Haelyn King – Secondary Schools Division, 1st Place

When the Pōhutukawa Blooms

One time, when I was younger, our sweet ginger cat Tama scratched me. He was just a kitten then, a straggly rescue fond of corners and hissing, and we only ever saw his amber eyes peer out from under the couch. We didn't know how to get him to like us, so I finally just stuck my hand out to pet him. It took one moment before blood was rising into a thin, bright red line. It stung, but I was glad of it; he came round after that.

I stroke the thin scar on my forearm absentmindedly, watching water trickle from the roof edge above. I look over at Noah.

He pulls the strings of his hoodie to block the snippy wind, leaning back in the weak plastic chair that holds him hesitantly. One day soon, that thing will break – I'm actually surprised it hasn't already – and Mum will make me take it to the tip. Then there will only be one chair, and I'll have to sit out here by myself. I could replace it now, before it breaks. I have time tomorrow. I won't, though.

In the first week of intermediate, I had a broken wrist. Despite my best efforts to convince her otherwise, Mum had said I wasn't allowed on the field at lunchtime. She had resorted to pinching her lips when I asked, so I was stuck sulking in the library while everyone else pieced together their new friend groups. I sat alone in a book-barriered corner like I bore a ginger coat.

That's when he walked in, sweat-sticky with a muddied-uniform, hair tousled like it hadn't ever met a comb.

I watched him walk around the library aimlessly, as if he was simply passing through. He ran a finger along a shelf, eyes roaming. He looked through the box with the fun books we weren't

allowed to check out, like the *Guinness Book of World Records* and various delicate, worn pop-ups.

He caught my fearful eye, and I would be lying if I said his head didn't quirk a little like Tama at the sight of a string. He continued his search for everything and nothing at the same time, not once looking back. I thought he had forgotten about me as soon as he looked away, leaving me to be alone with the books about astronauts and faraway exploding stars. But soon enough, he stood, looking down at me, wearing bright, inquisitive eyes on a bored face. A plastic pack of felt tips thudded in front of my crossed legs and a few pieces of printer paper fluttered down after.

"I'm Noah."

I stuff my pinkened fingers into my pockets and look away from Noah and the chair, past the bit of the porch unpainted by a few days of wet. The big pōhutukawa blocks the yard and the cars from most of the downpour, but in doing so it darkens the lawn. Danker and damper than it needs to be. Even less sunlight makes it inside on these days. It's depressing, really.

I don't know why Noah walks through the rain just to hang out on the porch.

I mention the practice he missed yesterday.

"Aw, yeah." He doesn't even look at me. "I forgot about that."

I exhale in response, tilting my head to the sky. The upset sky. The air is thick and damp but my house is right at the end of a wind-tunnel of a street. Right now, the wind has eased, so the humidity lingers in beads of sweat on our noses.

It picks right back up again.

Noah turns to me now, talking about something Jack P did on the weekend.

Mostly he is like this, chatty and goofy and stuff like that. He's always talking it up with randoms when we're at the mall or in the city, making friends wherever he goes. Always joking and laughing, doing shit just to make other people smile.

But sometimes.

"I've started running," he says.

I smile at him. "Sick."

He doesn't follow up, just stares out off the porch, and for a second it's like his eyes rest. The sky above us is concrete, and it starts to spit. I know there is more coming. It's constantly like that in these days – stretches where you only see shades of grey.

After a few terms or so, Noah started coming over regularly to hang out on our porch. He came inside sometimes, sure. But it seemed he was most content with watching the clouds pass by through tree branches and rocking back on the white plastic chairs, testing their patience. We would talk and talk – howls and snorts dispersed through conversation – about anything we could think of.

It took a few years, but at some point our names belonged in the same sentence, the second chair on our porch was his, and he didn't have to ask before coming over. He was there, always, even when he wasn't shooting the shit with me in front of the house. We tangled like roots under dewy grass and damp dirt, and our hearts began beating in tandem.

He'd stop by before going to the field, and, funnily enough, *I was just gonna come ask you that*! When Noah was there, we flowed like water in a creek. He ricocheted off me and I off him, and I always thought the front yard seemed to follow. The pōhutukawa by the fence bloomed thicker, the birdsong rang louder; I could even hear the grass speak if I listened close enough.

“I like the rain.” His eyes are sort of glazed over now, zoning out on the hazy distance, the tiny explosions on the driveway where droplets collide with cold, hard ground. “It’s like, ah. It’s like soothing, ya know? Like the world’s with you.”

I nod.

Like the world’s *with* you. What does that even mean? I think of the poetry unit in English last year and the grades I didn’t want but knew I would get. It’s not my best subject. It’s not Noah’s either. He doesn’t really have a best subject right now. “What does that mean?”

He’s looking at a washing basket. It’s one Mum left outside a while ago, and it has algae coating the bottom now. Rain strikes its surface over and over again. The captured water is close to reaching the brim.

His eyelids don’t move, they don’t even quiver, they just look at the washing basket. “It’s like…a friend. It’s always there.” And then he adds, stuttering, as an afterthought: “And you aren’t alone.”

And the wind is picking up, too. Whirling in the light rain, throwing it against the side of the house. It whips the leaves of the pōhutukawa, really beating up one of the low-hanging, wonky branches.

Last November the pōhutukawa didn’t bloom much.

Noah still came over and hung out on the porch, but he talked less. I talked less, too. It wasn’t awkward – it never was between us – just…dull. He began slipping away like the worn, weakening rocks of a riverbank.

It was a grey summer.

I haven’t talked to Noah in a long time, not like it should be, anyway. Yeah, we’ve gotten older. We don’t hang out in the library anymore. We play football. We talk to girls. We wag just to sit

at the edges of the park, where it meets the bush and bark. We do stuff Mum would be pretty upset about. And yeah, Noah is always there. But *Noah* isn't. It's like someone has locked him in his head. Like his skin doesn't fit him anymore. Like someone drained all the *Noah* from Noah.

I know he's still in there, but the worst part is that it seems like he doesn't. Even when he's like himself, talking and laughing and taking the piss, there is something about Noah that isn't very Noah. Not that it's something else, it's just *not Noah*; it's a lack of.

A stranded sailor watching his ship sink in the thundering sea: that's how it feels to be around him. Too far to reach but close enough to see something going wrong.

How do you tell someone that they feel off?

"Noah." I hesitate.

"Yeah."

And I hesitate again, "Er, nothing."

For a while it's felt as if I'm only seeing him in the corner of my eye, even when I'm staring straight at him. I'm so unsure, so fearful to tread somewhere I don't belong just in case I'm wrong and I make a fool of myself. And then, what do I say after that?

Looking at Noah makes my chest ache. It shocks me: the ache. It wrings my heart and steals my breath for a moment, makes me shift in my seat as if the new way in which my t-shirt sits on my torso will conceal all the emotion hiding beneath. But I can't hide it from myself, even if Noah doesn't look over when my chair creaks. I can't hide from the claustrophobic way it presses in. I'm on my hands and knees, searching through it like it is the underbrush of the bush for some semblance of understanding. In the dark, dampness coats my hands. Where is my rain?

The uncertainty is a vine under my skin, it writhes around my every move and glance and filters through my words. But the worry is stronger, older. It's roots have been here. They're deeper, sturdier. Certain.

There was a girl a couple years above us who stopped coming to school last year. Everyone knew why, but nobody would say. The school avoided it, and the family was okay with that; they didn't want anyone to know. It was as if she never existed, the way her name faded from existence, stuck as a photo in the yearbook.

Noah can't disappear like that. He can't be an uncomfortable silence or awkwardly avoided eye-contact. He can't be a blur in my memory, static and withering as I crash forward, alone. Our laughs belong in the same room; our names in the same sentence. Tomorrow, I need to watch three dots blink next to his photo. And then again on the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that. And –

"Noah." I turn in my chair to face him. "You alright, mate?"

The pōhutukawa's branch creaks. It will snap soon.

"Yeah, 'm fine." He doesn't even look at me.

I sigh, but it is sort of urgent. It's under my skin now, the way I can see it in the weight of his eyelids, the weight of his shoulders. How everything seems heavy.

"No, *Noah*," I insist, repeating his name once more until he turns to me. "Are. You. Okay?"

My words hang in the air, dense. They block the wind, but it's revving up.

He just stares back. I can't tell if his eyes are searching mine or if they're waiting. I don't know what for.

But as if I've been waiting, my roots curl tight. They squeeze a sort of sadness into me where my heart lurches like waves for the sand too high up the shore.

I want to shake him, shake him and tell him to fucking talk. Talk because I know it's hurting him not to say anything, but it'll hurt him to say something, and it'll hurt me if we have to pretend he's okay any longer.

Tears spring to my eyes, and again, it shocks me. But those roots, they hold me steady, curling and curling. They hold me in the dampness, in the dark, in all the emotions that fall from my

being into the air around us. They urge the wind on, shaking through the leaves of the pōhutukawa. They yell and scream for me. And though you can't hear it, you can feel it. You can feel it in the way the first droplet falls in the washing basket, in the way the plastic leg of the chair will break soon, in the blood beneath the scar Tama gave me.

The sky comes thundering down and Noah cries.