

Finalist

I AM

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As I step into the wharenuī, the first thing I notice is the blood. Blood is splattered up the wall, stretching to the ceiling and it is spread just as wide. The blood is of Broughtons, Powers, Chiefs and Princesses. It is the whakapapa of the mokopuna of Papauma, immortalised behind glass frames, suspended in time, clinging to the wall. The photographs of drowned men, children taken too young, loved aunts, cousins, brothers and wise old Kuia watch over me, echoing my silence. Their cavernous gaze bores into me as I take in the pungent smell of Mana.

It's really quite strange, I think, that these people who lived such separate lives have been brought together by Papauma and woven them all into a beautiful, multicoloured flax kete. The kete is made from their souls, innocent, wise, bright, broken, ignorant, mediocre and damned. It is left sitting wide open, pulling people in like the changing tide and growing with each one who gives in to the current.

These people who stare at me, although dead, are so lucky. The stars have smiled on them and given them a forever home in this place, and what a lovely home it is too. In death, they've bore witness to laughter and tears. They have smelt a tangi and tasted the liquor from the time that everyone drank just a little too much. Life after death has been found on a hook on the wall and eternal life will ensue as they are able to watch their children and their children's children who come here and leave their mark, and eventually come to rest.

I am a New Zealander of European descent. I am Irish and English, Doctor, Pirate and Scholar. I am a settler on the shores of Petone from hundreds of years ago building a new life in a new country, yet I'm still figuring out who I am and where I really come from. Maybe I am lucky enough to be my own special mix. My identity perhaps is a patchwork of squares lovingly stitched together by Mum, Dad, places, experiences, siblings and me. It's also a place... Owahanga.

Owahanga smells of salt and of the river that glides over the rocks and oozes into the sea. It is a dry summer and it is winter mud which squelches under oversized gumboots. The wind there rips across the hillside and shudders through stubbled trees. It is my home, my stomping ground, it is me. Nestled somewhere in the gorse and the manuka is Papauma, the heart and soul of the place, my heart and soul. It is the source of the ethereal energy that pumps through the hillside and sings out into the stars at the start of the new year. It is a place that when matariki twinkles down, it will twinkle back. Te Hika o Papauma is a communal heart, shared and passed around, now sitting with me filling the pit of my stomach and tickling my every nerve.

Owahanga isn't just the good days hauling shiny kahawai from the river and collecting dainty shells off the beach. My home is found in memories of the first pet lamb of the season which died in the frost. It is biting cold, driving rain and storms. It is a week without electricity or phones and being stuck, walled in by a hill that just couldn't hold on. Owahanga is broken fences that let goats infest the paddocks. It is rusted nails, thick skulled rams, yard bruises and dust that gets in your eyes and mouth. It is blind anger, pain, and persevering love.

Seven years ago, I learned that home is not in statistics, it is in the crick in my neck from the wind that screams like a molly-coddled toddler. Home is in the cracks in my heels from walking on the gravel, the grass and the sand. It is the blisters, the sweat, the thorns, itchy bites, sunburn, broken nails and the mud. My home is the slow shifting of dust on ancient wooden floorboards, swirling, settling. It is the peace in the sun parched paint on the tekoteko, which flakes away like pastry. Most of all, home is another stitch on my patchwork heart which skips and hops a little when I hear "Owahanga". It is in my very core, golden and warm like bush honey, which I pour into the kete to be woven in amongst people I have known and who have known me. I am bound to the marae and tied to this land. My European heritage is passed down to me by my family but my essence lies here. Who I am today was created in the rolling waves, broken hills and burning summer sun, in the place that smells of salt, blood and mana.