

Benn Jeffries – Open Division, 1st Place

Greywacke

There is a certain way of butchering a deer so that it becomes a backpack. It's easier than it sounds, you slice a hole through the front-leg ligaments and push the back legs through. Cut the head off and gut the thing and you can quite happily carry the animal for miles. I didn't have a licence to harvest wild meat, culling was all they paid me for. I normally left the carcasses where they fell but Hana was craving red meat. The doctor said it was normal; she needed iron.

I don't know why I thought of that. My memories have a habit of grouping together in ways that don't always make sense. For example, the smell of fennel reminds me of a grandparent who died before I was born. The word *taihoa* makes me think of the way my fingers move when tying a line to a hook. A certain shade of dusk and I hear the distant bark of my first sheepdog.

The doctor smeared jelly over Hana's stomach and pushed it around with the end of an ultrasound machine. The monitor showed a flipbook scene of shadow and light.

'You know in some cultures, they eat the earth to get at the iron.' Hana liked that detail, I saw her smile at it and imagine the taste of soil. She wanted our baby to feel anchored here, to be of this place.

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Ocean green, deep water. Clear, almost translucent in parts, clouded in others. A vein of quartz and gold; a river. A forest distilled, condensed like a planet shrunk to a marble in the dark of a black hole. Tawa, kahikatea, tōtara; mosses that drip with dew and tannins.

'Kahurangi,' Hana told us. The rarest type of pounamu. I knew the stone was tapu but I'd never seen someone look at it like she did.

'Where did you find it?' she asked.

I ignored her question and looked at my feet.

'Grey, where did you find it?'

'Landsborough,' I told her without meeting her eyes. The stone sat where the chopper had left it outside Hodi's workshop. Familiar smells drifted out from the large roller doors that stood ajar; oil and leather, sawdust, sea salt and rust. Hana buried her hands in the

pockets of her oilskin. Her moon belly tested the zipper. The stone separating us, half of its mass buried under a mound of firewood that Hodi had been stacking before Hana stopped him. Something so large was tricky to hide.

‘How much do you think it’s worth?’ Harper asked. He wore his West Coast Helicopters fleece like a farmer; collar popped, one roll of the sleeves. He had an air of old-money Christchurch about him but he was the only pilot we knew cowboy enough to do what we’d asked of him. Hana ignored his question. I could feel her anger at me morph into hatred for him.

‘Hodi?’ Harper tried again. ‘How much is it worth?’

‘It’s worth nothing,’ Hana snapped, turning to Harper. ‘You can’t sell this, anything over five kilograms belongs to the Iwi.’

‘And overseas?’ he persisted, oblivious to Hana’s fury.

‘You can’t export it. It’s illegal.’

‘If we could though?’

‘You’re not listening!’ she yelled.

‘Hana,’ I said, trying to calm her.

‘A million at least,’ Hodi finally answered, speaking up from where he sat on a large mussel farm buoy that had washed up on his beach. ‘With the right buyer, a million.’

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I am not a thief. If I say it aloud does that make it true? Dad used to say actions should be the only thing by which we are judged. He drank and let the land he inherited rot so there is little chance of an ulterior motive in his words. Most people had given up farming the islands and bays of the Marlborough Sounds. Most of it was worthless land gifted to return servicemen after World War One. Our farm was different though, it was much older and had been in our family since long before the war. It stretched along a snaking peninsula until the land ran out and the sea swallowed it. On the eastern side of the farm, seals sunbathed on the rocks and lashed out at livestock if they got too close on venturing down at low tide to eat the seaweed.

At the northern tip stood hundred-metre sea cliffs. At their base, a forest of bull kelp. The wind never ceased on our farm but it was strongest here. It carried sea spray over the paddocks and collected in the wool of our sheep. There is a memory I tried to forget for a long time that is now welded to any thought of home. Atop those cliffs, my arm wrapped around the body of some imagined woman, our hands clasped together like two halves of an

oyster. I was practising for a school dance. Whirling like I'd seen couples do in the movies. The wind spun me and rewilded my hair. I whirled faster and faster, my body a torrent. I was a part of the world that was otherwise lost. I was in harmony with it. The land loved me. The ocean loved me. I belonged in that place.

Mum used to say I was born with the farm's soil beneath my fingernails. I don't know if that was a dig at my shabbiness from working the farm or my ties to it. I used to think they were one and the same.

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Hodi is Hana's cousin. He's one of those guys who is always scheming and at any one time has a dozen sources of income. He's the one who found me the culling job. I've always been good at hunting and it beats gorse spraying or pine poisoning any day. The only other work besides killing what isn't native is south to the glaciers where all the tourist buses stop. I didn't bother applying there, I knew those jobs were out of my reach after what happened with the bank people.

I'm not a violent person. My anger tends to turn me inward and I regret every instance it hasn't, like in Form Three when I broke the collarbone of a boy named Wiremu after he called my old man a drunkard. He was just repeating what his parents said at home and that's what made me mad; the thought of gossip.

Mum was already gone when Dad died and my sister was living in the UK with no intention of coming home. The farm had to be sold, there was no way around it. Hana came with me to meet the bankers and sign all the papers. The guy in charge was kind and sympathetic but the valuer was a smug prick. He called the soil chemistry poor, the land slip-prone and the farmhouse a dump. I can't remember how it started exactly, only that Hana pulled me off him after I had taken his front tooth. I don't know why she stayed with me after that, but she did. I like to think she understood my anger but more likely she was just stuck. That was the same week we found out she was pregnant. When we got stung with the lawyer fees for the assault charge, her options shrank even further. I avoided prison but we were flat broke with nowhere to live. Hana's Iwi had land on the West Coast with a small shack we could live in, so we took them up on their generosity.

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The first stone I found was small, only two hundred grams. A perfectly smooth, almost black piece of tangiwai. Hodi knew people so I took it to him and he gave me fifty bucks cash for it. After that, I searched the riverbeds while culling just as closely as I searched the bush for deer. I never knew his reasons for buying stones illegally and I never wanted to. What we had going suited me fine and that's all I cared about. I had a knack for it, Hodi said so himself. I was finding over thirty kilos on some trips. There's something about the rivers, the ebb and flow of water; it carves, mines, washes. Its current is telling of storms past and storms to come. Flood water reveals pounamu best, the roar of mountain rivers shift silt and greywacke and hardwood to expose the precious stone. It's in my name, I suppose. Grey is not my birth name but it is the only one I have ever gone by. It's what Dad called me on account of my eyes when I was born. Greywacke.

Hana confesses that she was frightened of my eyes when she was a little girl. We've always been in each other's lives. She grew up on a farm a few blocks over from ours with her grandparents. I loved her from the start but she didn't give me the time of day until we were sixteen when she invited me to go to church with her and her grandma. Our family wasn't religious but I played the Jesus-lover to the tee. It turned out Hana only went to church because she had to, praise the Lord, and that afternoon, we shagged for the first time in her grandad's woolshed. It was clunky and awkward with the smell of lanolin and rough-sawn timber. After that, we got better at it and did it just about every day until we finished high school. We watched each other grow. Sometimes I see specific moments in her, decades old. Sometimes she'll raise a memory I know to be mine alone. Our histories are like that, all tangled together.

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I like the pokies; the cold beer, the lights, the sounds, the possibilities of it. Hodi likes them too, I think that's what kicked off our friendship. That first week after Hana and I moved to the West Coast a bunch of us had a night out at this pub in Hokitika called Horse and Hound. Hodi won four hundred bucks on Golden Dragon. I chucked a twenty into Electric Cash and won three-fifty on my second spin. Hana saw where things were headed when I returned to our table with two more jugs of Speight's.

'I'm outta here boys,' she said and tapped her stomach.

'Fuuuck, imagine not being able to drink for nine months,' Hodi said, shaking his head.

‘It’s for the best, she’d put both of us to shame.’

‘Pshh.’

The Crusaders were playing the Canes. Hodi and I watched the game and worked on drinking away our winnings.

‘Yous reckon you’ll stick around long?’ he asked me at half time.

‘I don’t know, maybe.’

‘You like it here?’

‘I got no complaints.’

‘Bullshit, it’s a shit hole. You don’t gotta lie bro.’

‘Why have you stuck around then?’

‘I don’t know, the whānau’s here. That’s you too, now. You’re part of the whānau now.’

‘Whānau now,’ I echoed.

‘Whānau now,’ he sang.

We stayed until the bar closed and they kicked us out. Hodi drove us home. I was so drunk I saw three or four sets of headlights each time a car passed us. Not far out from Ross we came over a rise doing a hundred and hit a cow standing in the middle of the road chewing cud. There was nothing Hodi could have done even if he was sober. The impact wrote off his Hilux but his bull bars saved us. We both climbed out of the wreckage uninjured and threw up. It took us five minutes to find the cow we’d hit because it had been catapulted a hundred metres down the road. I shone my phone light on it and saw it had been split open and a calf spilled out from its belly. We dragged it off the road into a ditch, then hid what remained of his ute down a two track. Hodi likes to say that’s when we became friends but I prefer to remember it as the pokies.

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The rain didn’t let up for a week. The rivers swelled, turned pastel and broke their banks. People were so focused on all the slash that came down off the forestry blocks that no one stopped to consider what else might have shifted. I didn’t tell Hana what I was up to. She didn’t approve of my *lotting*, but she did little to stop it. It gave me a purpose of sorts and she valued that higher than the law.

When the rain finally let up, I kissed her cheek and left for the Landsborough Valley. The river there was turquoise and the forest belt marked by fresh slips. Higher up, the trees

gave way to tussock and the black of mountain schist that broke through the earth's skin like bone. And then higher still, the snow and glaciers that capped the peaks and hid in the cloud.

The light was already fading behind the western spine when I set out from the truck. I donned a head torch and followed the river. It was cold and clouds from my breath showed in the light. I buried my chin in against my jacket.

The feeder streams were so high, I had no choice but to follow the first one I came across. It snaked off into the bush and climbed steeply to its headwaters. I searched its pools, shining my light into its black water. I've found most of my stones this way, at night. That's the secret, pounamu reflects the light like a river run. With the water so high and the undergrowth thick, I was losing hope though. A stand of bush lawyer pushed me away from the stream and I had the thought to turn back or at least make camp. The ground had plateaued but the floodwater had taken all the top soil and left the tree roots exposed. I didn't expect to find anything so far from the stream but that's where it was, twinkling on the forest floor, marooned in the land. I knew what it was the moment I saw it. The moisture on its surface pulled the dirt from the creases of my palm and the creases of the stone as I ran my hand over it. Ocean green, deep water. A river of quartz and gold. The stone would fix everything. It meant land of our own in the Sounds. It meant Hana and the baby and me. It meant being where we belonged.

I stayed crouched beside it until I began to shiver. The cold brought me back to earth and I suddenly had the sense I was touching something not entirely inanimate, like the cold skin of someone dead. I lit a fire and boiled water for dinner. The rock was a mirror and showed the flames on its greenstone.

Later, in a daze of half-sleep, I reached out and rested my knuckles against its surface like I did each night to Hana's belly.

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The dawn chorus woke me. Kākā, riroriro, pīwakawaka. I climbed a ridge and made the phone call to Hodi. He didn't believe me at first but soon came around and made the arrangements with Harper. I spent the rest of the morning cutting a hole in the bush canopy and digging the stone out. It was early afternoon when I heard the chopper coming up the valley. I threw leaves on the fire I still had burning to make a smoke signal. They put the machine down on the valley floor and came to find me. When Harper saw the size of the boulder he panicked and said there was no way he could fly it out. We hummed and harred

for a long time until it was agreed we'd have to cut it in half. They flew out to get a stonecutter and I dozed beside the stream. When they got back, I started cutting while the others ferried water from the stream to pour over the blade. Plumes of dust still rose into the air and settled on the backs of our throats and the mosses that covered the ground. We hammered chocks into the cut and it split in two. Hodi fell quiet then, he walked off between the trees and I could hear him mumbling to himself. It wasn't until I watched the stone lift up through the hole in the canopy that I understood we'd done something unforgivable.

The noise of the chopper faded and I was alone again. When we were little, Hana told me she could hear the earth groan if she put her ear to it. I had the sudden urge to kneel down and listen but the silliness of it stopped me. I rounded the crater we'd made in the earth and started the walk out to my truck.

It was late afternoon when I got to Hodi's. Gulls circled out from the shore and grey light seeped through the clouds to the sea. Hana's truck was parked beside his workshop. She rushed me and spat in my face when I climbed out onto the gravel. I didn't ask how she knew.

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One summer, I found a thousand cockle shells buried beneath our farm. I showed Mum and she called Hana's grandad who came to see my find. He was a large man with a back like a bull. Hana had told me he wore a tiki carved from whalebone around his neck although I never saw it. When he arrived, he came to the hole and knelt beside me to inspect it.

'It's an old Māori midden,' he explained to me. 'A rubbish dump from before you fellas turned up. Looks like the boys had good a feed.' He tapped my belly and we smiled at each other. Him and Dad talked about what to do with it for a while. They were both farmers first and foremost and weary of the group of archaeologists who had been excavating sites on the outer islands. In the end, they told me to fill in the hole and replace the tuft of grass. I looked at that spot every time I passed it until the day we sold the farm.

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'We could talk to the Iwi,' she said over the stone. 'If you gift it to them now there wouldn't be any trouble, right?' Her voice was growing panicked and the tip of her nose reddening with the cooling air.

‘What will they do with it?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know.’

The sun was falling into the Tasman. It showed the earth dried on my skin and the last of the stone’s dust on my clothes.

‘You know we can’t do that,’ I said.

Hana hid her face and walked away to her truck in disgust. There was a stone in my throat. My jaw felt weak, the muscles torn and stretched. I followed her to the truck but could hardly speak.

‘It was for you,’ I whispered. ‘To take us home.’ My face was hot – swollen with suppressed tears. She climbed into the driver’s seat but didn’t start the engine. She just sat there with her belly hitting the base of the steering wheel and stared out at the Tasman.

‘But this is home,’ she whispered. ‘This is home, Grey. Why don’t you realise that?’