

essa may ranapiri

Alba and the atua

Dear Alba

what runs through this broken engine
what spat up out of Albion
what whakapapa gets cross-wired
the viking anachronistically clicks
on the image of themselves
helmet adorned with horns
two for each devil on their back
eagle wings eagle wings eagle wings
these wings turn into a bird
or seraphim so many-eyed
and many-wheeled
building their own way through the water
how meat did we have to make of life to get here?
fish and boar and other beasts
my own mythology of segmented flesh
strike up conversation in the savagery of it
from where I'm standing I can see all the tongues
that the English have cut out
did you bagpipe along to the gargling

blood pooling in the cavities of language
when it dries you have a new red paint job
making everything brand new for the next four seasons
a breath that takes the ashes out
what weapon did they give you
what mascot-ed populace
the first of you to come here
were on the endeavour
with that one that the k̄anaka maoli
would turn cooked
a part of me wished this line of blood never happened
look at how much it spilled
do I turn myself inside out
screaming peace or war ad nauseum?
but it looks like you decided
the alba in albion the war machine
chugging along
let me lie inside it and fall asleep to
its rumbling
praying that the highlands hadn't been
so utterly compromised
that you never had to leave

A Shadow or a Snake

(after 'Address to the Devil' by Robert Burns)

did the devil exist before you lot got here?

the fish of Māui had ātua with their own

ways of seeing the world

of being the world

but none to mark so utterly with horns

before the Devil came

Whiro got to hang out in the dark

like night-time was something completely natural to be in

then a story came

from Christian mouths

that turned us in Whiro's stomach

evil was uttered over their sleeping form

when they arose again

the creatures in the dirt took on a new meaning

and we learnt to carve the word

evil into the night-sky

Tartan

when I found the words for who I was
or what it is I am
there was a knife-edge glint on the word woman
transformed in the light of the sun
just to see what it would be like
I started trying on
my best friend's skirts
one was the colour of wet hair in a storm
the other a baby's blue room
freshly gendered
I slipped one up over skinny jeans
some grotesque parody of early 2000s fashion
a preschool child trying on their parents' make-up
but if it was a kilt?

someone shares a picture of Oscar Isaac on twitter
he's wearing a suit jacket with a grey kilt
there is no tartan

the kilt and the skirt
or the skirt and the piupiu
would they all get the same
reaction
from men at the service station?

I look up Gunn tartan on Google
there are so many possible options
that I'm overwhelmed
I save as a dream of who I was

piupiu rustling around my hips
as I swing the poi
as I whir myself into being
lain on the ground as my mother wraps me in
tartan secures me in the fabric
would these moments have
settled my disturbed stomach?

the only Gunn I've met
a man who gave me a Marvin the Martian
bike helmet for my ninth birthday
the house smelling of Christmas pies
or was it the slow turning of life into death?
his funeral was the first I attended
the first time I learnt that celebration could
look like a tear trailing down the cheek
bloodshot eyes trying to see where he had gone
I don't remember anyone wearing tartan at the ceremony
nothing of that line made it into the church
the original colours have all been lost anyway
the sticks used to test the threads rotting
in the highland mud

Tangaroa at the Loch

Tangaroa watches his moko raise
their head above the water
like a finger breaking
through a black line

the taniwha of the loch is cautious
concerned about more bad flash photography
still feels a kind of way about that first photo
monochrome and grain
when the monster knows there is no one
except for
the foreign sea
sitting in the grass
they will climb up onto the land like a seal
all oily rainbow and flippers
bounding like a dog
to visit the carvings the long dead Picts
left to remind us
of their existence

Nessy thinks about crossing the short distance to
their koro
how easy it would be to bound
that gap between
but something stops them

and Tangaroa just watches with tears in his eyes
he has had time for some of his moko
oceans of it
but he never got to establish a proper relationship with
this lochness monster
the hours of staring at a screen and not pressing send
and the days of not even thinking about it
how long had it been?
was it before Tangaroa was even Tangaroa
Tagaloa perhaps
when the domain of water meant everything