

Briar Wood

Poem Notes

My poetry is often about moving to and from and between places. There's a tension between the fantasy and longing about living in one place for long periods in a deeply connected way, which I might have achieved occasionally and the desire to keep moving, an interest in the variety of the world that I think most people understand. Locations, people, plants animals, language and events are all a frequent focus in the writing.

Te reo Māori language has been extremely important – growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand when people were struggling to have Māori language and culture accepted as national culture made a lasting impact and I work to keep informed about events and writing coming from Aotearoa New Zealand wherever I am. Thinking about how language carries history and significant facts about place with it is a running theme in my writing and had a strong impact on how I think about poetry.

Rotomahana

Is about a place I have visited many times since I was a child when it made a lasting impression on me, and I like to take friends who are visiting Aotearoa New Zealand there. I'm always really interested in Māori history and of different people – in this case Te Arawa. Rather than using the useful but ubiquitous language of tourist description I was trying to write about the underlying aspects of what being at that place evokes for me and perhaps for other people too, although the poem does acknowledge that it is interesting how places do evoke different feelings and knowledge in different people.

Rangiputa

Is also about a place I've been many times in my life and it is a poem of mourning and tribute to my father who died in 2005. As is often the case, mourning has released a lot of memories and working them into poems has been a solace and a task as it does for many poets in Aotearoa New Zealand in traditions I'm thankful and disturbed to be a part of in some way. There is a marvellous and particular energy in Māori writing and cultural activity and New Zealand writing and culture in general that gives me a shove when I'm feeling incoherent and always helps to find incentives, readers, companion writers sooner or later. Perhaps it's something about the distances travelled and the courage needed to keep going at times that combines in a specific way in the people of Aotearoa New Zealand that never fails to move me to actions and even words, eventually.

Poet Notes

Briar Wood grew up in Māngere and now lives in London. She is of Te Hikutu ki Hokianga, Ngāpuhi Nui Tonu descent. Briar is a Senior Lecturer at London Metropolitan University.

E-mail: drbriarwood@review.mai.ac.nz

Rotomahana

Two lakes made this stretch of water –
one hot, one chill, though now we're told
the water's mostly cold, except around the edges
where cliffs steam and the earth rumbles.

Visitors, we float on a solid boat, the Ariki Moana,
across the site of Otukapuarangi,
coloured by amorphous antimony sulphides in sinter.
Te hana o Tarawera – buried terraces, villages and all.

The pretty tranquil town of Te Wairoa
where the tohunga Tuhoto Ariki was left
among ash and mud in his whare for four days
since his predictions were mistaken for a cause.

Ah, the cost of prophesy,
though Hochstetter got away with it
and Guide Sophia's mana grew. All respect
to Te Arawa, whose wāhi the gathering visits.

Calmer days now, the kanaka grows
but in Fumarole Bay, the steaming cliffs
and the fracture of a fault line suggest
restless temperatures, tremulous vents.

'If this place goes up again' the captain says,
'and its only a matter of time,
this lake in this boat is the last place I'd want to be.'
After that we trundle uphill in the bus asap,

past Ruaumoko's Throat, now labelled
Inferno Crater Lake – baby blue, azure –
and its symbiotic, Papatūānuku
down up relationship with Frying Pan Lake.

There and now, we could easily be in hot water
whatever newness earth has to create.
Despite the names, science and mythology alone
can't explain this place. Rotomahana.

Rangiputa

Clouds, white sand and blue
expanse of seasky reflecting
each other seeming to go on
and on forever. The transport,
a catamaran floats close to shore.

The dolphins do not appear
although they were here
only yesterday, swimming
among the rocks, playing
with the snorkel faced children.

I search without expectation
for my father, understanding
I will not find him in the dinghy
he rowed to the horizon in
on that stormy bay one day

over forty years ago long
before the manicured motels
now here. That time he came back,
with his friend, a diver,
holding up bundled crayfish.

Ngatote's gift to Joseph
except not in perpetuity.
Now the iwi want it back
and wouldn't you? Who'd
trust a missionary's version?

Today the ship loads up
with business and bonhomie;
not much sign of the god
except the sky rolling on and on,
long and deep as a song.