

Anna Woods – Open Division, 1st Place

Pig Hunting

It happened all at once. I couldn't separate it in my mind – the dark shape of Paul stepping from behind a tree in shorts and a Swandri, Red Bands scuffing his calves – and the pig, broad shoulders a dark smoky blue, tusks curved back on themselves like a dropped segment of moon, eyes reflected and golden.

I hoisted the rifle over my shoulder, released the safety and shot. The sound rang out across the gully, a loud crack like thunder in the hungry darkness, through the beating moth wings, the pushing wind, the shivering glow-worms down in the creek bed, the now silent ruru, Bo's never-found kiwi, the screams of the children, over Polly's frantic bark, through the heart of the night.

It started the day we woke to ruck marks under the guava tree. Deep furrows where a whiskery snout had churned the earth, loamy and scarred with the orange burn of clay, that yolky colour that's smeared across the sky sometimes the morning of a heavy rain.

Lucy had been feeding the chickens. It's best to give the easiest job to the youngest. She'd shake a shimmery bucket of feed and throw it with a scat to the ground. The hens, scurrying with a chicken-ish wobble, would cluck their excitement, nosing their beaks into the dust. While they ate, Lucy, with careful fat fists, would snatch their warm eggs and pile them in a basket, picking at the downy feathers glued to them with muck.

She didn't get as far as the chickens though. Mum, Mum, Mum – she called, leaving the upturned feed bucket in the grass for Polly, our black lab, to snuffle up with her wet nose.

Mum, it's a taniwha, she called. Her brother Bo clipped her on the head as he walked past, saying, Taniwha live in water, you idiot.

Don't call your sister an idiot, I said, pushing aside the lump of dough I'd been kneading. I patted the top of it, the hollow tap telling me the gluten was tight and ready to rest – which it would do for several hours, loosening, relaxing, oozing in its wooden bowl nested in the hot water cupboard.

Hold on, Love, I said to Lucy, pulling on my gumboots which were rimmed with enough globs of sticky clay to give me a whole extra size. I followed her to the guava tree, shoosing Polly from the last scraps of chicken feed.

The air was cooler in the spruce-lined orchard, still heavy with the chill of the first cold night of autumn. I'd thought about lighting a fire, but Paul hadn't chopped the wood yet. I can split it fine, but the summer's manuka still lay in the shed in fat crabby logs, waiting for the chainsaw. In the end, I'd cooked a huge stew; beans and tomato, kale and carrots and the last of the beetroot pulled from the soil, chocolaty earth clinging to its etiolated tails. Autumn surprise, I called it. The surprise being how I stretched each meal past what was reasonable – freezing and ladling and mixing new herbs to disguise that it was always the same soup.

The single-glazed window fogged with stewy air, enough to make the darkness beyond shimmer, and take the edge off the chill.

Loose maroon bruises of empty skins were scattered at the base of the guava, but they were from kids, or birds, perhaps a possum – nibbles too delicate for a larger animal. I poked my gumboot into the fresh dug earth under the guava. A snapped branch pointed like an omen towards a tunnel in the scrub, leading down to the gorge. Manuka branches flattened and bristled like boar skin.

I didn't realise we had wild pigs this far north. Months later, Reg and Shirley, who live up the road, would tell me a local, down on the flats, had let a litter of piglets loose years before, to have something to hunt.

You can't be squeamish on a block. We're not farmers, but we live close to the land – the blur of puriri moths tapping their wings against the glass at night; stick insects sawing back and forth like violinists on spindly legs; vampire wasps preying on tunnel-web spiders, paralysing them and dragging their comatose bodies to the nests tunnelled in the grooves of our picnic table, fresh food for their larvae to eat alive; storms that blow from the east, indigo swathes pushing up from the ocean, thunder magnified by the natural amphitheatre of the gorge, like bombs going off deep in the earth; north-westerlies that blow across the ridgeline; bands of rain that shower past, the angry clatters of an off-key orchestra alive on the roof; days when the sun, bright and spiky, sends whomping creaks through the metal, bleaching the long grass and the soft feathers of toetoe drift in from the field – you can't live in all this and not be part of the land.

Still, there's something obscene about pig hunting – chasing boars through the bush with snarling muscular dogs. The hunter leaping onto the cornered pig, riding it as a steed, slipping his arms around its neck, lover-like, stabbing the knife into its meaty folds. It's tough, pig-skin. It takes more force than you think. The pig squeals and flails. The hunter, gripping tight, stabs again and again looking for the jugular vein – the one that will spill

black on the dusty ground, sending the dogs into a wild frenzy. When he finds it, the pig slackens and falls to the ground with a slow, lurching thud.

There's something murderous about it. I say that as someone who snatches chickens' incipient babies straight from their nests, who fattened a lamb a long year in the paddock, feeding it sheep nuts and pinching its flesh together to depress the long drenching syringe. I say it as someone who slipped an elastic band over that same sheep's testicles so we wouldn't have more lambs next year. I've done all this, but boar hunting seems barbaric to me.

At a loss, I stood under the guava too long. So long Bo came over and kicked at the broken branch, saying, Dad would know what to do.

He would, too. Paul knows how to fix things. All kinds of arcane knowledge is screwed away in his head. How to replace a tap, wire a pendant, skin and gut a rabbit. But he wasn't there, so I slid my hand into Lucy's, sticky with fruit, and said, Come on, let's check the bread.

I thought about the pig all day – while I did laundry, the old machine chugging its way out of its alcove like a truculent child; while elbow deep in dishes, suds scudding from oily plates, frayed bubbles scumming the edge of the sink; while I took the warm dough and knocked it back, sighing as it released all the trapped air; when I shaped it and slashed it with the razor blade – then most of all – the image of blood blooming in the slit; and again, after the second rise, the slits healed over, gummed up like the fat edge of a new scar; after an hour in the oven, brown and high, folding over the edge of the tin, floury and hollow when I tapped.

I thought about the pig often that day, somehow transposing its arrival with Paul's disappearance – swapping the two so whichever I thought of reminded me of rutting and heaviness, of loam and blood.

The kids didn't know that Paul had left. I didn't want to tell them until I was sure he wasn't coming back. When Bo got up that first morning, he hadn't asked after his dad. It wasn't uncommon for Paul to be out in the field, in his Red Bands and shorts – he wore shorts year round, no matter the weather – worrying fence wire or opening and closing paddock gates. Or he'd be checking on the sheep, hosing down the yard, baiting the yellow possum traps with cinnamon dusted apple-halves. I'd hear the snap sometimes when he used a stick to bite the hinge of the empty trap. When he caught one, he'd grab the broken-necked creature by the tail and hurl it deep into the bush. I didn't care, possums are murderers here. Like Cook, like Heke, like we all are in the end, I suppose.

Only later, when the creamy light had clarified into a hard autumn morning, did Bo come around the front verandah, shuck off his gumboots and ask, Where's Dad?

I told him that Paul had gone to the city for work. I watched his ten-year-old mind turn this over, the way he turns the pebbles he collects in the creek – weighing them in his palm, holding them to his eye to check the smoothness, the angles, to see if they'll skim.

A meeting? Bo said, and I agreed, Yes, a meeting. Satisfied, Bo turned away. Paul usually worked in the gap between the laundry and the kids' bedroom. He'd fashioned a couple of 4x2s across a stack of old paint cans to make a desk. It worked well enough, even if it was dark in there, the window smeared with spiders' silk, and smelt of old paint. But he went to the city sometimes for the occasional meeting.

When we moved here, after the first lockdown, we couldn't believe our luck. We'd binged episodes of *River Cottage* while stuck at home. The faintly comical, foppish English chef gushing over damp soil and fresh milk in tin pails, lavender tweaked by bees, obscure pagan harvest festivals. The time he snapped a comb of honey open, liquid running across his fingers like molten gold, Paul turned to me and said – That. I want that.

We sold our house in the city for an embarrassing amount of money. I kept thinking they'd change their mind, realise they'd made a mistake, right until the money appeared in our account. Developers bought it. All they cared about was the size of the land, how many terraces they could shoe-box on there. Eight, apparently. Everything about it was ludicrous.

Sometimes we drive past it, on infrequent trips to the city. They knocked the house down almost at once, erasing every moment we'd had there – the doorway behind the pantry notched with Lucy and Bo's heights; the sunless bedroom I'd sewn curtains for, a thick cotton I picked up on clearance that made the room colder still, jagged seams coming away like loose teeth; the kitchen where I made my first loaf, the feeling of my hands in the dough, how it resisted at first, then released; where I thought, yes, perhaps I could do this.

When we found this place, between lockdowns, it was a fever dream too – driving up the metal road, forestry blocks either side tunnelling away the view; the denuded hillside, recently harvested slash down its face like an acned teenager; cresting the hill and turning down the private road; the sky, cerulean and flawless, all the way to the ocean, held close by the jagged profile of Whangārei Heads, like a giant laid down to sleep.

It wouldn't have been possible without lockdown, when Paul's boss realised his job, like a million others, could be done anywhere. It peeled back a layer of pretence we all had about our lives, about how necessary we were, how purposeful, how busy.

The land was laughingly cheap, we thought, those city zeros glazing our eyes. We used all the house money and a little more, but we consoled ourselves with what we'd save living on the land, the bucolic lifestyle raising our kids, the sheep Paul would farm, the loaves I would bake in our own River Cottage, down by the sea.

We packed our things into a ute we rented from a hardware store. Its shuddering suspension bouncing us over metal roads while Polly cowered in the back and the mattresses jostled against rugs and lamps.

The kids settled in. Kids settle anywhere. A scraped knee, a dandelion, a game of tag – you win, you lose – then you are friends. Their school is different from the city, but also the same. The mums still clutch coffee at the school gates, only in labelled mugs from the cafe across the road, washed and returned to their individual cubbies rather than takeaway cups. The Nikes are swapped for gumboots. These women have actual mud and stones on their 4WD tyres.

They settled in fine, is what I am saying. Paul did too. The one who didn't was me.

It was getting darker. It gets dark early, without the sodium glow of the city. Darkness spills out here, lying in wait for the sun to edge back so it can push its inky fingers from the cracks and crevices where it bides the day.

After I swept the kids inside, I reheated Garden Surprise, cutting off fat hunks of bread and spreading them with bright yellow butter. I wish I could tell you was from our own cows, but it's from a dairy twenty minutes away, bought from a farmer with a nose bulbous and red from too many whiskeys and winter mornings.

The kids were quiet while we ate. The window was battered by moths and I wished again we'd bought those bloody blinds even though they were an inch too small – surely we could have jerry-rigged them somehow – when we'd had the chance.

Something happens when it's dark up here. When you turn on the light, the glass turns to mirror and all you can see is your own worried face – pinched and frowning and tired. You know there is – there always is – something beyond. Moths or insects or ruru. Once, the bold yellow eyes of a possum. But it occurs to you in the gothic evenings there could be something mammalian out there. Something more.

The kids were watching TV, so I took my phone into the one corner that gets reception, and wedged myself above Paul's desk to search for pig deterrents. You can buy sprays, I discovered, heavy duty poisons, traps and sensors that blast a horn to scare the pig

away. Turns out my idea of pig hunting was wrong. The DOC site recommends a .270 gauge rifle or higher, better to get through the thick hide.

After I turned off my phone and sent the kids to brush their teeth, I walked around the perimeter of the house, switching off lights, checking and rechecking the windows and doors. When everything was secure, I went to bed.

I'd set my alarm early – the DOC site said late evening or early morning was when the pigs came out to feed. Wrapped in a blanket, tea steaming, I sat at the kitchen table staring at the tight mounds of lettuce and waving arms of silverbeet. Irresistible to a pig, I figured. The sun crept higher, ginger, as it showed itself above the ridge, as though it wasn't sure about delivering a new day. I sat there over an hour, only a blackbird hopping in the garden.

Once the kids were up, the day was wailing with sun. I made them porridge stewed with apple and cinnamon and feijoa, stirred through with the last of the cream and left them kicking their feet under the bench, to examine the garden.

How could I have missed it? Ruck marks through the silverbeet, flattened in the corner as though beneath great weight. Stalks snapped and already turning brown. Lettuce dug and discarded, the dark soil spilling like black rain on its roots. I thought I'd been awake most of the night, alive to sound. The shudder of rain and shove of wind, pushing the scrub nearly flat while I had hesitant dreams of tiny blue lights.

It took months for us to discover the glow-worms. There were caves down the road, famous for the slippery clamber at the entrance, the easy tunnels where the worms spun their display. We'd visited with the kids, mud squelching between our bare feet, stale cave water splashing up our calves. A few metres in, the first flickering star lit the stone roof like the sky at night.

We were looking for kiwi when we discovered our own glow-worms. Bo had been learning about native birds at school and his teacher mentioned there were kiwi in the area. I was sceptical, but he played us a recording of the kiwi's call; a chirruping sound, high and panicked. The only bird I'd heard at our place was a ruru. Still, we set off after dark, following the track down the hillside to the creek. We walked slowly, as quiet as we could. The only sounds were our breathing, the crunch of twigs underfoot and the trickle of the late-summer creek, dried up and dammed in places. Where the banks rise into a slit that chokes the creek into a small waterfall, there was scuffling. Paul called in a hoarse whisper to turn off the torch. I stepped a few feet into the blackness, then stopped.

The moist banks of the creek were strung with beads of blue lights, a web of them covering the banks like a net, glistening and glowing and moving in the dark.

Glow-worms, whispered Bo. There, at the bottom of our garden, an iridescence that glowed and pulsed like a heartbeat, a few hundred metres from our beds. We marvelled at the hidden strings, the secret threads. An entire world hidden under our noses.

Back at the house, kiwi forgotten, Bo went straight on the internet. Glow-worms, he told us weren't worms at all but larvae – maggots – he said with excitement, the larvae of fungus gnats. They use their light to attract flying insects, lure little midges into their webs. They're titiwai, he told us – lights reflected in water – Te Ara says.

Maybe that's what did it. A new knowledge, a secret beauty. Insects that hide their squirmy maggoty selves in constellations that seem like light but are darkness. Maybe it was their doubleness – the light that is dark, and the dark that is dark – because that was the night Paul did it again.

The kids were in bed. The night spread wet and black beyond the window and somewhere out of sight the glow-worms glittered, plying their sticky wares. Paul sat on the sofa and put a hand on my knee. I scooched higher to release my leg from his grip. He sighed, waiting for me to say something. I turned the page in my book. He sighed again. I read the same line three times.

When he realised I wouldn't ask, Paul said, I've been thinking.

I closed my book but didn't reply.

Maybe it's not worth it, he said.

There it was. I'd been expecting it, but still – that night? After the glow-worms and their secret night sky, hidden in our garden? Our children had made friends at school. Just that week, Billy had come for the afternoon. He and Bo had spent hours in the orchard playing some game that involved two sticks and a pile of apple seeds. He'd chosen that night, with the second lamb fattening in the paddock, the first filling our freezer, and the carrots pushing feathery tips from the garden bed?

No, I said. No. Not again.

This is what he does, you see. He moves, he presses on. He's restless, always restless, as though something in him is burning up and the only way he can stop the fire is to put it out with newness. New job, new place, new life. He didn't stick with anything. It surprised me he stuck with us so long.

Each time we'd sell everything, lose everything, start again, and again, and again. Each time was different until it wasn't. As much as I hated this place at first, the crazy carnivorous glow-worms had changed my mind. It was ours. We were here. We had to stay.

No, I said, not this time. The kids and I are staying. I can't do it again, Paul, I can't. I slammed my book shut and went to bed. He didn't follow. In the morning, the distant blue blur of his Swannndri moved around the paddock. He said nothing, but it was only a matter of time.

It was drizzly Day Two of Swine Watch. The DOC site said they liked to feed on overcast days, so I kept the kids inside, hoping the quiet and the grey would lure the pig out. I didn't have a plan; I wanted to get a sense of my opponent. The heft, the colour. Boar or sow, I wanted to know.

I'd unlocked Paul's gun cabinet and checked the rifle that morning. I didn't know what gauge it was, or how to work it – I'd never shot it before – but I'd seen Paul do it enough times.

The kids spent the day fighting over a jigsaw – a jungle scene all bright greens and the orange and black of a tiger. Bo pieced most of it together, except for the few bits that Polly had chewed, leaving a gap in the big cat's toothy jaw. I made play dough for Lucy. Flour and salt and water pink with food colouring, cooked in a pot until it formed a warm lump. She kneaded it, little pink blisters blooming into her hands where the sticky bits broke off. The windows misted over in the warm fuggish room. There was no sign of the pig.

I kept vigil in the kitchen, trying not to think of Paul. He'd left before. He'd be gone a few days, perhaps a week, but always came back. But it had been two weeks by then. The kids were asking after him every day. When would he be back? He'd never been gone this long before? I changed my story. A new job, I told them, a big opportunity—he'd be home soon.

I couldn't keep lying though, because of what I'd overheard at the Four Square. I was in the refrigerated room, tucked between the bread cabinets where they keep the alcohol. I don't often drink, but I needed some wine. The liquid nights were getting to me, the foggy misty fields that seemed full of ghosts.

The queue for the register snaked past the doorway and behind the ribbons of plastic I caught sight of Fiona and Bridget, two mums from school I didn't much like.

You hear about Lydia? Fiona said, the mole above her lip, a blackish mound, moving while she talked, up and down the way a resting gull crests unbroken waves. She ran off with that new guy, Paul, she continued. You know, his son Bo is in Monty's class.

I held my breath. It was fusty and the lights were dim.

She didn't! Bridget said, scandalised. Bridget was leathered and over-tanned, like fruit left in the sun. Her hair was all fluffy and electric.

Fiona dropped her voice. Don't blame him, she said, Wife looks a bit of a wet fish. They both laughed. Men are pigs, Fiona said.

The line moved and they shuffled forward. I waited in the fridge room until they'd both left, gripping the fruity wine so tight, my hand turned to a claw and my fingers went numb.

It shouldn't have surprised me, but somehow it did. Paul and Lydia. Lydia and Paul. I knew her by sight, an impish woman with short, streaked hair tucked under her ears – blonde #4. She had long nails, painted the purplish colour of church wine. No good for dough, nails like that. I keep mine short and stubbed at the end of my hands. They looked like an overgrown child's. Lydia was younger than me, but not by much. Without kids or commitments, as far as I could tell, she led yoga classes on Tuesdays and had a van with a dreamcatcher that spun in slow revolutions as she drove.

There was no sign of the pig that day, or the next. No new tracks or furrows. It had moved on, like Paul, perhaps. It was a week since we'd last seen evidence of the pig, about three weeks since Paul had left. I didn't know where either of them were, but local gossip held that Lydia was holed up on Barrier. Wouldn't surprise me. Sounded like Paul.

Bo and Lucy were glum. Bo kicked his backpack. Even Polly seemed morose, lying by the back door, head folded on her crossed paws. Stupid dog, pining for Paul, when I was the one who fed her, and walked her and cleaned up her shit. The day was colourless with great punching pillows of clouds obscuring the sky. Wind sped through the gully, rising over the house as if it would lift it right up and the toetoe bent almost to the ground, their feathered tips dancing like a ballet dancer's tutu, up and down.

When Bo asked to see the glow-worms that night, I said okay – despite the season, the cold and the muck, the knowledge that when we returned, the house would be colder still for our absence; the empty inside of a turned-off fridge.

I'd been trying to tell them about Paul. At least this would give them the memory of glistening blue lights when I did. I hustled them into warm clothes and gumboots, a metal torch in one hand, Lucy's small fist in the other. The walk seemed longer than I remembered. I worried I'd lost the way. Then, there they were, the otherworldly blue beads strung down the bank. The secret unfurling once again.

After we'd admired the lights, spiralling away like shooting stars, we returned to the house, warm and joyful and full of the secret. I felt powerful in a way I hadn't for a long time. At the house, the back door was open, banging in the wind with uneven claps. Something clapped shut inside me.

I ushered the kids to the lean-to. Polly was nowhere to be seen. Wait there, I whispered and crept into the house. It was dark and the shaky arc of my torch flickered. Nothing was disturbed. I checked the closets, under the bed, the pantry, all the alcoves and niches the kids favoured when we play hide and seek. My terror turned to outside. A tingle flushed up my spine to my neck.

Sliding the key off the top shelf, I opened Paul's rifle cabinet, then pulled the ammo from the tin box he kept up high and loaded a cartridge, click-click. I crept outside, finger to my lips, beckoning the kids into the house, whispering to Bo to lock the door behind him.

The night was hushed with fog and silvery light. There was a shape in the garden. I hesitated for a moment. Then the shape moved forward with a sudden burst. Without thinking, I hoisted the rifle over my shoulder, released the safety and shot.

The rest happened at once. Each moment stacked together, the way coins fall to the ground, in a single clattering sound.

The night cracked open.

The shape slumped forward.

A scream rang from the house.

The moon faces of the children pressed to the window.

Polly barked in a frenzy.

A mound materialised in the darkness.

Something groaned.

And I did the only thing I could. I stepped forward to examine my kill.