey, at least it's a paid gig and he gets to tell everyone he makes money doing what he loves.

Next you notice the food – it's everywhere. Bite-sized crostini, mini fritters, avocado sushi. Every flat surface is full of finger food, the kind that's flash because it requires finnicky hands and just as much time to make as it's full-sized equivalent. You stare at the abundance of tiny morsels and get flashbacks to helping your mum prepare similar things in the café kitchen when you were

young and your little fingers were her best asset. Twisting teeny sprigs of dill on to salmon and cream cheese pikelets or arranging caramel tartlets in neat rows on a platter. Then going with her to drop the catering off to the people who'd paid for it and feeling jealous that they got to eat all this food you deemed fit for a princess. Now you are the lucky girl who gets to eat it.

It doesn't take long for you to spot the birthday girl, Isabella, who's at the kitchen island cutting up a ciabatta stick. She is both glowing and frazzled, wearing patterned palazzo pants and a slinky black singlet. You spot her mum nearby – with the same blonde lob and trim frame – peeling cling film from more long plates of pre-prepared princess food.

You haven't spoken to Isabella's mum much before, you're likely not even on the list of friends who's name she knows, but you see her around Wellington all the time. Always at the gym and sometimes out for lunch. She's a journalist, which you're envious of. You went to university with the intention of studying journalism, but the percentages in the prospectus pamphlets told you that there were more opportunities and more money in something broader, like marketing. And so that's what you did, and now you work in social media, at an agency where you have to fight for a decent salary. And Isabella's mum is a journalist with a big house and finger food money.

Isabella notices you and the other girls enter. She beams a smile across the room and drops the bread knife. You all beeline towards her. Then comes the chorus of screeching.

"Ahhh happy birthday queen!"

"You look amazing!"

"The house looks amazing!"

"Everything's amazing!"

Everyone takes turns greeting the birthday girl. When it's your turn, you give Isabella a tight squeeze and tell her how much you love her pants. Then it's time to look around the room and figure out who else is here that you know. You recognise a small huddle of girls from uni, so you go over to them and say hi. You wish you had a drink in your hand. One of them compliments your outfit. You wonder if you should tell them that it's not yours and risk revealing that you are an imposter, or just bask in the glory of her kind words.

“Thanks, I wish it was mine,” you decide to say. Then Isabella saunters past and lets you know that the drinks are outside. You raise your eyebrows, as if you hadn’t even thought about alcohol yet, and thank her. Then you excuse yourself from the uni girls and go to grab a drink.

You slip through the gap in the sliding door that someone else has left open and then out into the tiled courtyard. In front of you is a dimly lit lawn area, with fairy lights glittered through the trees. On your right is the pool, large and glowing blue. To your left is the BBQ and two massive chilly bins, so massive that you reckon you could lie down in them. They are full of ice and swimming with bottles of light beer and pastel-coloured cans of RTD’s. You go to reach for a beer and remember your bare midriff. So, you suck in your tummy and instead, take a lilac can with only 0.0000001% sugar or something like that.

You join the girls for some photos in front of the pool. At first it seems like a distracting background choice, but then you think, what says opulence more than two-thousand litres of water overlooking the ocean? You imagine Isabella and her sisters swimming here as children and wonder what it was like to grow up with this as their normal. When you were young and your parents were doing well, they paid for a summer pass to your school pool. It was vast and well-chlorinated and almost always busy, so your parents often took you and your sister down in the evenings when it was quieter. You can remember kicking and kicking to get to the bottom so you could run your hand along the cool concrete and watch the tiny leaves dance on its surface and feel the weight of the water in your ears. Here, you could pretend the pool was all yours.

You spend what feels like an eternity cycling between the role of iPhone photographer and being a part of the ensemble posed in front of the pool. It’s thirsty work, and by the time you’re finished you need another drink. Now there are more guests. You mingle with the ones you know. You sign up to be Daisy’s beer pong partner. You lose the game and drink another can and a half in the process. Someone who you are no longer friends with arrives, which makes you nervous. So, you double park yourself with two cans this time. You mingle some more.

Isabella’s dad, the multi-millionaire entrepreneur, comes around dressed somewhat like Elvis and carrying a plate of food. He exaggeratedly offers them to you and those you are with as if he’s playing the character of a server. You accept with a small smile: this rich-lister with a platter serving hors d'oeuvre at a party of mostly broke-ass uni kids, some of which, including yourself,

know the true sensation of being paid minimum wage to be a plate with legs, makes you a little uneasy. Some of your discomfort is also because you need to pee – desperately.

You make your way back through the house. The party is now in full swing – the dancefloor is occupied by a group of girls that have discarded their heels to the side, the DJ looks less bored, people are hovering near the grazing table like flies, the finger food is almost all pinched and replaced with empty cans or bottles, and the air like stale alcohol. You meander through the chaos, smiling at familiar faces as you head down the hall to where you remember the toilet being. Aha – the short line outside a closed door lets you know that you were right. You spot Skye in the pile up of desperate pissers and go stand next to her.

“I really need to pee,” you tell Skye, loudly and obviously which means you’re drunk. Two ladies next to you giggle – not at you but with you, and so you strike up a conversation. One of them tells you that they’re friends of Isabella’s mum, which makes sense given they look around your parents’ age. The talkative one speaks on behalf of the both of them, so much so that you won’t even be able to remember what the other one looks like tomorrow.

The chatty lady is tall and narrow with dark features that make you envious. She’s gone for the hippie look tonight, with a scarf-like headband and glittery earrings that are definitely expensive. She tells you, with a champagne flute clutched tight to her chest, that like Isabella’s mum, she’s a journalist who lives just down the road in Seatoun.

“I’ve practically known Isabella her whole life, since she was a baby,” the journalist says with a smile and a shrug. It feels like she wants you to know that she is important because of this. She continues talking about herself, telling you that she now works at the university, as a tutor in the journalism school. She was a journalist, but now she is an academic.

You tell her that you studied a couple of journalism papers as electives in your undergraduate degree. This connection peaks her interest and so you keep going. You explain to her that you really wanted to be a journalist, but people told you it was hard to make money. So, you were responsible and majored in marketing and got yourself a job. Now, having a sensible undergrad under your belt, you’re indulging yourself by studying a master’s in creative writing.

Now it's her turn to be impressed, like all the other adults you've told this to. Instead, you realise that her face has turned sour. You won't realise until months later that you just accidentally shat on her profession.

"Oh, you'll never make any money writing books," she scoffs, clutching her champagne tighter. "Several of my colleagues have tried and failed, there's never been any money in publishing."

You're taken aback, confused at the venom in her words. There's silence between you. You make a weird face. You try to think back earlier in the conversation, to if you ever mentioned your dreams of writing a book or if she just happened to read you as delusional. But before you can muster up a response from your alcohol-soaked brain, two girls emerge from the toilet, laughing, and barge between you and the journalist. She looks at the open door and then at you. She follows her quiet friend inside, pausing at the entrance and turning to face you one last time.

"I can tell you, I've made *plenty* of money as a journalist," she raises her eyebrows, smug, before closing the door.

But when you said it's hard to make money as a journalist, what you meant was it's hard for people like you – who had a mother go bankrupt and leave when you were a teenager. Who had to put your summer job money towards bills in the worst year. Who even when the tough times were over, had to save, save, save with your dad in order to afford entry to the halls of residence. It's hard for people like you, who had to get government help in order to afford study in the first place. This is something you convinced yourself was a privilege in order to appease your friends from double-income, home-owning families, who feel hard done by that their parents choose to spend their money on other things. But the difference between you and them is that your family didn't have any money to spare.

So sure, there are opportunities to make money as a journalist, but for people like you they are few and far between. And frankly, hard to fucking reach.

But of course, she didn't get what you meant because you are walking around a mansion in Seatoun hills, sloppy drunk, wearing a four hundred dollar two-piece and eating finger food. How is she supposed to know that you're masquerading when you never take the mask off? Or have you been wearing it for so long that it's now absorbed into your skin.

Skye turns to you, with a puzzled look and says, “That was weird.” And you brush it off by suggesting you both go to the upstairs bathroom instead, even though you no longer have the urge to pee. Afterwards, you return to the party as if nothing ever happened. You stay through the speeches – it is a twenty-first after all – and remain until there’s only a handful of beer bottles bobbing around in the chilly bins which are now just buckets of water. At this point Loz comes up to you, teetering on her heeled boots with empty eyes.

“I’ve booked us an Uber,” she slurs, holding her phone in the air beside her face like you would with your ID in line at a club. You both agree to try and rally the troops and meet down on the driveway in five minutes. Time to circle around the party – the garden, the dancefloor, upstairs – to find those you know who are left among the straggling crowd and say your goodbyes.

Then, without locating any of the girls you came with, you head back down the concrete stairs to meet Lauren. Outside is dark and swarming with people – a bunch of partygoers have called it a night at the same time. You spot Lauren, and Daisy, hunched over a single phone that casts a glow around them, functioning like a locating beacon. You go over to join them in watching the virtual car on the screen get closer and closer.

When the Uber arrives, you hop in the backseat with Lauren. Daisy sits up front making small talk with the driver, who is an apathetic responder. The car hums through the suburbs and towards the city. You lean your forehead against the cool window, watching the road-facing houses melt into one another. *You’ll never make any money writing books. You’ll never make any money. Never.*

Daisy asks the Uber driver if she can connect to the aux and the next thing you know there’s drum and bass billowing out of the speakers. You’re in the suburb of Hataitai now. The orange streetlamps bleed into glowing lines as you head rapidly towards the Mount Victoria Tunnel. The windows are down. Daisy and Lauren are singing along to the music now. Being backseat in an Uber makes you think about the summer your family didn’t have a car, how you would bus to the supermarket and hail a taxi home with a boot full of groceries. The way that you would anxiously watch the fare meter while your dad tried to avoid mentioning hard times to the driver.

The end of the tunnel fast approaching. It spits the Uber out on to the triple-laned road that circles the Basin Reserve and straight into a red light. The car rolls to a stop and you start to feel all that

food you scoffed in your throat. So, you lean your head out the window and tilt your gaze towards the sky. Taking deep breaths, you realise you can no longer see the stars.

Uma Thurman

When I first watched Uma
wrapped tight in yellow leather slicing
men with her katana I thought wow,
I can't wait to be a woman.

Ak-7 wielding

roundhouse kicking

fearless

with big tits and a tight ass.

I practiced by learning kata and
smearing lipstick and smacking plastic boards in two

overdrawn baby lips
wee balled fists.

Angelina as Mrs. Smith
bleeding bullets and sex

or the mum from Spy Kids – just
cleavage and punches.

I had no idea my
weapon of choice
would end up a blunt kitchen knife

chopping onions in the
kitchen till the sulphur
made me sob.

Night Cream

Our first house on the island was barely that. The kitchen blended into the dining room which was in the lounge that was also the at-home office. The only rooms that felt like their own distinct spaces were our bedroom, thanks to a dodgy staircase, and the bathroom, separated by a sliding door with no lock. The ramshackle nature of it all was romanticised both by us and guests though, thanks to its location – Aotea / Great Barrier Island.

New Zealand's sixth largest island is nestled on the edge of the Hauraki Gulf, separating the wild waters of the Southern Ocean from the glamorous catamarans of Auckland Harbour – a great barrier indeed. When Māori first discovered the island, they named it Aotea – white cloud for the way in which from a far, the land mass appeared as a heavenly haze on the horizon.

Aotea's landscape is more or less what I expected of an island in Aotearoa; toppling mountain ranges with magical views of the countless beaches, outstretched like sandy lips puckered to kiss the waves. Yet, there's something in the air and the locals' reluctance to share that lets you know Aotea is far from a typical island. More stars seem to exist in the sky here than anywhere else.

The only way I got in was thanks to my boyfriend, Zach, who's family have called The Barrier home in some way, shape, or form, for generations now. The island has an art gallery, three social clubs and an Irish pub – just enough to comfortably house a settlement of roughly thirteen hundred full-time islanders. It also offers the perfect level of discomfort to attract a burnt-out townie like me.

...

I'd been desperate to get out of Wellington, to be done with the fast pace that the city demanded of me, but immediately I missed my friends. Hannah was the first one to visit me on the island. We spent most mornings before our planned adventures slowly, in what I labeled the kitchen-dining area of our wee house.

On one of those mornings, I stood at the stove watching the kettle boil while Hannah sat a few feet away from me at the dining table. She talked with her knees pulled to her chest. "Omg I've told you about Brigit's nana aye?"

I pulled the kettle from the flame. “The hot one, right?”

Hannah proceeded to tell me the story of how one of Brigit’s friends once thought her nana was actually her mum. I poured water into the French press, watching the coffee grinds foam as I listened. “I mean it’s happened before,” she claimed, “But this guy was so shocked about it apparently!”

I’ve never met Brigit’s nana, but Hannah has described her for me before in a way that makes me feel like I visit her home every Sunday for mimosas and scones. Nowadays when Hannah talks about her, I immediately picture her spritely wardrobe, eclectic house, and flawless head of hair. “Blonde with bangs,” Hannah reminded me, “I think that’s her secret to looking young really, having good hair.”

I filled two identical mugs – coffee with a dash of oat milk – as we continued chatting about our own signs of aging.

“Apparently I frown a lot.” I turned to show Hannah the angry lines on my forehead, putting both forefingers in the middle of my eyebrows and pulling them apart to reveal the intensity of the two dents that I’ve made myself. Hannah laughed.

“I think that’s actually your concentration face,” she insisted, “Like, you always frown when you’re listening to me.” I figured she was trying to make me feel better, but even relabeled as concentration lines, they remained just as cavernous and terrifying.

I migrated over to the dining table, and we talked skincare next. Hannah started to tell me about the products Brigit’s nana uses.

“There’s this avocado and pear night cream they do,” she took a quick sip of her coffee. I was distracted as I practiced unravelling my brow to invent a new concentration face. “Honestly, it’s like $80 or something but I borrowed it off Brigit once and when I woke up,” Hannah dipped her head for effect, “It was *noticeable*.”

That’s the magic word, isn’t it?

Noticeable.

Noticeable.

Noticeable.

My frown sprung back in its place.

...

When I first arrived on Aotea, the days were long and hot. Zach's mum wanted me to make the most of this.

"The water around here is so warm at this time of year," Annamarie had encouraged me while fussing over several cups of tea. "Like a bath," she poured the milk, eyes smiling.

Since then, Zach mockingly repeated the phrase almost every time we were in the ocean.

"God," he called out to me as we floated along the shallows of Mulberry Grove on his parents' inflatable paddleboards, "It's like a bath!"

The thing is, there was no better way to describe it. Warm, flat, inviting. The late afternoon sunlight reached a warm hand down to the bottom, illuminating seaweed and rock. Occasionally a school of fish rippled past, or the sea breeze pulled dimples in its surface. It was all so calm.

I whipped my head around to roll my eyes at Zach and his sarcastic words. But the motion unsteadied me. My toes instinctively grasped at the board while I braced the little abdominal muscle I have. Arms tense. Eyes shut. *Please don't fall right now. Do. Not. Fall.* The water licked at my ankles as the board rolled beneath me. I stayed frozen waiting for it to stop.

And after a few seconds, it did. Relief washed over me, followed quickly by embarrassment as I realised Zach was witness to my silent freak out. Sure enough, I looked over to see him standing tall on his board, watching me. His tanned face was pulled into a bemused smirk.

"Should we go round there a bit?" he gestured his paddle in front of us at the shoreline, winding out from the safety of the bay.

I nodded, wanting to say no.

As a child there was nowhere that I felt more at home than in the ocean, or the river or the pool. My dad used to brag about this.

“You just loved being in the water,” he would shake his head softly, as if telling himself off for reminiscing. “I couldn’t believe how quickly you took to it.”

I like to imagine what it was like the first time my dad held me in the waves. The two of us, bobbing there together in the shallows of Tahunanui Beach. Being cradled and submerged. The first instinct to hold my breath. The ocean using its salt to draw moisture from my skin and making our bodies one for the first of many times. Above all else, I like to imagine the overwhelming sense of being safe in the water. A sensation I no longer felt.

Zach sauntered past me with a few swift and strong pulls of his oar. I clumsily tugged at the water with mine, trying to gain back speed. I found some sort of balance between pulling and splashing while I tried to keep up. As we continued out along the coast, the seafloor fell further and further away. It’s not long before I’d lost sight of it altogether, the sun’s light suffocated by the increasing depth.

I looked around for Zach, for comfort, and noticed he was no longer in front of me. I turned around, this time slowly, to find him floating a few feet behind me. His eyes were following something in the water. Calmly, he stated, “Frankie, there are three sharks right beside us.”

My eyes raced to find what he was looking at and made out the shape of three shark pups, thrashing silently under the water.

“Baby bronze whalers,” he told me matter-of-factly, as if he was David fucking Attenborough.

One wiggled closer towards my board. The animal’s proximity matched with the distortion of the water made it appear bigger, and I felt my heart begin to race. Shark Week style footage looped in my brain. Blood. Teeth. *Jaws* music. I thought about the one-armed Anna Sophia Robb in *Soul Surfer.* About the time my sister fell in an eel pond as a kid and they blindly nibbled at her limbs, mistaking her for food.

I panicked.

I dug my oar into the water in an attempt to turn myself around and back towards the safety of the beach. I lost my balance. This time I was on my ass before I could even register that I was falling. I screamed, thinking I'd gone off, straight into the jaws of the baby sharks. I then kept screaming, even after realising that I'd landed with both cheeks firmly planted on the board, flailing around in my bikini like a fish on land.

...

The week after Hannah's visit, I went back to working in my office. And by office, I mean the corner of my house where I'd tucked a tiny desk and a monitor and a swivel chair courtesy of my employers. The space was such a squeeze that if I wheeled myself backwards a few inches on said swivel chair, I'd end up sitting smack bang in the middle of the lounge – and in the way of the TV.

I didn't mind the tight fit. I'd slide open all the windows and prop open all the doors so that it felt like I'd plugged myself into the middle of a forest. Some days though, my lack of space in the treehouse office really got to me. I found myself fantasizing about my desk back at my old workplace in Wellington. It was twice the size, and I had a fair amount of space behind me before I'd smack into someone else's desk. It was convertible too, doubling in height at the touch of a button.

My roomy desk was one of maybe twelve when I started my job at the digital marketing agency, and one of close to twenty when I eventually left. The place had an ocean view, a snack jar and was busy busy busy – just the kind of workplace I'd dreamed about being a part of by the time I'd finished studying. It seemed by some way of a miracle that I was there early, working part-time as an intern through the last semester of my undergrad.

The agency was a start-up that was on its way to being a stay-up by the time I joined the team. Everyone there was young – under-thirty – and hungry for career success, with many of my workmates plucked straight out of uni like me. I thought it was cool and aspirational when I started that my manager was only a couple of years older. But by the time I left almost two years later, it had become apparent that having young people in positions of seniority was, in part, a bid to keep payroll costs down. The ergonomic workstations, team outings and alternative milk supply all provided a flimsy plaster over the gaping salary wound most of us felt.

For a year, I tried to juggle four day weeks at the agency alongside a part-time master's program. One night, I found myself at my desk – this time in my room at my flat – driven insane by a week of averaging a daily screentime of fifteen hours. My bedroom was huge, cavernous with high ceilings and a bay window. But it felt more like a matchbox in that moment.

I've always had a habit of biting off more than I can chew, but this was the first time I'd really choked. I'd lost control. I desperately needed a pause, a breath, so I came up with an escape plan: move to Aotea.

In my treehouse office, I spent most days focused on my thesis and the rest working at my new job. A couple of boys that I met through the agency had left to start their own, so I was recruited to work on their growing number of social media clients. It was cruisy – I helped sell a bunch of stuff, from flat-packed beds that promise customers their best night's sleep ever, to protein powder made with bone broth that's supposed to be some miracle cure for both IBS and split-ends. It seemed that there was a huge market online of people looking to fix things about themselves.

I was no different when I found myself at my tiny desk, staring at a pixelated image of the avocado and pear night cream Hannah had told me about. *Manuka honey draws moisture to your skin to help bring a truly ageless visage…Revolutionary Vinanza Grape is a potent antioxidant extract…neutralise the effects of free radical damage that can lead to premature aging.*

I touched a gentle finger to the canyon forming between my brows.

Add to cart.

...

Back when I lived in the city, I paid twenty-five bucks a week to go to Les Mills – a four-story gym where you can do anything from H.I.I.T-style spin classes to Body Balance, a culturally inappropriate hybrid of Pilates, yoga, and Tai-chi that does well to reveal the glaring whiteness of the fitness institution. The gym even has those fancy Dyson hairdryers in the women's changing room, as well as a sauna, both of which I never used.

I suffered from mild embarrassment over the fact that I had become a Les Mills girl. It felt like a cop out to spend so much money to go and exercise in a special-purpose air-conditioned room when I could do the same thing for free at home or outside. But I was neither a competent or confident exerciser, and Les Mills was the only gym nearby with a decent class schedule. I told myself that at least I wasn't paying seventy bucks to almost vomit each week at cross fit like some of my more deluded friends.

I'd joined a gym once before in my final year of high school, after Zach broke up with me to move away for uni. I attended religiously for months, making a weekly ritual of spin class or yoga or even just running laps on the treadmill. This effort petered out the moment we got back together.

I guess I was yearning to gain a similar sense of control over my life when I joined Les Mills all those years later. The chapter of my life that was my undergraduate degree had just closed; I worked in an office for most of the week, friends were moving away, and it seemed that time was flowing faster than I could keep up with. As a result, I developed a hyper-awareness for the ways that time was beginning to effect my body too.

Roxane Gay raises the idea of 'undisciplined bodies' in her memoir *Hunger* (2017). Her reference is in the context of the body mass index (BMI) and the way it is used to measure and "bring a sense of discipline" to overweight bodies in particular (11). Yet, it strikes me that the aging body, particularly that of a woman, is an unruly one too.

Quite often these two notions of a 'lack' of discipline overlap. Terms like 'baby weight' or 'mum thighs' which are used to denigrate the appearance of women, enmesh both age and fatness as things that should be controlled. Of course, women don't necessarily need to have had kids to have these terms used against them, rather they just need to be of an age at which to have kids is expected.

I'd be lying if I claimed that the recent expansion of my thighs and waist weren't part of the symptoms of aging I was seeking to control in my time at Les Mills. It seemed even despite the fact that my thinnish white frame grants me a privileged place in Western body politics, I wasn't exempt from the pressures to discipline my body. Was this symptomatic of my personality? Of my tendency to bite off more than I can chew? Or something much greater?

Of course, there are no gyms on Aotea, so walking became my new form of discipline. The closest track to my house was a convenient thirty-minute round walk that started on the top of the hill between Tryphena and Medlands Beach. I would warm-up by stomping down our ridiculous driveway, which was a couple-hundred metres long, dirt, and so steep it could only be tackled in a four-wheel drive. This was just another inconvenience we had romanticised about our little nest in the trees.

Once at the bottom, I got in my crappy two-door Toyota and drove towards the start of the track. My route always took me past the Puriri Bay boat ramp – a steep slab of barnacle-covered concrete that quickly plummeted into the ocean. Often, I saw lone women using it as a tide-proof swimming spot. They just floated out there, weightless in the middle of the bay.

I wondered how they did it. How were these women not afraid of the sharks or stingrays or potential rogue waves? How could they seem so serene out there? Wading around all alone in the unknown.

...

The night cream arrived in a couple of days; fast like how I hoped to see the lines melt from my forehead when I put it on. I wasn't a hundred percent convinced that this would be the case though, so I ordered the tester size. The slim aluminum tube adorned in a bold italic font sat pretty on the bathroom vanity, where I left it until it finally came time to use it before bed.

All through cooking dinner, eating it, and doing the dishes with Zach, I couldn't stop thinking about popping the freshness seal on the tube and diving face first into Brigit's nana's secret youth elixir. I'd never bought a fancy face thing like this before, so the bubbling anticipation I had to use it came as a surprise. I could barely make it through watching a couple episodes of our TV show before it got the better of me. My ears began to ring as my eyes turned glassy.

"I'm gonna have a shower," I announced to Zach, unravelling his arm from around me and promptly peeling myself from my spot on the couch beside him.

"Okay," he replied without taking his eyes off the TV. I shuffled to the bathroom where I was in and out of the shower in minutes. Stood in front of the basin, wrapped in my towel, and still dripping enough to create a puddle at my feet, I reached tentatively for my new product.

Just as I had been fantasizing about all night, I used the lid to remove the tube's thin seal. A small amount of the cream had burst into view, inviting me to take it. I swiped it up with my index finger and carefully dabbed it on to the various sections of my face. My fingers moved in the shape of a cross – down along my forehead, nose, and chin, before wiping it across both cheeks – as I blessed myself with whatever holy ingredients were in this shit.

Finally, I rubbed it in using both palms, emitting a heavenly scent of olive oil and honey. I took a step back, ready to admire my smooth-faced reflection. Instead, I saw the exact same me staring back, only slightly reddened by the heat of the shower.

...

In *Natural Causes* (2018), Barbara Ehrenreich explains that many of us live on a 'quest for control' over our mortality. This quest was a path that I, like many other women, was put on from a very early age.

I received my first skincare set when I was about eleven, from the nana I no longer speak to. It came in a box covered in tacky branding; italic fonts, shiny silver, and insipid blues – the kind you would see advertised on midday infomercials. The products themselves had an unfamiliar scent, which was down to them being either really expensive or really cheap. It was hard to tell as a fresh face in the big world of skincare.

From memory there was a moisturiser, night cream, cleanser, and toner. Apart from the moisturiser, I didn't know what any of it was. I spent what felt like hours cowered in the bathroom at night, reading the back of each bottle five times over, so careful to do everything correctly. At this age, the fear of what might happen if I put this stuff on my face was yet to be replaced by the fear of what might happen if I don't.

The product that scared me the most was the toner; a tall, opaque bottle, through which you could see a thin liquid, the same wishy-washy blue as the box it came in. When I shook it, tiny bubbles formed on its surface which made me nervous. It also had the strongest smell, like a fragrant chemical peel for your nose. The first time I used it, tentatively smoothing it along my T-zone with a cotton pad, I half-expected to wake up with no face at all.

I can't quite remember why my nana bought it for me, but I do recall receiving it around the time of my first period. If it had come addressed with a card, I'm convinced the words would have read:

Dear Frankie,

Congratulations on growing up. Here's some shit to stop that happening any further.

Love from, a woman that wishes she could do the same

...

When Hannah was on the island, we went on a quest to find a waterfall we'd heard about through some girl's Instagram pics. What we hadn't seen in her perfectly filtered bikini shots was the walk to get there – a virtually vertical track built over the remains of an old tramline. Zach had warned us that it was a steep walk, but we went anyway, determined to get our own photos swimming in front of the sparkling water.

"I think I can hear water!" Hannah yelled excitedly as she transitioned to sliding down the bank on her bum. To my side, I could see only densely packed bush and in front, a seemingly never-ending path of earth. But she was right. Beneath the chatter of birds – tūi, kākā, pīwakawaka – I could hear it. The soft, bubbling sound of running water.

I transitioned to sliding on my bum too. After a while of this, an end to the dirt path appeared about one hundred metres below us. In the clearing I spotted the rounded rocks of a riverbank. Hannah whipped her head around to face me, a gleam of victory in her eyes.

Once at the bottom, we quickly dropped our backpacks and took in the destination. There was a small river in front of us, flowing quickly, rippling over the bigger rocks. It passed over a pile of boulders, creating a small fall, before widening into a huge freshwater pool. Here the water was still, golden green like sea glass, tinging the view of the stones at the bottom. The sun dragged its fingers across the surface, making it glitter like a bottle of one of those liquid body bronzers.

Hannah tip toed across the shallowest part of the river and made a beeline for a giant rock with a lip out over the water. I stood still, mesmerised. For a moment earlier, I thought the trek wasn't going to be worth it.

"I think the waterfall's over there," Hannah called across the water, one hand shielding her eyes from the sun and the other outstretched, pointing towards the far end of the pool. I hopped up on another big rock to get a better view.

The far edge of the pool was shallow, pebbly, but just past it was a wall of boulders. I could see a gap in them where the water was flowing, thick and heavy. There was a gushing sound like that of a wave constantly crashing.

"Should we swim over and get a better look?" I suggested to Hannah, who nodded and headed back towards me.

We stripped down to our togs and searched for an entry spot. Hannah found a suitable rock and immediately leaped, feet-first into the deepest part of the pool. The splash turned the water murky for a moment. I watched as Hannah re-surfaced, plummeted back under, and re-surfaced again, paddling around like a frog that just grew legs. I made my way over to the rock she jumped off and just stood there for a moment, hugging the cool stone with my toes.

When I was ten years old, on a school camp in Canvastown, I ran fearless into the raging Wakamarina river. It was mid-winter, and the cold of it turned my lungs to stone. I desperately tried to inhale as the water pushed back, leaving me breathless and floating down river. I was a good swimmer back then, but it was terror that propelled me back to the shore. Strangely, I don't remember this experience impacting my love for the water much in the years that followed. But nowadays, the sensation often consumes me when I'm about to enter a body of water.

"It's fine to jump off," Hannah called out from the water, sensing my hesitation. "I did touch the bottom but, like, not in a scary way."

I nodded, psyching myself up to jump. *It won't be that cold. It won't be that cold.* Eyes shut; I leapt.

The water caught me, it's cool embrace familiar and soothing as it entered my nose and engulfed my limbs. I let it carry me safely to the bottom, where the slippery riverbed tickled my toes. There was a damp noise in my ears, a whisper, as if the water was trying to tell me something. I listened harder.

Before I could make it out, my body was pulled upwards and suddenly I was above the surface again, splashing and spluttering. The water in my ears evaporated and was replaced again by bird noise. There was the hot touch of the sun on my cheeks. My lungs felt buoyant and full.

"See," I heard Hannah's voice in the distance, "Isn't it gorgeous?"

...

I'd moved to Aotea in search of a slower life, and at first, my newfound beauty regime served that purpose. Applying the cream every night was glamorous and indulgent, a ritual in self-care. I'd slip into bed next to Zach with a face dewy and fragrant.

"You smell nice, like a rich old lady," he joked. I laughed and snuggled closer.

He was right, there was something about the night cream that smelled deliciously mature. When I slathered it on, I felt like a woman who had her shit together – and it was this feeling which kept me coming back to it every night. I still had concentration lines etched into my forehead, or maybe they *were* fading a little. But that was beside the point. No longer were my lines this unruly fact of aging because the night cream routine made me feel disciplined.

In *The Beauty Myth,* Wolf compares modern women's devotion to beauty regimes with the concept of religion. 'The Church of Beauty' as Wolf refers to it, "supplant[s] religious authority as a policing force over women's lives" (86). Rather than praying to be granted immortality in heaven, we pray to be granted an immortal façade through masks and serums and procedures instead. Just like joining at Les Mills or my Station Rock walks, my devotion to the night cream was an effort to control time.

But after a few weeks of waking up to an unchanged me in the mirror my perception of the night cream dulled. It became just another responsibility, a thing to juggle, a chore. The night cream

had become as banal of an activity as putting out the rubbish and, on some nights, without excitement to remind me, I forgot to put it on all together.

But unlike forgetting the bins, neglecting my new skincare routine left me waking up with a dreadful sense of guilt. I catastrophized, thinking to myself, *what if that one night of no cream was the difference between seeing change and not? God forbid, what if my slacking now means I'll wake up with new wrinkles tomorrow?*

The pressure to pursuit a disciplined body had become all-consuming. Once again, like the time in my Wellington flat, the walls of the treehouse felt to be shrinking around me.

...

This was the first time I'd been to the mermaid pool alone. Since being on The Barrier, I'd come here to the southern tip of Kaitoke – the island's furthest stretching beach – a few times with friends. It's a magical place, an island must-see. The large formation of clay-coloured rocks here is underwater half of the time, part of the seabed, but when the tide is out you can clamber out along it. There are dozens of crevices and cracks where pools have formed, big enough for a few crabs or starfish to call home. But one of them, the mermaid pool as locals call it, is big enough for people to swim in.

I enjoyed swimming here because it was calm, predictable, and you could see to the bottom. Though it was much more intimidating one on one, without the sight of others splashing around in it. In the distance, white-crested waves rolled through the channel between the mermaid pool and the nearby Pitokuku island. Every now and then they crashed violently against the rocks, sending salt spray into the air, and my heart racing.

My toes gripped nervously at the rocky edge as I watched the wind lick ripples in the surface. I could see beyond the glare of the sun to the soft sand sitting on the bottom, a few rocks here and there, and a wall of seaweed dancing in the far end. If I focused my gaze carefully, squinting a little, I could make out little fish darting after each other as if they were playing tag.

I tried to focus on the calmness of the pool instead. Crouched down with my weight on my palms, I dipped my feet into the cool water, one at a time, until I was sat down with both legs in. I could feel my body tense as I swirled them around, creating tiny whirlpools. I closed my eyes and

pictured the lone women swimming at the boat ramp. I reminded myself how comfortable they seemed floating out in the ocean. My limbs relaxed slightly. And then, with a sharp inhale and no more time for second-guessing, I pushed myself into the pool.

Contortions

I became a woman the first time I blamed the thickness of my thighs for something. Most of my friends were still prancing around on spindly legs. Unaware. Unburdened by the weight of all this. And it was easy to pick out those like me that were – a few inches taller, a few inches thicker, huddled behind towels in the corner of the changing rooms with blooming hairs in their humid climates. We radiated fear. I thought that maybe if I was smaller, maybe if I weighed less, I could escape my fate a little longer. Stay a girl a moment more.

———————

You throw like a girl! This was the worst insult ever when I was little. I was never the most athletic kid, but when I struggled to stick my palm to boys in games of tag, none of them ever said I *ran like a girl*. So, being told I *threw* like one was the first time that doing something how it was expected of me came with such a negative connotation. I did most things like a girl, and I enjoyed being one, so it sucked to have the boy I had a crush on laugh at me across the field during T-Ball on the basis of my girlhood. What was I doing that was so wrong?

Maybe, being a girl just wasn't as cool as I thought it to be.

———————

My best friend and I are planning a month-long trip to Central America. I announce this to my dad over the phone one day. The first thing he says is, "Don't die in a mudslide."

"A wha–"

"You're great-uncle died in a mudslide in Guatemala back in the nineties. Tragic, although we didn't really know him."

This is the first time I've heard about my great uncle. Dad and I spend a few moments over the phone together trying to find the details of his death. I listen as Dad uses voice-search to Google "Mudslide Guatemala," – he gets results for more than one disaster. He asks his phone again – "Mudslide Guatemala nineties," and again, there seems to have been a lot of these things. Dad begins to calmly spiral.

“So, when are you planning to go? And have you checked when their hurricane season is? God, don’t you girls *dare* get kidnapped.”

———————————

> “The overhand throwing gap, beginning at 4 years of age, is three times the difference of any other motor task, and it just gets bigger across age. By 18, there’s hardly any overlap in the distribution: Nearly every boy by age 15 throws better than the best girl.”
>
> (Jerry Thomas, dean of the College of Education at the University of North Texas in Denton, as quoted by Tamar Haspel for *The Washington Post*, 2012)

———————————

I had just turned thirteen when I watched a 20-year old Cara Delevingne flounce down the runway in a pink and white, candy-striped mini and a gleaming blue push-up bra. She was a Victoria’s Secret Angel, accessorised with knee high socks, a little windmill and brows thicker than her waist. When I watched her strut past Justin Bieber – singing and gawking at her thinness – like he was just another prop, there was only one way I could describe it: powerful.

I wanted to feel powerful too, and so after she left the stage, I opened another tab on my tablet and asked Google: ‘How much does Cara Delevingne weigh’.

———————————

> “The girl of five does not make any use of lateral space. She does not stretch her arm sideward; she does not twist her trunk; she does not move her legs, which remain side by side. All she does in preparation for throwing is to lift her right arm forward to the horizontal and to bend the forearm backward in a pronate position…The ball is released without force, speed, or accurate aim…A boy of the same age, when preparing to throw, stretches his right arm sideward and backward; supinates the forearm; twists, turns and bends his trunk; and moves his right foot backward…The ball leaves the hand with considerable acceleration; it moves towards its goal in a long flat curve.”

(Erwin Strauss, “The Upright Posture”, 1966, pp. 157-158)

I got my restricted driving license at twenty-two. In doing so, I had to hand over the baby blue learners license card I’d been touting around for the last five years. All this time, I’d been pulling out the faded piece of plastic in line at the clubs, or to buy wine at the supermarket, and pretending that I still resembled the seventeen year old in the photo. Reality hit when the yellow card came, slick and shiny, with the new photo of me on it. I should have been ecstatic about finally obtaining this symbol of freedom and independence, but instead, I couldn’t get over how different I looked – tired, wider, with darker hair and facial features that seemed well-worn. I was so disappointed with the fact that I was no longer a girl.

Strauss notes that because the difference between the way that boys and girls throw is found at such a young age, it cannot be an acquired behaviour, or anything to do with the development of the breast. He dismisses weakness as an answer, as then shouldn’t girls be expected to stretch and prepare more to make up for that lack of strength? And so, he comes to a conclusion – that girls must throw different simply *because they are ‘feminine’.*

I can’t sleep without locking the door. My boyfriend reminds me that our only neighbours here are the old couple who own the place and that one whingy ruru. I tell him it’s just a force of habit from the city. A force of habit I try to kick one night while we lie cocooned in tea tree and silver ferns and a twinkling duvet of night sky. It’s enough to lull him to sleep in minutes but something keeps me blinking. The same thing that makes us girls travel to the club bathroom in a pack. The same thing that tells me to walk with my car key gripped between my knuckles like I’m Wolverine. The thing that my boyfriend never has to worry about.

“When de Beauvoir does talk about the woman's bodily being and her physical relation to her surroundings, she tends to focus on the more evident facts of a woman's physiology. She

discusses how women experience the body as a burden, how the hormonal and physiological changes the body undergoes at puberty, during menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious, and claims that these phenomena weigh down the woman's existence by tying her to nature, immanence, and the requirements of the species at the expense of her own individuality."

(Iris Marion Young, "Throwing Like a Girl", 1980, pp. 139)

A friend tells me about her theory that women are more forthcoming to the vaccine than men are, because we're used to being forced to take things. She acts out the role of apathetic woman – shrugs, smiles softly, takes the non-existent pill without first observing its colour. I laugh and say that if Pfizer really wanted to put Bluetooth tracking devices inside me, they would have already done it – with those birth control pills of theirs that I swallow every morning. The same ones that were intended for men, but never made it past clinical trials because of the exact side effects that us ladies barely question.

In the essay, "Throwing Like a Girl" (1980), Iris Marion Young strives to unpack the titular phenomenon beyond Strauss' articulation of a "feminine" difference. To begin, Young clarifies that femininity is "not a mysterious quality or essence which all women have by virtue of their being biologically female", rather, it refers to the "structures and conditions" that determine the "typical situation" of being and living as a woman in a particular society (140). Not all women may adhere to a 'feminine' existence, yet it is the experiences that many women share that generates the prospect of femininity in the first place.

At my first office job, I felt encouraged to dress up in drag. I tucked away my curves into shapeless dresses and boxy blazers and called it 'professionalism'. Because that was what it was, not some quiet form of inequality or anything, just an expectation of formality. At least I've never had to deal with anything serious, like a gender pay gap. In my next job, we even had a woman leading a team. A woman who was critical, abrupt, possessive, competitive, hungry. A

woman with the communication style of a balding man in a dull suit with a beer gut. My team did this…I'm so proud of my team…mine, mine, mine. Sorry. Maybe I meant to say she had the communication style of a red-eyed seagull pining for a beer-battered chip. Anyway, at least we didn't have a gender pay gap at work. It seemed that the world just has a masculinity preference, and I guess I can't really be mad at seagull girl for choosing to contort herself for success.

So what is the "typical situation" of women that Young is referring to? She states that "the culture and society in which the female person dwells defines woman as Other, as the inessential correlate to man" (141). In this explanation of a patriarchal society, men are established as autonomous subjects, a role that women tend to be "culturally and socially denied" (141). Yet, as we know, women exist as humans, and therefore are subjects too. And so Young acknowledges that "the female person who enacts the existence of women in patriarchal society must therefore live a contradiction", existing both as subject and object (141).

"It's not very lady-like to swear."

That's what my dad told me when I started sounding too much like him. A flawless imitation of a mouth immune to the taste of soap. A mouth free to roam the world in ways I'd never come to know. *But Dad, don't you get it? I want to be like you.*

Young raises the fact that 'throwing' is not the only thing that women do differently:

"Women generally are not as open with their bodies as men in their gait and stride. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man's body than is the feminine stride to a woman's. The man typically swings his arms in a more open and loose fashion than does a woman and typically has more up and down rhythm in his step…When simply standing or leaning, men tend to keep their feet further apart than do woman, and we also tend more to keep our hands and arms touching or shielding our bodies." (142)

_____

I have a bad dream about a boy I went to school with and wake up holding myself in a ball. I grip my knees to my chest so tight that I can feel my ribs bending.

_____

It is typical for the way that women move that there is hesitancy to put full trust in their bodies. As a result, they perform tasks half-heartedly, and as Young puts it, “fulfil [their] own prophecy” (144). At the root of this lack of trust is the fact that a feminine existence is rooted in the notion of the body as an object, a fragile object at that. Young suggests that the tendency of women not to fully engage in movement is in part to protect or preserve their bodies, the things which “exist as looked at and acted upon” (149).

_____

When I was little, I was afraid of the dark. I used to tuck myself into the smallest ball and hide my head under the covers. I slowly went dizzy from the lack of oxygen, fueling my fear even further. I truly believed that if I made my self-small enough, the monsters – sharp-toothed and ghoulish – that I imagined hiding in the shadows of my room wouldn’t be able get me. I imagine this is somewhat how my friend Lola felt when she started throwing up everything she ate. And she wasn’t the only one. It was assumed by most that these girls were trying to shrink themselves, contorting their organs into scary shapes in order to resemble some idea of beauty. I’m convinced it wasn’t so vapid. I mean, go ahead, ask any woman and I’m sure they’ll tell you this: there’s no more burning desire for a girl than to feel in control.

_____

Why does a girl throw like a girl? Iris Marion Young concludes that it is because “to open her body in…open extension and bold outward directedness is for a woman to invite objectification” (154). Her body is her greatest source of power and her most terrifying vulnerability. So, to do anything like a girl is a habit of protection. She is well versed in the art of shrinking herself by the time she learns her ABC’s. Throw a ball too hard and she might pull a muscle. Run too fast and she might fall. Walk with her head too high and she may as well have asked for that man in his car to honk

and holler. When she grows up and rides the bus home from work, her boyfriend will be able to spread his thighs wide and unafraid. Meanwhile she must keep up the practice of not being seen. Just cross her legs and hope to live.

Insatiable

See that girl over there? / I want to be just like her. / Fat ass / give a fuck / twerking on my feed like / Miley in her Bangerz era / like a wrecking ball / break the internet / those likes / the comments / an avalanche / of praise / I could only dream. / See

that girl over there? / Sheets tucked / slick-back / pilates girlie / with an aesthetic so fresh / so clean / you could eat off her. / I tell myself maybe / I too / could hit / the reformer and re-form / squeeze / curl / crunch / myself / into a / tight toned ball / a body so good / I'll afford / to be / nothing more.

But I don't take up pilates. / Because some blonde bitch from Byron / who / to clarify / is only a bitch / because I wanna be her / or be with her / I can't tell / but she tells me / and her 20k followers / that she got the six-pack she was born with / from surfing. / So I spend 200 bucks on a wettie / and try to erase my mind / of AnnaSophia Robb with one arm / because I wanna be just like this girl / or "that girl" / who instead of sea shells she sells / skinny tea / string bikinis / and herself / #ad.

And I eat it up. / Along with all the others / in their comments / who are starving / to know / *where's the dress from babe*? / *which shade do you recommend*? / all scrolling / searching / scamming / ourselves into delusion / into thinking / that as the sum of many muses / I will somehow / become / an individual. / Instead of just / another hungry girl / destined / to consume / until my head / heart / and phone / storage is full.

Rule of Thirds

Cinamin was on a quest to lucid dream. She'd read somewhere that keeping record of your dreams helped you to remember them better, which in turn, increased your awareness while you were in them. So she started to keep a dream journal – a bent up soft-cover notebook which she tucked into the nook of her bedside table, along with a biro pen, a Bic lighter, her iPad, some hair ties wrapped tight in strands of her hair, and a half emptied blister pack of paracetamol.

I'd slept over at Cinamin's house the night before and so I woke up that morning on a mattress on her bedroom floor. There I lay, on my side, close to the carpet, while Cin was sat up in her single bed, cross-legged and hunched over her journal.

As she wrote down her dreams, I watched the early sun dance on the gaudy print that wrapped her walls – a textured cream with muddy brown and yellow spirals. It was like the wallpaper equivalent of those retro cook books, the ones with illustrated recipes of weird fruit-meat combos and ungodly scenes of salads bobbing in jelly – gross, but in a cool way.

"I don't write heaps," she told me, "Just enough so that I can remember."

Cinamin's fixation on dreams wasn't new – we sent each other messages and called to talk about our dreams all the time – but I didn't really get the lucid part, the desire to be active and able to change the course of your dreams. For me, the pleasure of dreaming came from the feeling that I was floating, third-person like, through rose-tinted memories of things that never really happened. This lack of agency brought me a certain kind of freedom, the same one I remember from being a child who couldn't tell the time.

But Tom thought lucid dreaming was cool. Shaggy-haired, New-Balance-wearing, pretty much legally blind and smarter-than-any-and-every-other-boy-we-knew Tom, told us that he had already dreamt lucidly on multiple occasions. He thought it was exciting, the next big thing, a sign of a big brain or something. So, naturally, I guess, Cinamin and I were now both lucid dreaming enthusiasts too.

...

I had a dream that you had a huge bag (as big as u) of those little fish things that you get when you get sushi that have soy sauce in them but they were all empty, then u put the bag on the floor of my room and got out your phone to play a game about little sushi things

...

We met for the first time in Starbucks on Trafalgar Street. To be more specific, we met in the café's strange upstairs seating area, which operated much like an overflow carpark in the way that it made room for extra patrons, while also inviting drug dealers, loiterers, and people like us who just needed a good spot to meet.

When I arrived, Cinamin was already sitting in the corner in a worn-out lounge chair, feet splayed out, knees together, and looking down at her phone. I recognised her straight away – honey-coloured hair, straight and down to her bum, pale pink skin, the kind that got flushed easily, and a two-toned blue Fila jumper. I'd seen it all before, in her photos that I'd reblogged on Tumblr.

That's where we'd really met, on the internet under the guise of our Tumblr blog names. Cinamin's was methlake, an example of the classic tactic of combining two words, one extremely visceral, like meth, and one with little impact, like lake, to create an edgy persona. She even had a visitor counter on her blog that told you how many "methbabies" were currently viewing.

My blog name was balevolent, which I thought was a sharp-witted and whimsical mash up of the words benevolent and malevolent, a symbolic meeting of good and evil. In reality, it was just a made-up word that meant nothing.

Online, methlake had something like fifteen thousand followers. She posted faceless photos of herself laying on grass in a tennis skirt or a foggy view from her bedroom window, and racked up thousands of notes in the process. She was Tumblr famous.

In real life, here in the Starbucks on Trafalgar Street, Cinamin was a girl I would never have noticed if I wasn't looking for her. She had an oval face, with, frankly, featureless features. Her nose was merely a nose and her eyes were merely eyes and her lips were merely lips in a way that would make her hard to spot in a crowd. She was unassuming, a fantastic undercover cop.

As I approached Cinamin, she rose from her phone and smiled, a toothless smile that was probably better described as the pushing up of both her cheeks. It was a habit I supposed she'd formed from trying to hide her braces.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," I said back.

...

balevolent asked:

Dude, I think I saw you at school today? I smiled at you haha. x

methlake answered:

Yeah I think so, by the new gym? c: x

balevolent asked:

Yeah! You have a yellow bag ae? x

methlake answered:

I do hah, that's the only way people recognise me :p x

...

Where and when did I first meet Tom? I honestly can't remember. I guess I'll start with some of the things I *can* remember:

1. He went to a different school – a private, co-ed Christian school called Garin College. Cinamin and I went to the all-girls school in town, but knew some Garin kids from parties. Not many of them were actually religious, especially not Tom.

2. He was an admin of a popular meme page on Facebook.

3. His hair was a shade of gingery brown that when the sun hit it on the right angle, used to shimmer gold and bronze.

4. He was smart, but he knew that. I often used to ask him for his advice about school work just for an excuse to talk. Once, he told me that at Garin they had a compulsory religious studies class, that was, “Stupid, but really easy to get excellence credits in.” I was jealous of this.

5. Tom and his dad made home brew together in their garage. He used to bring it to parties in this banged up, electric blue, stainless-steel drink bottle. It smelled and tasted like gasoline. We nicknamed it liquid fire for the way it burnt your throat as if you’d swallowed a lit match along with it.

6. His mum was strict and he only ever called her by her first name, although I can’t remember what it was, just the way it used to hang off his tongue like a foul taste.

7. He played the drums and back then I played the drums too, which I of course took as one of many cosmic signs that our souls were entangled and we were meant to be together or something.

...

My memories of our house down the driveway exist in cool coffee and sepia tones – the carpet, the walls, the couches, all brown, brown, brown. The kitchen colours contrasted slightly, with deep blue cupboards and speckled grey countertops, but it was all the same really – dark.

The only exception to this was mine and my little sister’s bedrooms. “What colour do you girls’ want?” my dad fanned out a few colour charts and offered them to Charli and I like dollar mixtures. After sharing a bunk bed for a few years, we were both itching for the independence of our own rooms. My sister chose an eggshell blue, the colour that I too wanted, but to be different for different’s sake, I chose a rich lilac instead.

Dad painted our bedrooms along with my parents' right before we moved in, so the walls still sung of fresh fumes when I slept there for the first time. To this day, the smell of new paint makes me feel the ticklish excitement of adolescence.

My mum didn't move with us at first. Instead she remained at our flat above the café my parents operated, wanting to stay, "Close to the business," while she drove it into the ground. So for a while, we were three – Dad, Charli, and me – and, at first, distracted from her absence by the newness of our house down the driveway.

While Charli and I fussed over how to decorate our new rooms, Dad kept busy updating the shower head, putting up a floating shelf in the kitchen and installing black-out curtains for the lounge. He extended the fence to wrap around the front door, shielding a small courtyard area from the view of the shared driveway and making it impossible to reach the front door of our house without knowing the code for the newly installed gate.

But Dad lost steam at some point. Many of his projects remained half-finished for as long as we lived there, like the faulty rangehood that he took down with the intention to replace it. For years, there was a gaping rangehood-shaped space on the wall above the stove, marked by lines of steam and grease.

Whenever I dreamed a dream of home, it looked so different – sun-drenched with endless ceilings and a front door the size of our garage. But this wasn't the reality of it when I first invited Cinamin over to stay the night.

"Dad," I called into the lounge, over the blaring telly, "Is it alright if me and Cinamin go for a walk?"

"Sure honey," my dad replied from the couch, eyes fixed on the plasma screen. He spent most of his time here when we lived at this house, with the curtains drawn and the lights dimmed low enough that they struggled to mop up the shadows.

Back in my purple room, Cinamin and I giddily grabbed her new Adidas backpack and packed it with one thing – her iPad. We were fourteen, with no money and phone cameras that took photos so pixelated that they looked more like collages, so the iPad was considered our most prized

possession. With it, we headed out into the twilight, and down towards the end of my street. Cars began turning their headlights on while the sky blushed violet above us.

As a whole, my street was pretty unremarkable, the houses mostly weatherboard, the concrete cracked and covered in pale green lichens, but at one end stood a cool old church. It was white, framed in emerald bushes, and had stain-glassed windows that were coloured rich like boiled candy. We stopped at the path that spun across it's lawn and towards the stairs that led up to the door. Cinamin swung her bag off her back and unzipped the iPad.

"Maybe stand over there," she directed me around with a soft wave of her hand, her face hidden behind the monstrosity that was the iPad. I shuffled over in my curated outfit – a navy blue tennis skirt and a white bomber jacket – trying to feel comfortable as the centrepiece of what would likely be her next Tumblr upload.

"Okay, perfect." She praised, looking at me through the view of the iPad camera while I stood on the front lawn of the church. I prepared for the photo taking to begin by fixing my posture and placing my hands neatly over my face.

If you Google the word *aesthetic,* you'll be told that it's an adjective which means to be "concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty", and a noun that refers to "a set of principles underlying the work of a particular artist or artistic movement". But to me, to us, aesthetic was the swollen feeling behind our eyes and in our chests that came with watching clouds turn pink or the purpling of a bruised knee or a silver Nike swoosh on a pitch black t-shirt.

Aesthetic was the chase for belonging, the yearning to live a life constantly worthy of a photo, lives that weren't really ours, but which we went to great lengths to make a reality. Sometimes, the easiest way to do that was to try and hide what wasn't.

Cinamin took heaps of photos of me that night. I put my hands over my face for most of them. There's also one's where I'm walking away from the camera, flowing hair granting me faceless, or in which I'm far enough away from the lens that my undesirable bits are shrouded to a blur.

We eventually returned home and sat together on my bed as Cinamin edited the photos on the iPad. I watched her fingers dial up the saturation, harshen the shadows or dim the brightness, the colours on the screen throbbing, otherworldly, dreamlike.

...

I had weird dream last night hahaha can't wait to tell you bout it

I had a dream about TOM wearing fat pants lmoa

...

It didn't take long for us to form a trio of sorts – Tom, Cin and me. We bonded over the fact that we all knew who Quentin Tarantino was, enjoyed music that didn't feature on The Edge Top 40, and were better than everyone because of such things.

Tom was dorky, and camp enough that mine and Cinamin's parents were never worried about us having sleepovers with him. At the first one we sprawled across the Persian rug in the living room of Cinamin's dad's house. They didn't have a TV, so the three of us huddled around Cin's iPad to watch things on YouTube.

"Should we crack into this, then?" Tom dangled a fresh batch of liquid fire beside his face, grinning.

We had nothing to mix it with, so we took turns swigging the brew straight from the bottle. Each time the drink bottle made its way back to me, I held my breath, closed my eyes, put the cool stainless steel to my lips, and threw it back, letting the alcohol slide neatly down my throat. Then I waited with eyes still closed for the burn. The first few times, my throat sizzled, making me grimace and the others laugh. Then, after a while, the fire with each sip stopped. Instead, the warmth begun to grow in my tummy.

We three spent hours talking – romanticising each other's intellectuality, which sure, may have been more than most of the other Year 10 kids we knew, but nonetheless, we were blind to the fact that we still possessed the minds of children.

"You do know it's supposed to be about the male gaze, right?"

"I feel like while many people claim to be empathetic, they aren't truly you know?"

“You know how meme pages post like ghetto memes that have been edited and they are ironic and that’s the funny part? Well now it’s like the ‘proper’ memes themselves that have become shit and not funny, but they are funny because that’s the ironic part and that’s post-post-ironic meme culture.”

Eventually it got late enough that the alcohol had done its job, leaving us dozy on the carpet with the iPad still glowing on ten-percent battery. I could hear Cinamin’s soft, nasally breaths coming from the other side of Tom, who I peeked at through half-shut eyes, laying inches from me. His glasses were folded and placed on the ground above his head and I realised I’d never seen him glasses-less before. His eyelashes were the same sparkling ginger brown as the hair on his head. Seeing them bare like that made his face look softer.

As my mind went black I thought about one thing – how much I wanted to be closer.

...

“I think that when you are younger the camera is like a friend and you can go places and feel like you're with someone, like you have a companion. And also it's a license and it makes you feel you have a right to walk around and you are doing something. I think what happens is that you forget you're there. It's not like you are hiding but you forget, you are just looking so much...”

(Annie Leibovitz)

...

Cinamin and I had made a habit of escaping at night. We inched the ranch slider open, careful not to wake the sleeping giant in the other room, then shimmied through the gap and pulled it softly closed after us. We half-flew down the concrete stairs, each step carefully plotted as not to make a whisper, and out on to the road, unheard and unseen.

The first time we made it this far, we walked side-by-side in silence for a few minutes. The street that Cin and her dad lived on was never busy during the day, and at night, it was empty apart from us – two girls dawdling in the middle of the road. The damp tarmac sparkled under the street lamps. All I could hear was the pit-pat of our New Balance’s hitting the ground and blood rushing

in my ears. We got to an intersection, which marked the end of Cin's street and the beginning of another. We stopped, looked for cars, then looked at each other, grinning. We'd done it. We'd actually snuck out.

Cinamin's dad was lovely; a real estate agent with a neon orange car and a strange habit of keeping all his loose change in a waist-high vase in their living room – the 'money pot' we called it. She'd moved to Nelson to live with him at the start of college, leaving her mum and younger sister in Westport. Cinamin's dad didn't seem to ask her too many questions and was often away for work or for women. When he was home, he cooked us dinner and let us eat it in Cin's room, leaving us there unbothered all night.

My experience with my dad was different – sometimes I felt crushed under the weight of his love. The questions, the worry, the hounding requests to spend time with him. Sneaking out of my house was never an option. The windows had security locks so they only opened so wide and Dad was an insomniac, up late at night watching TV near the door. Even if I did make it out of the house undetected, there was the 2-metre tall fence with a pin-code door that he built – for what? Privacy? Security? Keeping things out? Or keeping me in? I used to joke to myself that I was like Rapunzel in her tower.

In hindsight, if I'd just asked, my dad would probably have let me go hang out at these boys' houses, even stayed up to give me a ride home. This was the case less than a year later. But at that age, the secrecy was most of the fun.

That night we had snuck out of Cinamin's house for the first time so that we could go to a 'drinks' that a Year 11 boy was hosting while his parents were away. He lived only a five minute walk away from my place, but it took us over an hour to trek there from Cinamin's. It must have already been past midnight when we finally arrived at the rainbow house, skin flushed from stomping through the cold.

Dreams are made up of our memories, and sometimes we get them confused: "For some people, old dreams can feel like real memories and this experience is referred to as 'dream-reality confusion'."[i] See, I can't tell if the luminous sheen over this night's details is due to it being soaked in alcohol, or the fact that, maybe, I've forgotten more than I'm willing to admit. Is it simply the fact that I just dreamt it up in the first place?

I distinctly remember each room in this boy's house being a different colour – starting with a brilliant cream kitchen and moving into a rosy pink dining room. The living room was cavernous, and painted highlighter green. The boys, a year older than us, who we thought were cool but didn't really know, were lined up on the couches that hugged the walls. They smiled and invited us in with warm conversation, like we'd always known each other. A few girls we were friends with were there too, glad that we had finally made it. I remember the rest in hot flashes – a spa pool, a bottle of Kristoff left on the bench, laughter, a long walk home. Then I have no memory of ever going there again.

...

"Users spoke of the platform feeling disconnected from the "real world"—no President would ever try to shape world events with a Tumblr post." (Lesko)

...

I can't wait to tell u my whole dream because it was off the rails lolol next time we call also these are notes to help me remember: field/rowers/cheerleading, postie +/ella/ruby/pond/fast escalator, Molly M/teacher/plants/mean, Thomas/Russell brand/gun??, restaurant/wharf/geography (Thomas)/shells/conservation guy, running over whales and water and stuff, waitress/lettuce/reward/Christian alcohol, Greg guy/calling/school/anri and saph KKK lol

...

Intensity is a word that comes to mind when I reflect on my friendship with Cinamin. We told each other everything to the point that it sometimes felt that her thoughts lived in my mind in the form of a little house. If I needed her opinion, I could just as well enter my own brain, knock politely on the door and ask, 'what would Cinamin do?'

Whenever we were apart, I used to scribe my thoughts to her, straight into my phone. Raw, unfiltered thought-to-text. I told her all my feelings before even giving myself a chance to feel them first. And it seemed she did the same. Perhaps this constant exchange of information was what really binded us together.

"I think I'm obsessed with Tom," I confessed to her one morning in my bed. The idea was so new to me, that I recoiled slightly when I said it, unsure if it was even true. She looked at me blankly for

a moment, hair wispy and slept-in. I noticed that her blonde head looked cool against my mint duvet and purple walls and thought about taking a photo.

“Yeah, that’s fair enough,” she said flatly, hoisting the covers up over her shoulders. “Tom is pretty cool I guess.”

...

Things I reblogged on Tumblr in 2015:

Britney Spears and a birthday cake / girl on beach holds two peaches over her nipples / a mountain blanketed in cloud against a bubble-gum sky / two white kittens, one labelled me, one labelled you, there’s a paw on one’s face that is labelled ‘my love and affection’ / Keith Haring / GIF of John Lennon and Yoko Ono with the caption “This is an alternate to violence…it is to stay in bed and grow your hair.” / line drawing of a woman / a parrot pictured proudly next to a painting she made / young Miley Cyrus smiles while holding up two *Hannah Montana: The Movie* DVD’s / an old school picture tile slider with a naked woman in fragments / “All our generation wants is a small apartment and a spouse that loves them back.” / a girl wearing white against a deep blue sky, her head is a cloud.

...

I’d been trying to lucid dream for months already when Tom invited me to the abandoned house. It belonged to his friend Joseph’s family, and it was the last weekend before it was going to be demolished to make way for a new build. For months, it had been existing as their son’s secret party den.

“Did you bring any more candles?” Tom greeted us at the sliding door, pushing his glasses up his nose as he struggled to keep the door on its track. Tom had asked me to bring some friends with me to make the ratio better, and with Cinamin out of town, I brought Vic and Hayley, somehow convincing them that it would be fun to meet some new boys. Tom had with him Joseph of course, and their other friend, Ewen.

“Sure did,” I confirmed, leading us girls through the door, our arms loaded with pillows and blankets and bags. The place reeked of alcohol and mould. What was left of the walls were

smashed up and graffitied. There was a ratty old pool table in one room and some manky couches in another. Everything was lit only by some lantern torches and a few wonky candles. I turned back to see the reactions of the girls, who were both looking around, wide-eyed.

Once we'd sat our things down, Tom and I did intros. It seemed everyone kind of knew each other already in some way. Ewen, a tall boy who looked like a sheep, knew Hayley from primary school. I'd actually met Joseph before at a Garin party. He was lanky and dark-haired, but was in no way tall, dark, and handsome. I looked at my friends – Hayley, blonde, petite and sparkling, and Vic, tall with luscious lashes and vibrant eyes – and thought, *shit, what have I delivered them?*

I still couldn't believe Vic's mum had dropped us off here – in a semi-rural area with no street lamps – knowing full well that we were about to walk up that driveway to a soon-to-be-demolished house and get raging drunk with some boys. Victoria's dad would kill her, and her mum, if he knew what she got up to. But it seemed Vic's mum got a real kick out of helping her do it all under his nose.

"See you in the morning girls," she chirped as we got out of the car. "Have fun!"

Another dream-reality confusion: Scrumpy, truth or dare, liquid fire, Hayley kissing Ewen. Then the candles are out, more liquid fire, a dead speaker. Party over. Vic, Hayley and I had brought one big blanket between us, so while they were up on the couch, I huddled underneath what draped on to the ground below. I gazed longingly over at the other couch, where Tom was passed out cold. I was freezing. Sleep would come and go as the motion of my own shivering woke me up. The constant toing and froing in and out of consciousness turned me delusional, waking me from one dream before plunging me into the next.

One such dream started with a whisper in the dark. "Hey," it said. I blinked my eyes open to see nothing but black. "Are you cold?" the voice asked. This time I recognised it as Joseph's.

"Uh, yeah," I muttered back, "It's pretty cold."

"Come here then," he said as if I should have already known what he would say. I heard the swish of him ripping open his sleeping bag and felt my body move towards him. Stop, Frankie. This is your chance. You're in a dream. You're in a dream. Think lucid, lucid, lucid.

The next morning I woke up in Joseph's sleeping bag with his arm crushing my ribs like a dead weight. Wrong boy. Was this what it's like to lucid dream?

...

"The more you do it, the more it gets ingrained into your head." (Ingersoll, et al.)

...

I remember/I had a dream that my dad set himself on fire. I remember/I had a dream that my mum swept away the smoke under the rug in the lounge and hoped to god that no one would notice the smell of a burning heart seeping into our carpet. I remember/I had a dream that we got on with it. Wiped the bench, changed our sheets, boiled the jug, started again like I hadn't been reusing yoghurt containers for a lunchbox, ignoring the fact that there had only just been a pot of pumpkin soup, made from scratch, left to fester on the stove. I remember the day Mum crashed the Swift. I had a dream that I helped pay bills. I remember a dream where a shark ate my mum and left her as only a talking head in a wheelchair – all talk, talk, talk.

...

In the dark it was hard to tell that my room was purple. The walls and my desk and my drawers and my plants became one murky colourless colour. A shadow that had no beginning or end. This is what it looked like at three a.m. on a school night, when Tom told me he was secretly in love with Cinamin. I stared at my phone for a few minutes, trying to bend the black pixels of her name with my mind so they spelled out mine instead. I made my ears ring from the effort, but the letters of her name stayed firm. That same night I reblogged three things on Tumblr: a flash-photo of a bowl of silver beet with rainbow coloured stalks, a screenshot of feet on a dashboard with the words 'A Film by QUENTIN TARANTINO' over top, a text post that said 'highlight of my day'.

...

I had a dream that I was swimming across to haulashore from the road but haulashore was like a huge bay with a city and further away and I was swimming across there with a pod of dolphins and there was a shark chasing us and its scary because I have different versions of the same dream !!!! plus all the flags of the world were being flown by the road

I had a dream tom was strangling me

...

Where do you go when you want to be someone else? For us the answer was Savemart – the huge second-hand clothing warehouse at the back of the industrial area near my house. Like most of its other franchised locations, Nelson's Savemart was in a building painted with the brand's colours – off-white walls with a once-red roof washed pink by the sun.

Inside were rows and rows of racks, just bulging with clothes that had once belonged to other people. Above us were these big industrial lights, the kind they have in a supermarket, that did nothing to actually light the place. It seemed they were permanently dimmed by congealed layers of dust. The air had a distinct musty smell, that quickly filled our lungs on entry – a mixture of moth balls, stale cologne and the sweat of strangers.

"I'll take this end," I announced to Cinamin as we approached our first rack. She nodded and walked to the other side. We began our routine of working our way towards each other, threading our fingers through the flimsy hangers in search of what we were looking for. It was hard not to think of the past lives of the clothes as I touched them – a floral dress once worn to her dream job interview, a crass slogan tee that probably made everyone at the pub laugh when he wore it – sometimes it felt like we were rummaging through alternative identities rather than used t-shirts.

After we made it through both the women's and men's sections, we finally moved to the kid's clothes. This was our holy grail when it came to a good find. It was where we scored the best ironic baby tees, with things like The Care Bears or Yu-Gi-Oh! on them, the kind that Tom found funny, as well as cool fitted sportswear with nineties style sticker logos. My fingers were working overtime as they weaved through tiny zip-up jumpers and baby pyjamas in an attempt to strike gold. I heard the squeal of Cinamin shoving back a bunch of hangers and turned to see her pulling something out.

"What about this one?" She thrusted towards me what looked like a metallic baseball tee, with a double-layered, dark mesh torso and silver arms. The sleeves and neckline were lined with an interesting striped cuff but the main event, was the glimmering silver Nike swoosh stuck brazenly on its chest. This kind of shouty, branded sportswear was all over the girls we saw on our Tumblr

feeds. But this one was different, cooler even, than what I needed to recreate the images I'd been reblogging.

"Woah," I awed at the intergalactic sports-bunny piece, thinking about who I could pretend to be while wearing it.

...

Heartbreak is:

The weight of a pool's worth of water when you touch the bottom of the deep end / the colour blue / the feeling of waking up in a different bed or falling off your bike / where am I? / what's next? / it's like wearing broken headphones or being hungry and having nothing to eat / it's nothing and everything all at once / a stubbed toe / a dull ache / burning yourself on the stove / searing hot / unavoidable / unbearable / even though they tell you 'just run cold water over it'.

...

Of all the colours, green has the most shades visible to the naked human eye. Days spent down at the river were always a reminder of this – dark green trees, burnt green flax, green-green grass and even slimy green algae responsible for the piss green waters of the Maitai. Cinamin and I laid amongst all this green, in the middle of the riverside field on shoddy old bath towels, with a pile of supermarket snacks between us. Hummus, bread, strawberries. We picked at them to our hearts' content.

The summer sun beamed down on our bellies, full force. Cinamin rolled over to let her back take the brunt of it instead.

"I can't get over how nice it is today," she chirped, reaching over to grab a strawberry from the punnet. I squinted past the arm I had splayed over my face, watching her chubby fingers spin the strawberry leaves into something capable of being gripped.

"Totally," I replied.

Knowing that Tom was in love with Cinamin made me look at her differently. Flat hair now silky. Easily flushed skin now a pretty peach tone. Tom's feelings had transformed her featureless features into somewhat of a minimalist vision. I wished for them.

"Okay, I think I'm ready to get in the water," Cinamin announced, pushing herself up off of her stomach and on to her feet. Her hair fell in front of her face as she brushed herself of loose blades of grass. I noticed an imprint of the towel's fabric, pink on her stomach. "You coming?"

"In a minute," I told her, rolling over to heat my backside first. "I'll meet you in there." And with that she wandered off towards the river. I watched her petite frame, smaller and firmer than my own, as she scaled down the bank.

This was one of the last times we'd spend a day like this together. Months later, under the protection of the fact that I was in love with someone new, Cinamin would admit to me that her and Tom had gotten together. Many times. Including that night on the floor of her dad's lounge while I snored gently beside them, dreaming that I was in her position.

...

i don't think I've ever had a sad dream

i think my dreams are how I want life to be

Eggs Bene

I always wanted to work. As kids, me and my little sister, Charli would often play games where we had jobs or owned businesses. We transformed my bedroom window into a takeaway shop by placing a step-stool outside of it, on which earlier, we'd graffitied a limited edition menu. We printed our own money using coloured card and glitter pens, and then in true baby capitalist fashion, swapped it for 'cupcakes' made from mud and grass or 'coffees' mixed with dandelions.

I can remember that for a while, I really wanted my first job to be at a supermarket. I think it was a dream job heavily influenced by the toy checkout that my grandparents had. It came with a conveyor belt, a cash register, a product scanner that beeped like the real ones, various plastic food items and of course, pretend money.

Charli and I used to fight over who would have to play the customer and who would get to pretend to be working behind the counter. It seems strange, looking back, that being the checkout chic was the prized role in this scenario. What was it about her that we were so eager to embody? Was it because she was the one who at the end of the game, ended up with all the money? I guess we didn't have the knowledge yet to understand the concept of wages. I also think about how as kids, we tend to romanticise the idea of being a grown-up. And what is quintessentially grown up? Working, of course.

The main grown-ups in my life, my parents, owned and operated a café from when I was in my final year of primary school, to some time in my first year of College. Well actually, my Dad did most of the owning – using money from his job as a painter-decorator to fund the café's cashflow – and my Mum did most of the operating – cooking, catering, hiring shitty staff, and failing to pay the bills.

The café meant that I started working as young as eleven. I earned cash from the register for helping do the afternoon pack downs, wash dishes, piece together finger food for the catering events, and eventually working in the front-of-house, using a real cash register. Working in a hospitality environment at such a young age meant that I developed a lot of key life skills – efficient communication, multi-tasking, how to carry two plates in one arm – earlier than a majority of kids did.

I loved working, mostly because it gave me a chance to exist in an adult space for once. It was different from attending school or holiday programmes, where there was an obvious gap between the adults and us kids. The adults I worked and served at the café treated me differently – in a way that made me feel grown up, which made me feel important.

But the café came to an end around the same time as my first year at College. As a kid, I recognised that it had begun as an act of love from my dad to my mum. It was something she really wanted after having owned one back in the nineties and giving it up after I was born and so, Dad found a spot for lease and got to work on making Mum's dreams come true.

I lost him for months when he was building the café. On the nights that Mum would take Charli and I down to visit and bring Dad dinner, we'd form a makeshift dining area using saw horses and paint buckets and sit chomping down on cheeseburgers or kebabs. It's strange because I remember these nights fondly, the excitement of seeing my dad and his proud smile when I told him what was happening at school. What's missing from these memories though is how tired his eyes were, or the fact that he had a pillow and a blanket set up in the back of his van.

Among other factors, the café's demise came with the decaying strength of my parents' marriage. There was a lot I didn't know about their relationship, but one thing I was certain of was that my dad hated liars – and my mum was one. So when her office, tucked in between the walk-in chiller and the dry goods, began piling up with notices of overdue payments and overdrawn accounts, it was no surprise she pretended to my dad that they didn't exist. In the end, Mum filed for bankruptcy and sunk Dad's credit rating with her.

If I'm going to be honest, a lot of the hard things in my life resulted from this long story told short. Yet if I had the choice to go back and stop my parents from starting the café, I wouldn't. Because being a hospo kid was my early ticket into the workforce. And working has in many ways, been my identity all my life.

...

My first job after the collapse of the café was at a popular Japanese restaurant in town. I was desperate for a job. I hated asking my parents for money all the time, just so that I could afford the stupid shit that fifteen year olds need money for – like rummaging the sale racks at Glasson's or buying seven-dollar iced chocolates.

I sulked around the house about how hard it was to find a job as a younger teenage girl. I was yet to gain much experience or lose my baby face – which were both important prerequisites for most jobs. Some of my friends were now working at supermarkets or doing odd cleaning and babysitting work, but my parents didn't have any friends with little kids, and Nelson only needed so many checkout girls.

Dad was friends with the owner of a sushi restaurant – a gentle Japanese man named Masao – and so he called in a favour to get me a job there. On my first shift, Masao's wife, Shiko greeted me at the door.

"Frankie!" She called across the room, recognising me from all the times my family had come here for dinner. Physically, Shiko took up hardly any space, but her energy was almost too big for the intimate restaurant. She had this gigantic grin, complete with crooked teeth, that I couldn't help but reflect back to her every time I saw her.

"Welcome. Welcome. In here." She beckoned me through the front of the restaurant, past immaculately set tables and a handful of early diners, and over towards a door frame shrouded in a red curtain. She pulled the fabric aside to reveal a box-like kitchen, all stainless-steel, and full of busy men.

At the far wall sat a dozen gas hobs and a deep fryer, where two chefs seared various meats, boiled edamame, and fried the tempura in unison. Beside them was a tall fridge with a glass door, and stacked high inside were rows and rows of pre-prepared sushi rolls. Masao, a burly man, was working on the neighbouring bench, next to a massive plastic bowl of sushi rice. He stood there, methodically gripping fistfuls of the stuff and flattening it swiftly on to sheets of seaweed. In front of him were plastic containers brimming with finely cut vegetables that he gently selected pieces from to then lay down on the bed of rice.

"Masao!" Shiko called over the sounds of crackling pans and whirring rangehoods. Masao turned his head, looked at Shiko and I blankly, and then smiled.

"Ah, Frankie." He said, wiping his large hands on his apron as he made his way over to us. Instead of squeezing past the busy chefs he walked the long way around the centre island, where there were stylish platters stacked high with various fried things and little bowls of syrupy dipping sauces, ready and waiting to be taken out to a lucky diner. Masao greeted me with a brief hand

shake and a nod. Having handed me over, Shiko took the food from the bench and grinned goodbye, before exiting back through the curtain and into the restaurant.

After a brief introduction to the other kitchen staff, Masao turned me around to my work station – the sink. Masao was a man of little words, so my induction was short and sweet. It covered how to turn the dishwasher on by closing it, how to know it was done by looking at the green light on the front, and where everything belonged once they were clean. I was told that pans and knives were to be handwashed only and that there was one dishwasher tray that fit the big platters in the best. Then, I was left to do my job.

For the next three hours I grabbed dishes from the bench on my right, plunged them into the sink, scrubbed any food from them, and then placed them on the rack to my right. Then, once this was full, I slid it carefully into the commercial dishwasher, which was forever spewing out hot steam. I loaded a new rack up as I waited for the wash cycle to finish. Then put the fresh stuff away before loading it up again.

Load. Unload. Load. Unload. It was monotonous work, or meditational, depending on how you want to look at it. Occasionally, Shiko or one of the other waitresses would flutter through the curtain and neatly discard what they had cleared from the tables. Or one of the chefs would come to me to clear their work station.

“Hot pan,” he would announce, placing a sizzling cast iron gently on the metal bench beside the sink. “Very hot,” he’d reiterate. The men’s warnings to me of things that were hot or sharp were the only times that they spoke English, the rest of the time they used Japanese. I liked the way I never knew what was going on outside of my little corner of the kitchen. I was content with being an outsider.

For weeks I’d come into the restaurant on Friday or Saturday nights, sometimes both, and do the dishes. I was a dish girl, which was more than most of my friends could say. I enjoyed doing the dishes, it was simple, and gratifying to begin my shift with a tall stack of dirty plates and slowly work towards having a clear bench. I felt purposeful, but part of me did begin to yearn for something a little more challenging.

Then one slow night in the restaurant, with little dishes to keep me busy, Masao beckoned me over to his work station – the sushi bench.

He unfurled the cling film from a pre-prepared sushi roll, and silently demonstrated how to cut it into eight even pieces. With swift precision, he first cut it in half, then in half again, and then in half again, revealing the roll to be filled with crispy tempura prawns. Then Masao reached for a long platter from the shelf above him, and neatly arranged the sushi on it like fallen dominoes. For the final touch, he grabbed a sauce bottle full of Kewpie mayo and delicately drizzled it across the top like calligraphy ink. He nudged the plate towards me to observe.

“Now your turn.”

I made a clumsy first attempt at replicating Masao’s meticulous movements – the results of decades of hard training and practice. But apparently it was good enough, and so then I learned how to prepare the edamame by dunking them in a boiling pot of water using a mesh strainer, and a few other simple tasks. Just like that, it seemed I was no longer just the dish girl – I was now also a kitchen assistant. I remember on the car ride home that night, excitedly telling my dad about my new responsibilities. He raised his eyebrows, telling me that traditionally only men get to be sushi chefs.

“It’s a pretty big deal that you got to touch the sushi at all.”

Another night, when the team were down a waitress, they gave me a go out the front. I got a fun little half-apron and a notepad, accessories of the job, and Shiko let me shadow her through the process of completing orders, which included calling the order out to the kitchen staff before putting the ticket down.

“One times prawn roll, one times avocado roll and one tempura vege.” Shiko yelled out loud above the sounds of the kitchen.

“Hai!” the men chorused back. I was nervous when it came my turn to do this, but when the chefs all called back to me like that, it was like a wave of validation. I didn’t feel like an outsider anymore, I was beginning to feel like I belonged.

I had spent most of my shift manning the dish station on one Saturday night, when Masao handed me my usual take home dinner – a flimsy plastic container of assorted sushi – and told me they didn’t need me to come back next week.

“Our other staff are returning from their trip to Japan, so no need for you to come in anymore.” He smiled as if this would be good news to me. It wasn’t, but I smiled back anyway. He thanked me for my hard work and then that was it.

I left confused. Shattered, as if Masao hadn’t just taken my job away from me, but a part of my identity too.

...

I had a myriad of hospo roles after that. First, I became the waitress at an Italian restaurant, or as Ray, the old white (not Italian) dude who owned it, called it, a ‘Gourmet Pizza and Pasta Bar’.

The place was a well-kept dump, with mismatched walls and terracotta tiles that seemed like they were trying to scream, ‘Roma!’ but, in reality, they read more like a Subway or service station. And then there were the tables – tired, heavy wooden things that all sat pre-dressed with tacky little table talkers, and blaring red paper napkins that should have been viewed by customers as big red warning signs.

The food was bland and overpriced and the owner was desperate and cheap. Once I was unstacking the dishwasher and broke a wine glass, and Ray told me if I did it again I’d have to pay for it. When taking phone orders, I could barely hear the muffled words through the landline it was that old, but Ray just told me I wasn’t pressing it hard enough into my ear. To top it all off, I was fifteen, so he had me on a youth training wage – which meant I got paid each week what I now get paid in a couple of hours.

Everything that was wrong with the place became the fault of the staff – the lack of customers being a major one. Ray would spend many evenings hovering outside, attempting to lure passers-by into the restaurant. Often, he’d have little success and end up sending me home after only a couple of hours. It felt like the early dismissal was meant to come across as a punishment, but walking out that door was nothing but a relief. It didn’t take me long to quit, and when I did, Ray told me that it was a shame because he was ‘just thinking about starting to pay me more’.

Next I got a job at a café owned by an Aussie women named Jane. She was gruff and cool and let me sit down to polish the cutlery.

“Why waste your energy standing?” She once said while sitting across the table from me herself, counting up money from the register.

I liked Jane, and her son who manned the kitchen. He was funny and made the most glorious breakfasts, including the eggs bene which came glistening in hollandaise, and topped with edible flowers picked from the garden at the back of the outdoor dining area. I worked front-of-house with a girl in her late twenties called Charity, who I actually already knew because she used to work for my parents at their café. I mostly took orders and did dishes and ran food, but Jane also started teaching me to make coffees.

“You shouldn’t have to bang the milk around to get rid of the bubbles, I fucking hate when people do that,” she told me with a scrunched face as she moved her wrist back and forth, twirling the milk jug around in a circle. “All you need to do is swirl it around like this.” I watched diligently as sure enough, all the bigger bubbles dissolved into the silky foam. To this day, I still don’t really know how to make coffee. But I do carry Jane’s milk bias, cringing every time I watch a barista bang their jug against the bench.

I worked for Jane all summer, flouncing around the courtyard with plates up my arms, confidently chatting with customers, drinking smoothies for lunch, and most importantly, diversifying my skillset. At the end of every week, I left with a plastic bag full of cash and having learnt a dozen new things. Ray, from the pizza and pasta place, texted me on multiple occasions to see if I wanted to come in and pick up hours to help out. I only ever said no, happy with where I was and starting to really identify with the role of front-of-house.

Eventually, it all fell apart though. Not quite as abruptly as my job with Masao, but more slowly, and painfully. It turned out that Jane was an alcoholic, and so was her son. One day, when I wasn’t working, the two of them had a big blow out and he walked out – leaving us without a chef. Jane was busy elsewhere, as the café was opened as an extension of her catering business, so Charity and I managed things just the two of us.

We tried to get by making money on only cabinet food and coffees. I added baking to my skillset. The café hours got reduced, but Jane made up for it by asking us to help out with catering events. One such event was an early-morning teachers breakfast held at the café. Jane turned up hungover, threw up outside the back entrance and then started crying. It was traumatising. I was

sixteen years old, witnessing my boss, the woman who paid me, and someone I genuinely liked and respected, in the middle of a full on breakdown. I watched through the open back door as Charity sternly told Jane to go home and 'sort her shit out'. The two of us worked the rest of the event alone and the teachers left happy, fed, and none the wiser of the drama that had unfolded.

It was only a matter of days before the two of us were told over text to no longer come in, that the café was now closed. I had to chase Jane up for my final days pay – a grand total of $60.

I was unemployed for months after that job. It was awful. My parents had been struggling for a while and now, I had no way to hide from my friends the fact that they had no money to spare for me to go out and buy coffees and overpriced bowls of chips. Then, one day my friend tagged me in an Instagram post – a new café had opened and they were looking for part-time staff. I sent them my CV during my second period art history class, and by lunchtime, I had an interview lined up for after school. I suppose there weren't many sixteen year olds applying with five years of hospitality experience under their belt.

The man who interviewed me was Grant – a tall and zany man, who was one half of the Christian husband and wife duo who owned the place. I remember that he asked me if I knew anything about the business, and when I said no, he furrowed his eyebrows at me.

"Some advice for your next interview," he spoke briskly, "Is that you should *always* research the business, get a feel for the brand, the ethos." I didn't even get a chance to defend myself, to tell him that I didn't know they existed until earlier that day, because he was already enthusiastically filling in my knowledge gaps for me.

I ended up spending three years working front-of-house at The Kitchen. It was a fast-paced, trendy spot that specialised in whole foods. The concrete walls were painted minimalist-white, and the ceiling was hung with plants to really accentuate the natural vibes of the place.

Skippy and Grant, the owners, credited eating whole foods for fixing Skippy's myriad of health issues. But despite their authentic passion for clean eating, the café mostly served a loyal customer base of less authentic people, the kind of hoity toity Nelsonians who didn't blink to spend $30 on a salad and a smoothie and then leave half of it behind to rush back to work or their gym class. I'm not sure that any of them, the customers or my bosses, were conscious of the fact

that they were eating seventeen-dollar smoothie bowls on a street burdened by ‘For Lease’ signs given low tourist numbers the past few summers.

Despite the shitty customers, I loved my job. I got paid decently and felt like I was good at what I did. And then there were the people I worked with. Like any hospitality business, there was a churn rate when it came to staff, but there was a decent number of people like me, who were a part of the team for years. Like Mandy, an older, curly-haired woman who refused to work weekends at the café so that she had time to work on her art. Or Sophie, a bubbly girl, a few years older than me, who Skippy and Grant had hired through the church. She was like a big sister figure to me, along with Emma, a girl a year below me at school, who at times customers thought was my actual sister. These ladies, and many more, began to feel like my second family.

During my final two years at high school, I probably spent just as much time wearing the tight, black t-shirt that w[ii]as my uniform at work as I did in my frumpy school uniform. People started to recognise me from the café in other areas of my life – on social media, at parties or parents’ BBQs. They assumed things about me based on my job, like that I must be a vegan or go to the gym a lot.

This was the first real time that what I did for money and who I was as a person became indistinguishable from each other. I wasn’t just a dishie, or a waitress, or a front-of-house worker –

I was ‘The Kitchen girl’.

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Recently, I was listening to a podcast on my beach walk. The air was muggy. Above me, the sky was cloudless in that way where the clouds are so thick and endless that it appears they are in fact the sky themselves.

“An identity crisis is a developmental event that involves a person questioning their sense of self or place in the world,” said the soft-voiced podcast girlie as I looked out at the ocean, watching it curl up on to the beach in frothy white crests. I felt the sand, squishy between my toes.

“Our identity is formed by our passions, by our mission and our hobbies,” continued the unknown Aussie girl in my headphones. Ugh, hobbies. I thought back to when I was in the final year of my undergrad degree and interviewing for my first marketing job.

“So tell us about yourself,” asked my soon to be boss over the video call. “Do you have any hobbies?”

I laughed before saying, “I’ve always hated being asked that.”

This was an honest reply, but then I got nervous. “I like going camping, I guess?” I added, even though I was sure I’d pitched a tent once that year. In the moment I just couldn’t think of anything that I liked to do regularly in my spare time, despite going out for dinner or getting drunk. In fact, I hated being asked about my hobbies because it made me realise that outside of trying to get a degree and working, I didn’t have a ton of a spare time to fill in the first place.

As I walked and listened, I spotted a lone surfer out in the waves. I knew that was a hobby. I wondered if walking could be considered a hobby too? The podcaster continued to muse in my ear.

“What do we really care about? What is our purpose in life?”

Shit, these existential questions were starting to make me feel woozy. I watched the surfer, teeny in the distance, begin to spin their board around as a wave formed behind them and tried to think about my purpose.

“Who are you?” I heard the girl in my headphones as if she was the voice in my head.

Fantastic Breasts and Where to Find Them

A girl I grew up with got a boob job a couple of years ago. As soon as she left school, she saved up to go to Thailand and got her boobs done there. They looked amazing – taut, heavy, and precariously propped on her tiny torso. I throbbed with jealousy when I first saw them on Instagram. They became the star of every photo she uploaded – from pre-drinks in her friend's backyard to walking her dog on the beach, once mundane activities now appeared to have a sparkle to them.

The truth is, I'd *love* to get a boob job. Sometimes, in my pre-shower examination I cup my hands and hover them out over my existing breasts, moving them up and down to demonstrate how different sized implants would suit me. I turn to my side and gaze at my reflection. Usually I hate this view, the way my lower belly extends further than my bust thanks to the way my tits extend out sideways rather than forwards. But with my rounded palms imitating a set of perky double-D's, I feel a small smile on my face and a softening in my chest.

I then roll back my shoulders and take a deep breath in, watching as my waist shrinks, my tummy flattens, and my individual ribs press harsh against my skin. I hold my breath in an attempt to hold this form, spinning around to see what I look like from all viewpoints.
Eventually I feel woozy and breath out again, dropping my hands back to my sides and inflating my torso with disappointment. Yet in that moment, it feels as if dropping a few kgs and gaining two balls of silicone is all I need to be content in life.

But what if when I looked in the mirror, I was asking myself, *how could I help my body to serve me better?* How could I help it move faster? Be stronger, think quicker, see better. How useful would it be if instead I asked a plastic surgeon to make me a tail? To extend my vertebrae so it curls out from the nape of my neck. To use the rippled skin from my thigh to graft the flesh of it. I could braid it up within my hair and no one would even know.

I could use that tail sunbathing at the beach. Face down, ass red, hair flicking away any bug that dared enter my orbit. It'd be like having a built-in version of those slow-moving fans that cafés position above scones to shoo away the flies. With a tail, I would lay out baking for hours in undisturbed bliss.

Maybe I'd tear into the surgeon's office and instead of a silicone chest, request that he give me wings. I would sit upright on the examining table – the room around me painted a sterile shade of white – with my arms out wide to demonstrate my potential wingspan. I'd sit grinning while the surgeon pinched the flab of my forearms to demonstrate where he planned to slice and

stretch the skin down to meet my ribcage. With a ballpoint pen, he'd indicate where my wings would eventuate.

"Most women find they're able to use their wings like normal within a few months," he'd assure me with a veneered smile, fussing over getting his pen back into the breast pocket of his coat instead of making eye contact with me. I would smile and nod and swing my legs underneath the edge of the table like a giddy kid.

Afterwards, I'd skip back into the lobby to confirm the date of my operation with the receptionist. Staring blankly into her computer and wiggling her mouse around, she would offer me polite small talk.

"So, where are you planning on flying to first?"

There are so many other things I'd want done if this was the reality of plastic surgery, if our culture was focused on helping women to enhance our lives rather than refine the way we look. I'd ask for fangs to better pierce the flesh of summer fruits. Enlarged vocal chords so there'd no longer be such a thing as too much karaoke. Webbed toes to confidently kick and dive and explore various bodies of water.

It would be seriously handy to get a pouch fashioned on my stomach rather than having to tote a bag around with me everywhere. I could perhaps even get it branded, literally, with designer emblems or tattooed with funky florals. In line for the clubs, I'd smugly whip out my midriff to retrieve my driver's license and show off my latest accessory.

The use of ultrasonic energy to reshape one's nose, or electromagnetic energy to tone muscle and break down fat, both sound like things out of a science fiction movie, but these are the actual descriptions of two real-world cosmetic surgeries. The prospect of making bird-women, then, seems less a question of how would we do it, but more so a question of what would turning us ladies into beastly hybrids do for the patriarchy? How would men benefit if, all of a sudden, the more than 86% of plastic surgeries that are performed on women had nothing to do with improving the outlook of their gaze? Would 'tits or ass' men soon categorise themselves as 'wings or tail'?

The truth is, I'd *love* to get a boob job. I tell my boyfriend this often when we're lying in bed together. With Zach's arm around me, I scroll through TikTok, moving my one thumb and not much else. Between recipe videos for vegan cupcakes and funny skits about the dumb names that cocktails have at fancy bars, I'm bombarded with content full of big-breasted women.

"Imagine if I had boobs like that," I suggest. Zach gives me a loving squeeze.

“I like your boobs a lot just as they are,” he comforts me, or at least intends to. Every time he says this, I expect his words of validation to flatten my longing to go up a couple cup sizes. But it doesn’t budge.

I want a boob job so bad. And by ‘I’, I mean the tiny man inside my head who’s disguised himself as me. The same me who I shave my legs for. The one I ask if my ‘ass looks good in these jeans’ for. My internalized male gaze shouts above the noise of Zach’s affirmations and my fantasies of a tail, convincing me his voice is my own.

And he’s done an epic job of it. The reality is, if I saw a woman on the street today who had pterodactyl-like wings and a fold of skin above her bellybutton with her iPhone and keys inside, the last thing I’d think is *wow I wish I looked like her!*

More likely, I’d think, *ugh, what a freak! How beastly. Unnatural.* I’d slow down, stare as she unfurled her flaps of skin and took off above the busy traffic, touching down on the footpath across the road. I’d watch her greet another winged woman, ignoring their radiance, their big smiles and loud laughs as they wandered into a café.

Instead, I’d fixate on the way their warped flesh moved differently from mine. And once gone from view, I’d continue down the street with furrowed brows, wondering, *how could they do that to themselves, to the way they look?* Knowing full well that hiding deep within my hollow judgement, is a girl who’s just jealous of their freedom.

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