

Looking for old fire, new fire

by Liam Jacobson

**A response to our offsite exhibition A fire that blackened the rocks,
in collaboration with Blue Oyster and hosted by Te Atamira**

*First she goes to her father
for a kauati and a bundle of dry raupō,
wraps them in harakeke
and makes early for the lake.*

Spring. Wind animates the grass.

Following the skeleton fairy leaves to their fallen branches of mahoe, walking the wing of Te Aka o te Tūi in Pukekawa.

Mahuika's children are here. We've come cos of the whispers.

The sun drips its tendrils cross the canopy, spills through the tōtara branches too, bounces off each stratum of fern to bite our foreheads and shoulders and feet.

The newborn lil heads of tōtara are white-green. Beneath them, we pull a fallen branch from the foot of the tree and break off a dry wedge.

We fill mum's kete with a small bundle of wood, dried grass, dry moss and dead feathers of nīkau.

The sky thins, and it glows like the mahoe trunk. We find a duck egg and wish it well.

When we've got all we need, the clouds crawl and darken. Leaving the small patch of kahere, I imagine the histories spiralling in their gaps. The wind claws the car window. We drive a road that was a wetland.

*Her fists grab at the lake / stars
step across her back,
her hair wings the night-water
like kelp.*

We're home, the rain briefly toughens and rattles the metal fence. Under the quick and scattering branches of Te Uira, the sky swallows himself. Whitiri staggers, shakes our front-door. Then, they're gone.

I imagine memories outliving their hosts, persisting beyond bodies, hunting playfully through the air, dancing between trees. I imagine my skull is a net to remember before me. I want to shrink the

distance between me and my histories, outwards.

Backwards and Forwards. From and Through.

There are bays of Te Waka o Aoraki that my tūpuna knew intimately that are hardly smoulders in my words now. Places I haven't been to—that I left before I was born. I'm trying to find a way for my branches to remember their body. I can't only write. I want to find old fire.

I watch the branches of mahoe drying in the sun beside me, and turn them over. I think they have fire, fire they've nursed cross their generations.

When the rain comes again, I wrap the branches in a towel and carry them inside. Lay them on the couch.

*Land crawling closer over
the lake,
reaching for Hakitekura.*

Heaps of the Aotearoa kahere grew into shapes befitting its birds. The bush learnt to flower at the heights of their beaks—and still does for those now extinct. What histories still shape us? I think about the memories I'm looking for. I imagine them flowering at the perfect height for the right posture.

Sitting at our wooden table, my shoddy laptop speaker warbles *Ka Korokī Te Manu*. Old Kāi Tahu songs call between ads for Spotify Premium and Lotto.

I press my orange knife into the branch on my lap. I smooth away some bark that curls into tight spirals. I find myself, considering its capacities. It's stuck somewhere between a tool and a weapon. I think of fire, employed as a weapon of eradication, to burn off and to burn down—to empty the whenua of its alive-ness. Fire winks through the branch. I spose we all have our histories to contend with.

A blackbird watches me from my neighbour's aerial. A streetlight buries the early moon. I find a finger nested in the mahoe and let it out. Sharpen its nail with slow slices.

The finger of mahoe is wrapped in my hands. My nails dig into my palm. I push the hika against the kauati, which sits, raised slightly, against a wedge of tōtara.

Backwards and Forwards. From and Through.

The hika scratches a groove, one that looks like a dark waka swimming the wood. The dust slowly collects in its beak.

I sit there, working... thinking 'just another minute or 2' for hours. Time leaks til it's empty, til its layers unfurl. Sweat springs from my face to the wood. First I smell the burning. Then small flakes of smoke.

I'm reaching for a time before me. There's a fire in my head.

*At the lake shore
her kauati and raupō are bone dry,
she splinters the morning with
her walking.*

Liam Jacobson (Kāi Tahu) is a poet, writer and artist from Manurewa, South Auckland, currently in living central Tāmaki. Liam's poems have been shared in galleries, pubs and alleyways across Aotearoa and overseas. Liam's first anthology of poems, *Neither*, was published by Dead Bird Books in 2023.