

Ariana Happy – Secondary Schools Division, 2<sup>nd</sup> Place

### **Through Glass Eels**

I have a hangi pit where my heart is. A dingy old clothesline running through my veins, pegging valves in my vivacity.

There were times when Uncle Kokopu seemed a hundred years old, until that silly smile crept back across his face. Like the great Katipo, it only emerged on special occasions -- becoming rarer as time wondered on. Mum said the walls of our rickety home became too small for his greatness, that he needed more space to grow. Why did he need more space when he seemed to get smaller by the day? Sometimes I was scared he'd shrink away to nothing, and all that would be left is the memory of his beloved ratty squished slippers. The ones he wore to listlessly tiptoe around the house on nights he couldn't seem to sleep, or to Countdown on Mondays before school. Now the house is barren at night. No more repetitive tap and scrape of slippers on lino, or morning runs to Countdown when he forgot we went the day before. No more Uncle Kokopu. Mum said that eels are nocturnal too. That when one comes to the end of its life, it swims for five whole months through the Pacific Ocean to Te Rangi -- paradise. This is where it ends its life cycle. She said that that's where my uncle went to, Vanuatu or somewhere sunny and *far* away from here.

I flop against the yellow hallway wall, using it as a headrest for my thoughts, tracing lines in the intricate paisley wallpaper. Closing my eyes brings me back further, and for a second I'm eight again. It's a Sunday morning and the world feels warm. The scent of split pea soup and 'Lemon Cotton fresh' washing powder -- the budget kind, swings through the air around me. I inhale it through the neck of my holey red polar fleece, to catch it before it evanesces. Today's fleeting drizzle bounces happily off the leaves outside, foggy bay windows protecting me from the outside world. kanuka, kumarahou, titoki and nikau. An eight-year-old plant connoisseur, 'king of the bush!' -- or so Uncle jauntily liked to call me. Prince Tui Teka cries out from the whirring cassette. It's almost worn down now. The rhythmic sounds of the galumph of feet on carpeted wood, and Uncle's discordant baritone hums, escape through the rips in our yellow wallpaper. They meld into a beatific symphony that I'd like to call *'the sounds of home - track one, side A'* If I could, I would play this track on repeat, but it wore out months ago.

Today, looking at memories is like looking through a writhing clump of glass eels. The tiny slimy creatures, just the size of worms, make the wrinkles on your palm look like rivers. A million string-like magnifying glasses, everything seems bigger than it once was. I slip my feet into his flattened slippers, out the door, and into the cool morning air. We'd always make the trip down to the creek before sunrise spread its warmth along the horizon. Bucket in hand, I trudge along the desire path we paved over what feels like an eternity ago. Feather grass has spilled over the clearing, muffin-topping over the memory of our footsteps. Begrudgingly, my toes snake from the warmth of Uncle Kokopu's ratty slippers and into tepid waters. With Cutty grass wrapped hands, I start. Fondling under the miry banks first, then moving onto more inconspicuous places; under rocks and rotting logs. Sun starts to light the cloudy brown around me. This once teeming creek is now barren. Slogging toward the shallows, I slump. Pretzelled between past and present, rock and muddy water.

Sediment sinks down and I can see myself on the surface. Two beady hematite eyes stare back, making black gaps in the beige of my reflection. Down from that, a tail, moving with more fluidity than the water below me. Fins curling ever so slightly, as it moves in an infinite S-shape. The great Eel, longer and thicker than my arm, with bite and beauty and grace. I put my bucket down. It glides into the murk, hidden once again. Tracking back home through kanuka, kumarahou, titoki and nikau, empty bucket and soaked slippers in tow, I smile. No catch of the day for mums infamous smoked eel pie, but instead; release. I used to want to go down to the creek with a bucket and scoop up what was left of him, the memory of the great eel, that I was told could live for a hundred years. Now, there are times - increasingly less rarely, where his katipo smile creeps back into mind and the valves release, and I think of paradise. Te Rangi.