



'Willow Trees and Waterholes'

By Sawooly Li, Senior Winner aged 17 from New Zealand

When he leaves, there is silence. It slips off his coat hooks, settles with the dust on his clothes, caresses my cheek in the still, sunstruck mornings. Sometimes I sit beneath the willow tree, as we had before his first departure, weaving harakeke¹ into mats of checkered green. Lush hues illuminate golden rays of sun, which slip through the willow leaves like sand in an hourglass. Time passes. I wait for him to return.

I was young, then. Memories, now faded at the edges, glow like glistening waterholes in the summer heat, melt like pavlova on tongue. But his tanned skin, smiling eyes and large, calloused hands—teaching me how to swim, tucking me into bed—are still imprinted vividly in my mind. I remember the way he smells, like pine and woodsmoke in the winters, how he feels like kauri², big and sturdy and strong: memories I have clung onto tightly throughout the years.

The months before his first leave are an oblivious blur; only looking back did I realise the significance of those hushed phone calls, the rubble and chaos on the television, the thin line my father's lips became as he watched the children crying and towns exploding in bits of dust and breaking headlines.

Later that month, I was watching him weave, fingers flying over flax-like blades. Willow leaves dipped into water, a canopy ringing with bird calls of the tui and the silvereyes.

He said, "I'm going to be gone for just a while."

The evening was cold.

"Where are you going, Papa?" I asked.

His expression was bittersweet, like burnt honeycomb. He said there were people who needed help. Vulnerable, innocent people, who deserved to have sweet summer memories, and to know their papas, just as I did. People who deserved to cherish their children lovingly, just as he did.

I thought of the television's chorus of aeroplane engines and the rumble of collapsing buildings.

In the gentle evening, the birds sang in the trees. He said, "I'll be back before you know it,"

I said, "Okay, Papa."

While he was gone, people told me he was a hero, fighting on the frontlines for all those unable to fight for themselves. That made me proud. But the months passed, and the

¹ New Zealand flax. Represents family in Māori thought.

² A native New Zealand tree. One of the largest in the world.

seasons changed. The winter was colder without him. Summer lost its hues. Letters stacked up in my drawer.

His returns were short, mere months of bliss. Each time, his face seemed more lined, more careworn. His hands were rougher, calluses harder, and he smelled like new uniform and unfamiliar washing powder.

Each time he left, I felt a little more bitter. In the mirror, I watched myself grow taller against the doorframe. There were days I was proud of him, days I was worried sick, and days I was utterly angry at him for leaving me. Other kids beamed on stage at assemblies, but I knew his face was absent. When we won our swim meets, the celebration was still tinged with blue. Often, I sat under the willow tree, weaving harakeke, but the birdsong seemed more melancholy than sweet.

You've changed," my father told me.

I handed him firewood. He loaded it into the grate.

I said, "I've grown, Papa."

He looked at me. His eyes were more lined, more creased.

"I've missed you, papa." I told him. "But you've missed a lot, too."

We were silent for a moment.

He asked me if I was angry at him. I told him that I wasn't.

We were silent for another moment still.

"Do you know why I go back?" He asked me gently, turning away from the fireplace. His shoulders were broad, still, like kauri. I saw soot on his fingertips. "Do you know why I go back, when I miss you so, so, dearly?"

Outside, the wind blew gently. I heard the moreporks hoot.

"Mana," My father said. "A person's life force, embodied in every living creature; what fuels the spirit and soul. It is identity, pride, respect for other people and the environment around you."

His eyes shone. "When you honour that, there is manaakitanga: the understanding that others are just as important as yourself, if not more."

At that moment, he was bright. He exuded life, passion, soul. "Not everyone has the power to help. But I do. And I see the innocent driven from their homes, unjustly slaughtered, buried in rubble, separated from family, when they are each just as important as I."

His face was anguished in the low, flickering light. "Can I neglect my responsibility to help them? Can I neglect my morals? It would be a disgrace to my mana. It is my duty."

I watched as he lit the fire, nursing the flame.

"And my mana passes onto you," he said. "You inherit it."

There was the familiar smell of woodsmoke. I breathed it in deeply. My father smiled softly. "I want to make you proud."

The years passed quickly, leaving my childhood behind in a rush, like mist on a Monday morning. Willow trees and waterholes were that of the past; the present was the suburban rush of cars and flashing buses, stethoscopes and white coats—textbooks and hospital corridors became quickly accustomed friends.

Life was normal, in the beginning. A different rhythm, but a steady beat.

Then, the war came.

Slowly. It trickled stealthily into the nooks of homes, mingled with the air, hid behind shadows of tall concrete buildings, and the noise of honking traffic and hurrying pedestrians.

As it crept into our country, we saw the aftermath of the war in others; ongoing battles, losing battles, lost battles.

The world had not yet seen a victory. Morale was low. Cries of children and anguished families pierced the air, and it was not the drone of aeroplanes, but instead, that of blaring ambulance sirens which followed—a chaos of injured streamed in, but no shrapnel nor bullets were the source; it was, instead, the winding tentacles of Covid-19, wrapped around lungs, squeezing throats, sinuses, hearts.

Soon, zero became one, which turned into ten, then into a hundred, then a thousand. We were swarmed, ambushed by the enemy, surrounded by bodies and battlefields, bodies turned into battlefields, and we tried desperately to win.

Facemasks rubbed ears raw, and the air smelled sour and thick with the fume of alcoholic sanitizers. Waiting rooms flooded with the sick: children clung onto parents, parents clung onto their children. I remember a haze of overshifts and night shifts, rattles of trolleys, the quiet beeping of machines, praying they wouldn't fall silent.

We washed our hands three times, four, five. We peeled coveralls off our bodies, masks and goggles slick with sweat, each night more exhausted than the last. On bus rides home, away from the battleground of sick bodies and churning machines, the roads were eerily empty. Silent like ghost towns. Glow from streetlights cascaded like waterfalls, touching me softly in the early morning twilight.

It became routine, sanitising, stripping down, washing every curve and corner of my body, praying that one line did not become two. Each morning I rose and prepared my defences, rallied my nerves and energy for another fight.

The end seemed near. Ceasefire arrived. People stepped out slowly like hedgehogs from hibernation, cases died down and life returned to lonely cities and empty streets. In the lull of normalcy, we thought we had won.

But Covid struck again with renewed vengeance. Tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. And we were called back to war, as fervently as we had been the time before.

It felt hopeless. I was exhausted. Our backs were against the wall, our heels were slipping off the edge.

But I could not turn my back.

And it was then, that I finally, truly, understood what my father had told me all those years ago. It was mana: my soul, my identity, my pride, my values. I could not step aside when there were so many in need. It was responsibility, duty. It was manaakitanga, the ability to put others, and the community, above myself.

When I looked around, there were so many selfless people; bus drivers, grocery workers, doctors, volunteers, who battled on the frontlines. I could see manaakitanga in everyday citizens, as they put the collective good above their own jobs, desires, freedom. It filled me with pride, strength, and love for my community.

Covid would return, with its slippery limbs and many variants. But we, the people of New Zealand, of beautiful Aoeteroa, would be here to fight on.

I walk down the old gravel driveway. The willow tree sways, unchanged with age, still golden with green youth in the sunstruck evening. Under its leaves, there is a figure, weaving harakeke, tanned and tall, shoulders beginning to hunch with age.

I want to make him proud. I want to be deserving of the mana he leaves behind to me. In the distance, the tui calls.

The fight has been tough. The fight is still going.

But all is well.



'Nursing Homes'

By Amaal Fawzi, Senior Runner-up aged 17 from UK

No one thinks about the souls
Wandering around the halls
Of nursing homes.

Two hands, shrivelled with age:
One clasping my alien-blue scrubs,
The other pressed against the poisoned glass
Of a bedroom window,
Tainted with mist from breath whispering,
'This is a safe space between us -'
A smile, crumbling to dust,
When every ten seconds I must ask
Somebody's grandma
To say 'I love you' through a face mask -
My pupils, those tiny swirly spirals
On a loading computer screen
As a I stare and stare
Through a little black fan
Of lines
Stamped on blank little irises,
Waving hello and goodbye to pixels
Calling themselves people.

No one hears about the souls
Stumbling through the halls
Of nursing homes.

I get home and peel off layers of plastic
That feel more solid than skin.
I wake up, go to work, do it all again.
My friends say I'm brave.
*"So brave for going in there every day
And living by yourself.
Never seeing anyone,
Always there to help."*
I'm not brave.
I'm just a person trying to keep other people sane.

One old man asks me my name
As I come in with his usual breakfast on a sanitised disposable tray.
I've known him for a year
But I tell him anyway.
He smiles at me. Says he wishes he could see my face.
I steel myself till I'm safe within my one-bedroom-fully-furnished cage.
Till it's too late at night to keep it all at bay.

No one cares about the souls
Floating around the halls
Of nursing homes.

Some of them don't even have a contact to dial into the phone.
They sit on their favourite armchair or bench
In a silence that makes me hesitate before I break it
With a suggestion of playing cards or tea.

My limbs have become polished, whitewashed cave walls.
You could drop a stone down my throat
And feel the echo reverberate in my bones.

But I'm still here.

With the wilted hands and the constant fear.

No one knows about the souls

Drowning in the halls

Of nursing homes.



'Catalina'

By Madeleine Wood, Junior Winner, aged 14 From Australia

In the heavy dusk cloaked sky,
the moon lights
my granddaughter's face.
Catalina.

She will grow up
in an ever-changing world.
She will learn
to be strong,
to be kind,
to be good.
So, I tell her the story
of her namesake,
of a woman
who had the respect of the
world, but was subject to
patriarchy.

"And so,
the story begins
in the gilded renaissance age,
with a girl born to a United
Spain. She had the will of her
mother and an intellect that
could best the finest men.
From young,
she was taught to lead,
to be a queen."

"Well versed in Latin,
the art of diplomacy
and military strategy.
An observer and thinker,
she learnt from the victory
over the Moors at Granada.
A passionate girl.
An unbreakable spirit."

"Barely 15,
she ventured
across the sea
to a fragile England,
to wed the prince.
A man she knew not,
but was duty bound to be
with."

"They wed,
in the ethereal halls
of Old St Paul's,

escorted by the youthful second son. An alliance of power."

"But as winter turned to spring,
the prince fell ill.
Succumbing to his sickness,
he left in his wake,
a widowed foreigner."

"All alone,
she was left in limbo.
Neither Spain nor England
ready to relinquish their claim,
yet neither prepared to
negotiate her fate.
1 year
of tenuous dependency,
uncertainty,
insecurity,
became 7.
But each year
she fought
for her rights as Princess,
for her promised crown,
And she became the first
female ambassador
in European history."

"Then,
on a fateful spring night,
the king died.
And heir,
the youthful second son
took the throne.
Now eighteen,
he was the
picture of a valiant prince,
and he took her as his bride."

"And once again
she stood outside a church,
ready to seal her fate
to a Tudor heir."

"They wed,
in the enchanting halls
of the church of Observant
Friars, and within days,
she was crowned alongside
her king."

"Many a time
she found herself with child.
And each time,
she would glow with joy,
but as night cast its shadow,
fatigue and terror waged a battle."

"During
one such struggle,
her king
set out
to conquer France,
leaving her alone
to govern over England.
A show of trust.
And here, she outdid even her king.
Organising defence against the
Scots, riding out to inspire her
soldiers, claiming victory at Flodden.
Claiming the hearts of her English
people. A warrior Queen."

"But despite this victory,
each time
he would say,
"My love,
I have faith it will be a boy."
And each time,
she would scream
in wretched, wretched pain
as she lost another son.
She could feel him slipping from her
grasp, as she failed to give him what
he wanted. But each time,
she would gather her dignity,
remain generous,
and loving,
and loyal,
in the eyes of her subjects.
The perfect queen."

"But in the King's displeasure,
perhaps they poisoned his ear.
Knowing in his vulnerability
he would seize any solution,
even from advisors
whose intentions
were clothed in deceit.
Coerced to turn from her.
A desperate man,
lost to fear."

"Fear of what?" Catalina
whispers, eyes wide.

"Fear of ending the Tudor line.
Fear of being remembered as
incapable and weak."

"Gradually,
as the years turned
4-and-20,
he no longer confided in her.
He no longer saw her.
And she no longer recognised him."
Her grasp had slipped,
because of a sin
that is not a sin,
but a twisted expectation."

"He cast her aside,
like she had never
been the world to him.
Like her loyalty and love
meant nothing.
Torn from her daughter,
she was sent away."

"In all this time,
though lost to her king,
she remained true to herself,
for she had done nothing to fault.
It is not a sin,
to give the king a daughter
instead of a son.
So, she fought
with grace and virtue,
and the strength
and voice of all women
who were subject to
the rule of men.
And even the advisor,
who crafted her downfall
admitted that,
"If not for her sex,
she could have defied all the heroes of
history.""

From the tapestry of the night,
the moon lights
my granddaughter's face.
She sleeps,

her last thoughts,
holding the
memory of her
namesake.

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¹ Catalina's Badge.
Featuring a pomegranate, also called the Apple of Granada.
Ironically, this symbol which she adopted as a child, represents
fertility.



'The Molai Forest'

By Maulika Pandey, Junior Runner-up aged 13 from India

It was undoubtedly going to be frosty tonight. As the rain poured heavy, I snuggled my grandchildren into their mother's old bed. They longed to hear a story, but I couldn't think of one I hadn't told them yet. I gazed out the window to see the trees bending and swaying with the wind but still standing tall. I had planted those trees when I was a teenager, and they had always been with me ever since then. Memories flooded my mind. Just then, I know the perfect story to tell them.

"Grandma! Are you still thinking?" Samaira, my eldest granddaughter, asked impatiently.

"Ah yes! I want to tell you the story of Jadav Payeng...a man who believed in himself...my biggest inspiration when I was your age. You see, that was the time of manual labour...time when Earth choked due to deforestation...We didn't have robot machines that planted trees at a massive rate then like how we do now. Trees had to be manually planted and it wasn't easy. But this man not just planted trees, but built an entire forest – The Molai forest!"



"Wow! Grandma how was that possible!" Akshay said, surprised.

I smiled.

"Jadav Payeng comes from a tribe in Assam. You see, when he was sixteen, he witnessed massive number of dead snakes...their lifeless bodies entangled and curled up on the hot sand bars. All due to the excessive heat after floods washed them onto a sandbar. The mere thought of the pain these snakes went through disturbed him. He decided to do something for them....to plant bamboo seedlings on the sandbar."

"Bamboo seedlings? All by himself?"



"Yes! He did it all by himself, with his own hands. Later, in 1979, the forestry division of Golaghat district launched a scheme of tree plantation on 200 hectares land. Jadav was among the labourer involved in this project. When the project completed after five years, he was the only one to stay behind and tender the plants. While doing so, he planted more plants in an attempt to turn the area into a forest. Slowly this jungle became house to many species of animals like the Bengal tigers, Indian rhinoceros and many vultures too! Many elephants visited the forest and even gave birth to calves during their stay. There are a thousand different varieties of trees and you both would be surprised to know that bamboo covers three hundred hectares of the forest!"

"Three hundred hectares! That's about three hundred football fields!", Samaira added.

"Oh My! Three hundred hectares is so much! How did he manage to plant so many trees on such a large scale?" Akshay curiously asked.

"That's the interesting thing about his story. He went to the forest every day to plant trees for decades! Almost for forty years and after all the efforts, he managed to plant forty million trees! Everyone at that time called him 'The Forest Man of India' and the forest which he created is around five hundred and fifty hectares!



His efforts only came into notice in the year 2008 when some forest department officials went into the forest in search of a hundred elephants that had retreated in there. They didn't expect the forest to be so dense and large."

"I'm glad his efforts came into notice. Oh...now I remember...he's the same person my teachers told us about. Once poachers came to hunt for the rhinos in his forest. Mr Jadav timely alerted the forest department and the officials caught them.", Samaira said.

"Yes! It's great that your school teaches you about people like him. He's an inspiration to the young generation. Jadav had also spread his forest to another sand bar inside of Brahmaputra. He has been multiply honoured like the Padma Shri award in 2015 and Commonwealth Points of Light Award in 2020!"





"Woah! That's the fourth highest civilian award in India!" Akshay excitedly said.

"So children, now you tell me what you have learnt?"

"Consistency is the key to success. He went there every day to plant. That's how he was able to plant forty million trees!" Samaira was quick to answer.

"And we should always try to do the right thing for everyone even if no one asked for it. I would also try my best to always do what is right." Akshay willingly added.

"I hope you do so. So, now that you both have been inspired, how about we plant trees tomorrow morning?"

"Of course grandma!" they both happily exclaimed.

