

## Auckland Writers Festival and Auckland War Memorial Museum Documentary Heritage Collection Commissions 2018

Alice Canton, Emma Espiner, Linda Olsson, Tusiata Avia



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As part of the 2018 Auckland Writers Festival, four writers **Alice Canton**, **Emma Espiner**, **Linda Olsson** and **Tusiata Avia** were commissioned to create new work inspired by the Auckland War Memorial Museum's *Are We There Yet?* exhibition which explores 125 years of Suffrage.

Our writers researched items relating to that exhibition in the Museum's Documentary Heritage Collection and used what they found to inspire new works of writing which were presented live at a free event at Auckland Writers Festival, May 2018.

You can visit the Documentary Heritage Collection at the Museum and [also online here](#).

The final pieces of collected writing are gathered here so you can read and enjoy them. With thanks to the Auckland War Memorial Museum.

**OVER/UNDER**  
Alice Canton



Abel, C.M. Domestic service woman with tray. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira.  
PH-NEG-C14388.

*Letter to the Editor - [16 MARCH, 1883](#)*

*"We are looked down upon as if we are nothing but mere slaves by mistresses; but for all they may think, we consider ourselves quite as good as they are...I think it was high time somebody stood up for us" - signed, SERVANT*

The woman in the picture wears a black dress beneath a white apron, with a decorative but modest lace-trimmed bib and matching cap atop her perfectly quiffed hair. She doesn't have a name. She probably washed clothes, dishes, prepped meals, and looked after children. She probably scrubbed floors, brushed carpets, beat rugs, filled lamps, lit fires, changed linen, drew curtains. She probably lived with a family (not her own). She probably didn't go on holidays. She probably didn't get sick days. Or mental health days. Or monthly menstrual leave. She might've got a half a day off on Sundays. She might've slept in the kitchen. She might have been the housekeeper. Or the house maid. Or the Lady maid. Or the Cook. The Head Nurse, Nurse, Nursemaid, Parlourmaid, Dairymaid, or Scullery Maid. She is holding a tea tray with a silver pot and a tea cup. She doesn't have a name. She is standing in front of a big punga. A silver fern. She is a no name.

When we think about the Women's Suffrage Movement, we don't typically picture the no names.

When we think about the Women's Suffrage Movement, we typically picture the middle class women. The White, middle class women. The White, middle class educated women. The White, middle-class, educated women, wearing those sort of loose top knots and drapery skirts and a spunky, Elizabeth Bennett kind of charm-in-the-face-of-adversity type thing. Kate Sheppard's smile beckons a clear, dulcet speaking tone (think Kate Winslet *Titanic*): "All that separates, whether of race, class, creed, or sex, is inhuman, and must be overcome". When we think about the Women's Suffrage Movement, we typically think about graceful, feminine women with a knowledge of music, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages - eloquent and strong willed, fighting not just for the rights of women, but the rights of the under-represented.

When we think about the Women's Suffrage Movement, we typically think of White, middle-class, educated women wearing the privilege that their White, middle-class, education afforded them. A privilege that affords me the opportunity to speak today.

When we think about the Women's Suffrage Movement, we don't typically picture the no names. We picture the school teachers and governesses, wives of lawyers, doctors, and business owners. We picture the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. We don't picture the woman who stayed back at the house to mind the children for those Christian families. The housekeeper. Or the house maid. Or the Lady maid. Or the Cook. The Head Nurse, Nurse, Nursemaid, Parlourmaid, Dairymaid, or Scullery Maid.

During the time this photo was taken, domestic service was the single largest form of paid employment for women in New Zealand. Right through to the Depression, women

worked in more than 15,000 homes: 16-hours day, 6½ days a week. But we don't picture the domestic servants. And we definitely don't picture the factory workers, farm workers, washerwomen, coal workers, wool spinners, animal breeders, hawkers, or sex workers.

Instead, we picture the images and stories that *are* important, but typically over-represented in the Suffrage narrative. I'm not suggesting that they are bad or wrong, but simply that when something is over - is the only, is the norm, the singular, quintessential, universal, one - it means something else (or everything else) is under - is other, is different, is invisible, doesn't exist. No name.

*Pitchfork TV* is a youtube channel dedicated to covering indie music like performances and interviews with artists.

They do this great series called Over/Under where they ask artists their hot takes on random topics, simply: Is it overrated or underrated? It's usually followed by a punchy justification. For example: OVER or UNDER:

Craft Beer?

Extraterrestrial activity?

Pet ownership?

Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*?

We could play a similar game with stories told from the Suffrage Movement. OVER or UNDER:

White Middle Class Educated Women - OVER

Don't get me wrong, I love Kate Sheppard. Being the gifted speaker she was made her a voice for the movement. I *don't* think she stood for *just* the rights of Her Kind of Woman, but for *all* women (except of course, Chinese women, who didn't get the vote until the 1950s lol).

Working Class Women - UNDER

When we think about the Suffrage Movement, I want to think about this woman, to know her, to know her name. I want to know her whakapapa. I want to know her story.

Rural Women - UNDER

When we think about the Suffrage Movement, I want to think about the back block women, the farm women. I want to read about the mud track roads, the isolation, loneliness, illness and hardship.

Maori Women - UNDER

When we think about the Suffrage Movement, I want to think about the mana wahine. I want to hear about the effects of colonisation, urbanisation. Māori women were involved in *two* suffrage movement. The right to vote, and the right to vote & stand as members of Te Kotahitanga.

I wonder what might happen if we continued to think about the stories of the modern feminist movement in these terms. OVER or UNDER:

Disabled Women - UNDER

Queer Women - UNDER

Migrant Women - UNDER

Indigenous Women - UNDER

Women of Colour - UNDER

Queer Women of Colour - UNDER

Poor women - UNDER

Fat Women- UNDER

Old Women - UNDER

White Women - OVER

Cisgender Women - OVER

Transwomen - UNDER

Some people might think my little game is trying to dismantle or undo all of the great work that feminism has afforded us, collectively, as women. That I'm suggesting a kind of Marginalised Olympics where proving you're disenfranchised wins you some kind of medal and negatively impacts on the momentum we gain working together. Although I agree we may be at risks of splintering the group, the idea that every woman is an equal beneficiary of the feminist movement simply isn't true. Example. Y'all all arguing for equal pay, and I can't even get a job interview past the Chinese-sounding last name on my CV.

Let us return to the image.

Concurrent to Kate Shepard doing Very Important Work, there were employment schemes encouraging young, single women to immigrate to New Zealand to take up jobs as servants for settlers.

Today, workers from India, the Philippines, and the Pacific nations come to New Zealand to fill our labour shortages. Widespread migrant exploitation is eye watering,

and it's happening right under our noses: being underpaid, being unpaid, denied toilet breaks, threats and abuse, confiscated passports, propositioned for sex by bosses, being forced to work up to 18 hours a day, substandard accommodation. No sick days. No mental health days. No monthly menstrual leave and certainly no half a day off on Sundays.

We know that the Women's Suffrage Movement was more than just the Kate Sheppards and Kate Winsletts getting the right to vote; it was about *all* women being able to speak on their own terms, and more importantly, having the opportunities to do so. There are more stories that exist, beyond the ones you've heard before. The question is, if and when women do not have the opportunity to tell their stories, what can we do with our privilege to change this?

*Letter to the Editor - [16 MARCH, 1883](#)*

*"they think we don't hear them, but I have sometimes, and you can see them say such things by their eyes, and the way they turn up their noses, which are not nice ones either, sometimes.*

*I don't think I can say anymore, but thank you for standing up for us so nicely" - signed,  
SERVANT*

## Brought up with Broadsheet: A love letter to my mum Emma Espiner



Broadsheet. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira.

As a young woman, I rejected everything my mother stood for. I was a shit of a teenager. From age 15, everything she did irritated me.

She was too strict, too lesbian, had too many tattoos. She wouldn't let me criticise other girls' looks and didn't believe in calling anyone 'overweight'. "Over whose weight?" she would say. To the bitchy teenage version of myself, this was hopelessly dull. We were too poor and that was her fault. While friends went to the Gold Coast or on ski holidays to Ruapehu, our social life as a family was attending protest marches, feminist theatre or Judy Small concerts. Other girls got cars or laptops for achieving academic milestones. Mum and her friends threw me a menstrual party when I first got my period.

When I went into the world as an adult I thought it was entirely on my own. I wore make up, high heels and I slept with men thank you very much. I went to university, a first on

mum's side of the family. I moved far away from home. My walls were covered by banal mass-produced prints of European art, my taiaha relegated to the closet, no hairy, bra-less, stropy women in sight. It was Otago, in 2002.

It's 2018. Are we there yet? Do we have gender equality in Aotearoa? What have we done with the suffragists legacy?

Objectively, on any number of measures we're not there yet. There are four times as many Johns who are chief executives of the top 50 publically listed companies in New Zealand as there are women. The pipeline myth has been debunked, with studies showing that even in fields with more than 50% women for decades, the positions of power are still far more likely to be held by men. In New Zealand low paid women still fare worse than low paid men, and low paid brown women fare the worst of all.

What's changed is that it's now common to see mainstream journalists cataloguing the issues and columnists raging at the inequality. The gaps are showing.

But for me, because of my mother, this is the continuation of a conversation that's been the backdrop to my life.

When I was growing up my friends' mums read Women's Day and the rich ones subscribed to Australian Women's Weekly. I desperately wanted those magazines in our house. I tried to stash them in the trolley at the supermarket hoping mum wouldn't notice. Maybe she would learn how to be a normal mum from them. She always threw the magazines out of the trolley at the checkout.

The only magazine that we had in our house was Broadsheet. And although I loved the so-called 'women's interest' magazines for their glossy perfection, they didn't reflect our reality at all. Broadsheet did.

Broadsheet was a feminist magazine published from 1972 to 1997 whose core issues remain relevant today. Reproductive health, domestic violence, Māori sovereignty, sexual politics, gay and lesbian rights and the impact of government policies on women. Critiques of political advertisements were common - like the one shown here - featuring a woman in her underwear with the phrase 'Maybe she's pretty but would you elect her Prime Minister.' In 2018, the answer is a resounding yes.

Many of the issues raised by Broadsheet were considered extremely radical and were reported nowhere else. This mattered to our family because we were certainly not mainstream. Other families had church each week. We had the Lower Hutt Women's



Centre. It was normal for me to observe and participate in discussions about domestic violence, rape, pay equity and politics. This was at about age 11. Other girls had netball practice. Mum enrolled me in self-defence and 'assertiveness for girls' courses on the weekends because she thought they would be more useful.

If this sounds like some feminist utopia, I would agree with you now but at the time I mostly wanted to be normal. At high school in Lower Hutt in the 90s, to be the same as everyone else was to survive. I spent years pretending to be normal, and almost rid myself of the feminists entirely. Didn't need them. I was going to be a businesswoman and make it on my own.

I came out of the business world in 2015 where I had worked in executive recruitment and went back to university to study medicine. From an environment where one or two women on a shortlist for a job was good going, to a class of over 50% women and to a population health lecturer who said the feminisation of the medical workforce was 'devaluing' it. I sensed some feminism might be needed again.

And indeed, they weren't far away. Sandra Coney and Phillida Bunkle were introduced to a new generation of medical students, courtesy of an ethics lecture on the National Women's scandal - the 'Unfortunate Experiment' which saw women die for the sake of one man's ambition, and the system which protected him for years. Prior to breaking this story in Metro magazine, Sandra had been one of the founders of Broadsheet, and she has relentlessly championed women's rights for decades.

In the 1976 issue of Broadsheet, then medical student Rosemary Wood talks about being a woman at medical school. Her male colleagues blame childhood obesity on working mums, one says he'd rape his wife if he wanted another child and she refused, and in an echo of what would become apparent in the Unfortunate Experiment she details the passivity and utter disempowerment of women patients faced with the overwhelmingly male authority of the medical profession.

A cartoon in a later edition shows three male doctors with a line 'I never liked women much – that's why I specialised in gynaecology.' Rosemary was in the clinical part of her training, roughly where I am now. She said then that "Anyone who is at all openly feminist is assumed to be a one hundred percent man-hating/militant/megalomaniac/lesbian/feminist. It doesn't ever pay to be openly radical – final exams loom near."

Thankfully this is one area where progress has been made. My colleagues advocate for inclusivity, have a (mostly) open mind on issues relating to health inequities for Māori and there are fantastic role models to be found among women who have not only

excelled in clinical medicine but also broke the glass ceiling on academic medicine. As far as I can tell, the feminisation of medicine and surgery has been positive and valuable for the professions, the system and patients.

Now in my 30s I realise how formative the experience of my mother's feminism was. For example, bell hooks tells us about the failure of feminism to address class issues for working class women. The idea that the ability to work was the source of liberation only ever made sense for wealthy women – who could aspire to the privilege already afforded to wealthy men. She said "Working for low wages did not liberate poor and working-class women." The situation was even less liberating for non-white women.

Mum always got that. Not just because she worked in low wage jobs and spent time on the DPB, but because she continued to give a shit even when her circumstances improved and she edged into having a middle-class lifestyle. She has personally secured paid work with good conditions for people whose CVs wouldn't have gotten through my first filter as a recruitment consultant, and continues to be active in the union movement despite having done well for herself, because she stands in solidarity with others.

From a home full of protest posters and a Toyota Starlet covered in bumper stickers the quote I remember most, and think of most often is this one from an Aboriginal activist group in the 1970s:

"If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you are here because your liberation is bound to mine then let us work together."

He Māori ahau, No Ngāti Porou me Ngāti Tukorehe ki te taha o tōku pāpā and although mum is Pākehā, she always got the principles of tino rangatiratanga with an effortlessness that I have not often seen replicated elsewhere among non-Māori feminists. She hasn't cringed away from her identity in false worship of indigeneity. She is proudly Pākehā and loves her Irish immigrant ancestry but she has an intuitive appreciation for why Māori sovereignty matters.

In the November issue of 1984, the year that I was born, Broadsheet interviewed Donna Awatere about her ground-breaking and controversial book Māori Sovereignty. Awatere, a member of the publishing and advisory collective behind Broadsheet, suggested that the lack of understanding of Māori concepts by non-Māori was a major obstacle in establishing a uniquely New Zealand culture which brought together the best of Māori and Pākehā alike. In addition to saying some unflattering things about our monocultural colonial heritage, she advocated fighting for cultural sovereignty, over language and

customs, as much as for land. We see this today in the calls for compulsory Te Reo in schools. There is more popular support for this now, indicating the debate has moved forward, but it remains to be seen if our political leaders will have the courage to implement it.

While Broadsheet was not impervious to the fracturing of the women's movement along class, faction and ethnicity lines, it stood out as one of the only places you could hear from women like Donna Awatere, or Moana Maniapoto or Linda Tuhiwai-Smith. Originally a Pākehā feminist magazine, by their own admission, the subject matter promoted by these activists was confronting but Broadsheet thought it was a confrontation New Zealand needed to have. It is because of these women and the platform they were given, that I'm able to stand in a place like this and say things that were extremely radical 20 years ago.

I have never seen my mother threatened by the centring of Māori voices. She has never been concerned that she might not get her say as a consequence. Unlike some so-called diversity proponents, mum gets that sometimes you have to make a space for others and then get out of the way and let them occupy it. She has gone out of her way to promote respect for tikanga Māori, even when it isn't well received. Recently, at the request of local iwi, she facilitated a meeting between them and a government agency. A colleague sneered at her for continuing to run the meeting along tikanga lines even after 'the Māoris' left. She held her ground. Doing the right thing when nobody is looking is the definition of walking the talk when it comes to being an ally.

Every time I'm tempted to look at the privilege and opportunities I've been afforded as a woman generally and as a Māori woman in particular and think that it is representative of the reality for all women, I come back to the principles my mum taught me through her actions. What is the reality for most women and what does that say about how far we've come? It says we're doing better, but we're not there yet.

This is for my mother, Colleen Smith. I'm sorry for being such a shit. You were right about everything.

## Who are you, who am I?

Linda Olsson



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'Who are you?'

It is a good question. Perhaps in a way the very question to which I am seeking an answer. This meeting is all my doing and even if my reasons are not entirely clear, even to myself, I do owe her an answer. She speaks with the soft, slow intonation of the islands. I always thought that the dialect sounded as if, like the granite rocks of the land, it too had been polished by the ice and the sea over thousands of years. While I ponder my response, she speaks again.

'And why are we here?'

I can't detect any real curiosity in her questions, but slight impatience, perhaps.

I hesitate. There are no easy answers. Why are we here? And who am I?

'I am your great-great-granddaughter. You are my grandmother's grandmother. My grandmother was your granddaughter Dagny.'

It sounds odd put like that, but she expresses no obvious interest in my answer and makes no comment.

We are seated directly opposite each other with a dark surface between us. The space is dimly lit from some invisible source. Beyond us is only darkness. I can see her from the waist up. She wears a black dress with a high collar and her grey hair is firmly tied back. Her hands are placed on the table, palms down, one hand on top of the other. The impression is that of a woman who gives nothing away without careful consideration.

There is no time here, and there is no place. Just the two of us.

Finally, she speaks.

‘But you are an old woman, too.’ It is an observation, not a question. I am not sure if her lack of justified curiosity is genuine, or if she is holding back any reactions.

So, how to respond? If a response is at all expected.

‘That is how it is here. We are beyond age. We are all our ages. And at the same time no age at all. We are the essence of all that we ever were.’

‘Essence?’

‘Well, all that we have ever been. All that we remember. And perhaps things that we have forgotten or don’t want to remember, too. All that we are.’

Is she smiling? I could be mistaken, but without changing her posture or expression, for a moment she somehow projects mild amusement. It passes quickly. Instead she looks more impatient. For an instant I am afraid that I will lose her. But she makes no move.

‘And why are we here?’

This is harder for me to explain.

‘I have wanted to meet you for such a long time. You have been in my dreams. And you are in my blood.’

I don’t like how that sounds. So, I begin again. ‘Will you let me tell you a little about myself? It might help to give an explanation.’

She doesn’t respond.

‘I loved my grandmother very much. When I first met her she was old, I thought. I suppose grandmothers always are in the eyes of the grandchildren. Later, I realised she was only forty-two when I was born and over the years as I got older she somehow got younger. In the end we were the best of friends and age was irrelevant. She talked to me about matters that were close to her heart. I have come to understand that in a way I became her closest ally. Her confidante. As she was mine when my home ceased to be a home.’

She looks straight at me, expressionless. Then, a very discreet nod. Or is it just my imagination? I choose to take it as encouragement.

‘My grandmother was your oldest grandchild. I now have grandchildren of my own. Four of them. And I know how special they are. Perhaps especially so the first one.’

Finally, a movement. She clasps her hands and looks down at them for a moment before she looks up again.

‘Dagny. My first grandchild. The first one to be born happy.’

When she looks at me again her eyes shine. Whether it is a trick of the light or an sign of emotion, I can’t tell. I do notice that her eyes are really very beautiful. Dark grey and very clear under those heavy lids that are so familiar. I see them every day in the mirror.

‘The little one. Such a good little girl.’

There is softness in her voice now. I wonder if, unlike me, she can sing. If she sang to my grandmother.

‘She was a wonderful grandmother.’

How can I begin to explain how much my grandmother meant to me? How she came to be the only constant in an otherwise chaotic existence? To make her understand will require more time than we have now. The words that emerge are not the right ones, but they will have to do. For now.

‘My father told me she had been a strict mother. Fair and loyal. But strict. I never saw the strict part. Only the loyalty. Never ending and constant. She was a little hard on herself, I always thought. I suppose she expected others to be, too. But I never felt that she was disappointed in me. To me she was always loving. Family was very important to her, I think. And once you were one of hers, that could never change. She called us *the ourn*. I didn’t understand what the word meant, but I knew that belonging to her *ourn* was something very precious. Something that gave my otherwise unstable world a core. A reliable, stable structure. A proper sense of belonging to a family.’

‘That is how my daughter talked about *her* children. First Dagny, then the little boy. David. She called them *the ourn*. We all did.’

She nods and now I am sure that she is smiling. It is a tight little smile and it somehow looks a little unpractised. And very quickly she puts one hand over her mouth to hide it.

‘She had another little boy, Daniel, didn’t she? The sweetest, my grandmother used to say about her youngest brother. I remember her telling me he died away from home. She used to smile with tears in her eyes when she talked about him. She must have loved him very much.’

Now she nods slowly.

‘We all did. First, I only had Aleksandra, my daughter. And eventually the grandchildren. *The ourn*. It broke my daughter’s heart when her Daniel died. She never got to say goodbye, you see. His ashes came back with the ship. He died at sea. In South America. Both boys sailed, there was nothing else for the boys. We lived off the sea, and the boys either fished or they sailed. And they died in the sea or on the sea’

She falls silent. I think she wants a moment to consider her own words before continuing. She is her own censor.

So, I give her time, before saying, ‘Shortly before grandmother died she said she wanted to find out more about her family. It is not hard on the islands where everybody

seems to be related and the records are very good. I was excited. It was our little project and I wondered what we would learn.'

I pause, realising that I, too, am choosing my words carefully. I am a little startled when she suddenly speaks.

'I don't know your name.'

'Of course. I should have started there. My name is Linda.'

She laughs, now with both hands over her mouth. It is so unexpected that I can't help myself but smile, too.

'But that is a name for a cow!'

'It was the name of a song that my father liked.' Annoyingly, I feel a little hurt. 'He liked music and he had a good voice. Could whistle, too. I loved to hear him whistle. He stopped doing that. I realise that now. And it makes me sad to remember.'

She nods but makes no comment. She places her hands on the table again.

'Yes, the two little ones. Only a year apart. Your father Rune first and then his sister Ruby. My great grandchildren. I couldn't get enough of the little ones.'

'My second name is Anneli. I think my grandmother would have preferred that this had been my first name. It is common on the islands, isn't it? Like you, she didn't like my name very much. But I have been happy to be Linda and I suppose it's too late to consider a name change now.'

'My name is Lovisa,' she says. 'I had another name, but I left it behind when I returned.'

She makes no further comment and I leave it at that.

'So, there they are, the people connecting us. Your daughter, your grandchild and her child. And my father, my grandmother, her mother.'

'Yes. But why are we here?'

That impatience again.

'Because I have read all the documents. Seen the places. I even travelled to Russia. I have looked into the faces of the people on the few pictures that exist. No portrait of you, but some of your daughter. Why are there no pictures of you?'

She sucks in her upper lip and I can see that like my grandmother she has lost her teeth and the dentures are ill fitting.

'Why should there be?'

'Well, there are pictures of other people from that time. But none of you.'

Now her hands are gripped together so hard that the nails shine white.

'Because I was nobody.'

The words come slowly and spaced, with emphasis and her voice has lost all softness. There is a finality in the words and an audible full stop at the end.

I grasp for some new angle, something to keep her talking.

'Can you tell me a little about your home? Where you lived as a child. I know you had two brothers.'

'Only one to know. My brother Markus died the summer after he was born. Many children did in those days, especially if the winters were hard. He was the first child. My brother Johannes was the second and I was the third. Then there were two children who never lived. And finally Greta, the youngest.'

'Was it a happy home?'

'Happy?'

For a moment she looks disconcerted as if the word is unfamiliar.

'It was just a home. Like any other home.'

'You lived in Föglö? Did you have your own house?'

'We lived on the farm, of course. We all worked there. And so that's where we lived. But when father died we had to leave.'

'What happened?'

'First my mother got the cough. '

'How old were you?'

'Ten. I was ten years old.'

'So how many years had you been going to school?'

'I started ... I loved being there. But it was a long way to walk and there was so much to do at home ...'

'And then you had to look after your mother?'

'Yes. The doctor only came at the very end. But there was nothing he could do for her. So mother died.'

'But your father looked after you and your brother and your sister?'

Again she looks at me with an expression of bewilderment. As if she can't make sense of my words.

'My father worked. And Johannes, too. He was fifteen.'

'And you? Did you go back to school?'

'No. There was so much to do at home. My sister Greta was only five. And I had to help with the milking. And during the harvest we all had to be on the fields.'

I swallow hard. For some reason it is her hands I see. Not those on the table in front of me, but those of the ten-year-old little girl.

'Father drowned the year after mother died. It was the day before Christmas Eve. The weather had been unusually warm, and the sea was still open, so he decided to take the rowing-boat out and catch a pike for Christmas dinner. It was late in the afternoon and already quite dark. He had his boots on and was tying the scarf around his neck when he turned back and looked at me. He squatted and beckoned me to come closer. He held my shoulders and looked at me. *You have been such a good girl, Gustava. Like a little mother in the kitchen. Will you help me make a nice Christmas pike with rice and prunes? Will you do that?* I nodded, and he patted the top of my head. And he left.'

She pauses, and her gaze is focused on something only she can see.



'He never came back. They found the boat in the morning. And that Christmas we had no pike. Only porridge.'

'What had happened?'

She shrugged.

'He drowned. Nobody told us how. I suppose nobody knew. When he wasn't back for supper Johannes went out with a lantern looking for him and calling. But it was pitch dark by then and a storm drew in with the first snow. They found him on Christmas Day morning. He was lying in shallow water in the muddy bay just below the farm. Where the cows liked to wander on hot summer days.'

I think of myself at that age. I, too, losing my father in a sense. But not to the icy winter sea, just to another city. Too far away for me to visit so it had felt like he had died.

'And that was that,' she says and makes as if to rise.

'Tell me why you changed your name. Did you do that when your father died?'

She sinks back into her seat, cautiously, as if not quite decided.

'No. Later. When I came back.'

I nod. I know what she is referring to, but we are not there yet.

'So, what happened after your father died? Did you stay with your brother and your sister? Or did someone take you in? Some relatives, perhaps?'

She shakes her head slowly, her eyes on her clasped hands. Then she inhales audibly and looks straight at me.

'The school teacher and his wife took Greta. Johannes went to live with the other farmhands on the farm.'

'And you?'

'I moved in with the other maids in the lean-to behind the main building. I was the youngest and they were kind to me. In the beginning.'

There is a strange distance to her voice. It sounds almost as if she is talking about a person she doesn't quite know. Or like.

'Did you work on the farm?'

She smiles as if she finds it an absurd question.

'We got up at five in the morning to milk the cows. I liked milking. Especially in the winter. The cows were warm and the milk too. I liked all the animals, but the cows I liked the best. I didn't like working in the kitchen. Nobody did. The wife was ... hard. Unkind. They all were. It was a hard family. Nobody wanted to be in the house. But I was the youngest, so I had to do it. I didn't mind the work. It was no harder than what I had done at home. It was the ... the cold. It was cold in there.'

She looks at me as if to check if I understand.

I nod and say, 'There are families like that. Sometimes it's because they are unhappy.'

'But they had nothing to be unhappy about!'

For the first time, there is a measure of emotion in her voice. 'They had everything! The largest farm in the village. A big house with apple trees and cherry trees and lilacs around it. Twenty-two cows, four horses, pigs, hens. Dogs for hunting and the guard dogs. The wife had nice dresses and beautiful shoes. She was very beautiful, too. They had the front seats in the church. They had *everything!* But it didn't do them any good.'

'Were there any children?'

She takes her hands off the table and puts them in her lap I assume. I can't really see.

'There was a son.'

'Only the one child?'

She nods.

'Yes, only the one son.'

'And was he kind?'

She stares at me, her pale cheeks suddenly blushing.

'No.'

I can sense that she will say nothing more unless given an opening.

'How old were you?'

'I was thirteen.'

'What did you look like?'

'Look like?'

She looks completely stunned, as if the question is incomprehensible.

'Yes, tell me what you looked like.'

'Look like?' she mutters.

'Did you have long hair?'

'Of course. All girls had long hair.'

'Dark or fair?'

'Dark. Like my father. Greta, my sister, was fair. But I was dark.'

'What did you like to do?'

Again, that look of incomprehension.

'Do? I told you I liked to milk the cows.'

'But when you were left to your own? Did you work all days?'

'Of course. Except Christmas Eve and Good Friday, when we only milked the cows.'

'So, what did you like to do when you had a little time to yourself?'

'I liked picking flowers. Anemones in the early spring and the lilies of the valley a little later. And I liked to play in the shallow water where the little baby plaice hid in the sand and tickled your feet. I liked that.'

I can see the little girl with her long hair in a braid wading in the shallow water holding up her skirt.

'What clothes did you have?'

'Oh, just clothes.'

'Dresses?'

She nods.

'Yes. And aprons. And a headscarf. My mother made me a sheepskin jacket for the winter and I wore it until it was too tight. Then I unpicked the seams and put the skin inside my pillowcase. But that left me only a woollen jersey, like the ones the sailors wore. It wasn't as warm. The wind blew through it.'

'Did you have a toy?'

'A toy?' Followed by a short laugh that comes out as a snort.

'Something from your home? Something to remind you of your family?'

Absentmindedly she returns one hand to the table, her fingers tracing small circles on the surface.

'I brought my Helmy.'

Her voice is a whisper and her look embarrassed.

'A doll?'

She shakes her head.

'A clasp.'

'A hair clasp?'

'No, father said it was a clasp or a buckle for a woman's belt. He found it in the soil when he was ploughing the low fields down towards the sea. It was very old, he said, and he thought it might have come from the sea. Maybe lost from a ship. That's why we called it Helmy. It means a jewel from the sea. Father promised he would polish it and make a belt for my wedding dress.'

'And did you keep it?'

'I did. I couldn't take it with me when they took me away, so I hid it in my secret place.'

I wait for her to continue.

'I buried it underneath some stones where the snakes like to bask in the first spring sunshine. Nobody comes there.'

'But you never married?'

'No.'

The single word is flat and final. I try another angle.

'So, you stayed on the farm?'

'Where would I have gone?'

'Did you see your brother?'

She nods.

'But he went to sea. And I never saw him again. I heard that he had settled somewhere on the other side of the earth. Not America, somewhere even further away. Some place I had never heard of.'

'New Zealand, perhaps?' I say jokingly.

'Perhaps. I'm not sure. Far away, anyway.'

'What about your sister Greta?'

'Greta was so pretty with her golden hair and big blue eyes. But she was a little ... well, a little slow, perhaps. She liked to be in her own world. But the teacher and his wife loved her like she had been their own.'

'Did you visit her?'

She nods.

'I did. At first. But later I was no longer welcome.'

I can't pretend I don't know what happened. I have read the court protocols. The witness statements.

'Tell me what happened.'

She looks down. I can see how she struggles to stay composed. I give her time.

'All the girls liked the son. Oscar was his name. They smiled and curtsied whenever they saw him. And giggled behind his back. They all wanted him to notice them. I didn't. I tried to stay away from him. He scared me. Perhaps that's why he picked me. He liked it. He liked that I was afraid of him.'

A long silence.

'I was just a child. I knew nothing. One day when I was on my own in the kitchen peeling potatoes he came in. So quietly that I only noticed when he gripped my neck hard. He pulled me inside the pantry, opened his pants ... he took out his... he grabbed my hair and pushed my head down and told me what to do. Afterwards, he gave me a pat on my butt and told me I had been a good girl. And not to tell anybody. If I did, he would make sure to shame me. I heard him whistle as he left.'

She speaks slowly and her voice is dry and flat, absolutely emotionless. It is as if she is placing the incident between us for me to see, rather than listen to her words. And I do. I can see it. I feel tears welling up but try to ignore them.

'After that day I woke up every morning dreading what the day would hold. My ears pricked up as soon as I heard his voice and I tried to make myself invisible. But there was nowhere to hide. Eventually, the other maids began to whisper behind my back and turn up their noses in disgust when they saw me.'

Without thinking I stretch out my hand to hold hers, but she doesn't respond.

'One evening as I came out of the barn with the milk pails in my hands I found him blocking my way. First, he took my chin in his hand and forced me to look into his face. He was smiling. He took the pails from my hands and put them down. Then he grabbed me hard around the back of my neck and shoved me back inside the barn. He had me climb up the ladder first and pushed his hand under my skirt. I didn't want to weep but I couldn't stop my teeth from chattering and I think he liked it. Upstairs, he ripped off my skirt and pushed me down into the dry hay and lay on top of me.'

The words come forth very fast now, but her voice is barely audible.

Now I am weeping, tears streaming down my face. But she seems oblivious and continues.

'Afterwards, I lay still for a long time. The bristles of the hay dug into the skin on my back, but it somehow felt good. I wiped myself dry with my apron and dressed. I climbed down the ladder and went over to my favourite cow, Rosa. She was in her crib with her little calf. I leaned against her warm body and felt the soft nose of the calf sniffing at my skirt. I stayed for a long time.'

There had been nothing to indicate that she was also weeping, but now I could see the tears riding down her cheeks and falling onto her chest.

'He left me alone after that. I think the other maids noticed. I tried to stay away from them. I know they talked about me behind my back. I think the gossip got to the wife because I was no longer asked to work in the kitchen. I was relieved.'

'Could you not leave? Find work somewhere else?'

The expression on her face is that of someone tired of a child's endless tirade of naïve questions.

'Where could I go? You don't understand. There was nowhere to go for someone like me. I could never leave. They could throw *me* out. But I would never have anywhere to go.'

She is right. I don't understand. I can understand intellectually, perhaps. That little girl had no protection, no family. Nowhere to turn and nothing in her pocket. But I have never experienced that kind of desertion.

'The weeks went by and I was not well. The warm milk that I squeezed into the pails began to revolt me and sometimes I had to run out of the barn and throw up. I think the other maids knew. But I couldn't understand what was wrong with me.'

'What about Greta's family? Could they not help you?'

She smiles a crooked little smile.

'One Sunday after church I saw Greta and walked up to talk to her. Her 'mother' quickly pulled Greta towards her and said: *I think it will be best if you no longer see Greta, Gustava. Leave her alone.* And with that she turned and walked away, her arm around Greta's shoulders. I saw how Greta tried to look back over her shoulder, but she carried on walking.'

'And you came to understand that you were expecting a child?'

She nods.

'I did. But I never thought of it as a child. Something was happening inside me, but I wanted nothing to do with it. I just carried on as usual.'

'What happened on that night?'

'I had been feeling ill all day. When we were finished for the day we all went to bed as usual. I had the top bunk and I was so tired I struggled to climb up. I lay awake, trying to be keep quiet when the pain came, again and again. I listened to the breaths of

the girls below. At last I had to get up and go outside. I was afraid to wake the others. Afraid that I would not be able to stay quiet.'

'It was November and it must have been cold. Where did you go?'

'I went to the earth cellar. I had to find my way inside with my hands. It was so dark. And I lay down on the floor.'

'That's where you had the baby?'

She shakes her head.

'That was not a baby. It had no life.'

Our eyes lock and I feel as if there is something I should grasp. But the moment passes and have nothing to offer her.

'I had closed the door and I could see nothing. It was cold in the darkness. But I was sweating as if I had been working on the fields. Then I began to shiver. I was hoping that I would die. I was certain I would. I thought the pain would tear me up. That's how it felt. When finally I felt it come out of me I closed my eyes. I felt no movement and no sound. I was so tired. And suddenly I felt so very cold and I hoped that perhaps this was because I was dying. I put my hands together and began to pray that God would take me. Then I rolled onto my side and I was ready to die. I waited and I think I fell asleep. But God didn't take me. I woke up and I reached down and felt the cold wet bundle still under my skirt. I sat up and lifted it and then I stood and fumbled in the dark until I could feel the wall and make my way outside. It was a clear night with moonlight. It had been snowing and there was a little snow on the ground. I felt something running down my leg and I saw the dark spots on the snow. I looked at the bundle in my arms and I could see that it was a little girl. It looked like a doll, not a person. I touched her head with my fingers. The skin was soft and cold. The eyes were closed. I knew the it was dead. I wrapped it in my apron and walked into the barn. There I put it in the hay and covered it. Then I went back to the bedroom and went to bed. That is what I did.'

We sit in silence for a while.

'Yes,' she says. She says it slowly, and in the kind of tone you would use to comfort a child that has wept for a long while.

'I know what happened afterwards. I have read the court protocols. The ones from Sund and the ones from Åbo. But I have not heard your words. There are witness statements. Many of them. But there was no witness, was there?'

'When they found the bundle in the hay they knew I had put it there. There was so much talk. But I was dead, like I told you. It didn't matter to me.'

'And nobody spoke for you?'

'No.'

'So, what happened? You were so sick, where did they take you?'

'They called for Aunt Kristina.'

'So you had a relative?'

She smiles and it is a genuine, almost childish smile.

'No. Aunt Kristina wasn't my aunt. She was everybody's aunt. She was called for when women had their babies.'

'I see. And what did she do?'

'She took me to her home. She helped me wash and put me to bed.'

'She was kind to you?'

A nod.

'But then they came to collect you?'

Another nod.

'It must have been very frightening.'

'No. You don't understand. I was dead. Nothing mattered to me. I felt nothing.'

I think of the dry protocol wording. And she is right. She could as well have been dead. She is not a human being in those reports, so painstakingly handwritten in ink. Page after page describing a crime that never happened. But her voice is never heard.

'And then you were taken to Finland? And another court. I can't understand that you weren't scared. It must have been so very frightening. And the very long journey. First across the sea and then by land.'

'It took a very long time. I liked knowing that I was travelling further and further away. The farm and all that had happened disappeared. And I was free.'

'I have seen pictures from the prison. The Spinning House. And I have read about it. One thing I read made so very sad.'

'Why?' She looks interested. 'It was not a sad place. It was a safe place.'

'What I read was a comment by someone visiting. He said the women there all looked the same.'

Now she laughs. And I can't help but smile.

'Yes! And that's why it felt so safe. We had the same clothes, of course. Blue and white striped blouses and skirts and aprons and head scarves. We made them ourselves. But we had little things. Secrets that we made from things we found. There was a Russian girl who made beautiful little pieces from hair. From our work money we could buy them from her. Some of the women received letters and gifts from home. Some had nice buttons in their blouses or good shoes. But we all looked the same, that's true. And it made us feel safe.'

'Six years is a long time.'

'Some had been there almost all their lives. I would have happily stayed. I liked the work and learned so much. Mrs Salonen said I was the best seamstress she had ever trained. Best of them all.'

She shines with pride as she speaks. As much to herself as to me, I think.

'And then?'

'Then?'

'Yes. The little girl. Your Aleksandra.'

Her lips are suddenly firmly closed and her eyes downcast. I can't quite interpret the impression she presents. She is not embarrassed, I think. Not sad. Just a little secretive, perhaps. As if this is too personal. Too precious. I am not sure how to react. But before I do, she speaks.

'If we were good and worked hard we were allowed to be outside in the courtyard when we had finished for the day. In the summer the sun would still be up and we used to sit on the grass. It was ...'

She looks at me.

'It was very lovely. I was free and happy. We would talk and giggle. Take off our shoes and socks and lie down on the grass.'

I try to accept that she had experienced freedom and happiness in prison. Perhaps more than ever before.

'There was a place I liked the best. It was a little away from the benches, so usually I had it to myself. It was near the wall where the dog-rose bushes were. I would lie down on the grass and close my eyes and remember the bushes where my mother used to pick rose-hips for winter.'

We are in a slow, delicate dance around the secret she has kept for so long. I don't mind.

'I had seen him before. He came in the morning to deliver milk and butter. I had never talked to him, of course. I wouldn't have been able to anyway. He only spoke Russian. But he used to smile at me. He would make me blush and I would turn away and pretend I didn't notice him.'

'You liked him?'

She nods.

'I didn't really know him. But I liked him. After some time I used to wait for him to arrive. Some days it wasn't him, but someone else. But most days he would come into the kitchen and take off his cap and smile and make a little funny bow when he saw me. Nobody had ever bowed to me before. I was happy. I was happy when I woke up. Happy when I saw him. And when he left I began thinking of next morning.'

So little to make her so very happy.

'Then he gave me the earrings. I didn't notice until he was already gone. He had left them between the blocks of butter on the counter. But I knew they were from him. For me. So I put them in my apron pocket and carried on with my day as usual. In bed that night I took them out. The lights were off, but I could still see how beautiful they were. I put them in my ears. I felt beautiful. I think I smiled all night. I couldn't wear them during the day, of course. But I wrapped them in a piece of cloth and stuck them in my apron pocket. It made me feel good to know they were there.'

'But you couldn't really meet?'

Now the smile is mischievous.



'No. But I started to get up earlier and earlier. It was late spring and the sun was up while everybody was still asleep. I quietly got out bed and sneaked out of the dorm. I was on the roster for the breakfast service and I would make my way to the kitchen. As far as I can remember every morning was sunny and the first thing I did was to open the big window to let the air inside. And soon the birds would wake up and begin to chirp and sing.'

I can see her move around the sunny room, filled with delicious anticipation.

'He started coming ever earlier, too. And it just happened. One day I just found myself standing right in front of him. He slowly placed the box he was carrying on the counter. Then he put his hand on my cheek. And bent forward and kissed me. I had never been kissed before.'

'Nobody ever saw you together?'

'No, it was just the two of us. The mornings were just for him and me. Aleksander.'

I could hear the love in the way she said his name. So long ago, yet so vivid.

'All spring and all summer we had the kitchen mornings to ourselves. I would put on my earrings and run downstairs knowing that he would be there.'

'Tell me what he looked like.'

'He wasn't very tall. Just a little taller than me. But he had the strong shoulders of a hard worker. And a Russian face.'

'A Russian face?'

'Yes. Wide. You know, with high ...' She places her palms on her cheeks.

'Cheekbones?'

'Yes. And very blue eyes. His hair was so fair it was almost white and it grew straight up on his head. I liked to touch it. It felt different from mine. So thick. And he smelled ...'

She opens her hands and it feels as if she invites me to share what she is describing. And I think I do.

'Well, so nice.' Such ordinary words for such extraordinary emotions.

'And you made love.'

She nods slowly and looks straight into my eyes.

'I loved him. And he loved me.'

She has raised her head a little and her eyes are set somewhere beyond us.

'We loved each other that summer.'

We sit in silence and I can clearly see the large kitchen, the window wide open to the summer. I can sense the warmth of the sun on the worn floor tiles, smell the wafts of perfume from the roses and the lilacs. Hear the birds.

'What happened?' The inevitable question that breaks the spell.

'One day he just didn't come. I waited but he never came back.'

'Never?'

She shakes her head.

'No, never. I thought something terrible had happened. That he was dead. He could have been.'

'And then you found out that you were carrying his child?'

'Yes,' again that extended soft word on an inhalation. Calm, satisfied. And, yes, happy.

'What happened?'

'What do you mean?'

'What happened when they found out?'

'Nothing much happened. They tried to make me give them his name, of course. But I never told. I have never told anybody until now. Never.'

'Were you allowed to have the baby with you at all?'

She nods with a triumphant smile.

'There were several children there. And we all helped to look after them. The older women watched the little ones while we worked, but we were allowed to have our babies with us during the night.'

I am astonished.

'It was the best time of my life. I was safe and I had my little girl. I wanted it to last for ever.'

'But it didn't?'

'No, it didn't.'

'The day of your release arrived.'

She nods.

'I had my Aleksandra, my earrings and my work money. That was what I had.'

I am not sure if it's the light playing a trick on me, but she seems to fade, her contours blurred.

'So, you travelled back home?'

'I had to. I didn't want to leave, but I had no choice. Where could we go? I cried all the way to the ship. Then I dried my tears.'

Her voice seems a little distant, too.

'You're not leaving, are you? There is so much more to talk about! So many questions. So much to tell. Please, don't leave!'

She cocks her head a little and smiles.

'Yes, there is so much more. But perhaps we don't need to tell it? Perhaps we already know?'

And I watch in sadness as I lose her. Gustava Lovisa, my great-great-grandmother from Åland, the Land of the Sea. There is so much I would like her to know about me. But perhaps she is right, perhaps in some way we do know what we need to know?

Or else we need more time. Much more time.

Time to write a novel.

**This is a picture from my childhood**  
Tusiata Avia



Photo: Julie Lambie

Christchurch demonstration, December, 1977.

Julie Lambie Photograph. Broadsheet, 1978. Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira.

When I take the *Broadsheets* out of their museum boxes, the covers are familiar. I open one and brush my thumbs over the inner pages, the newsprint is velvety, I think of the strange little patch of downy fur at the base of my new-born baby's back. I put my face to the magazine and breathe in. It smells as sweet and musty as the inside of my mother's room, this helps bring the memory forward.

1977, Mum's bedroom. This is where she keeps things not meant for my eyes: large white sanitary pads, the strange plastic-lace undies with elastic loops meant to hold the pads in place – I try them on. Her diary in her bedside drawer – I read it. I learn, in the tiny pages, that the job Mum disappears to all day is hard, that it makes her eyes hurt, that we don't have enough money, that she's worried. In her room she also keeps a pile of *Broadsheets*. I sit on her floor because I am 'sick' and have the whole day to roam the house alone. I study the *Broadsheets* carefully. I am eleven years old.

Mum is at the beginning of her 'coming out' phase. I don't know it is called this yet. I consider myself a determined feminist, I tell my mother one day – in the back yard while she digs out potatoes – "I'm NEVER getting married". I am watching the unhappiness of her marriage bow her. And soon it will explode and rip through all of us – my father included – like napalm.

Mum hasn't told me about her backstreet abortion yet, but she will in the next few years. She will also tell me about her aunty who performed it for her in 1958 – and how her aunty later went to prison for seven years when a later one, for someone else, went wrong.

Sitting on Mum's bedroom floor, looking through the *Broadsheets*, when I come across the image of a naked woman lying on the floor, legs open, red blood pouring from her. I learn what this means. Abortion. I don't remember what the article says exactly, but I learn there about coat-hangers. In my eleven year-old mind I wonder about the mechanics of this: I know the naked woman has to get the coat-hanger up inside herself somehow, But how does she hook the baby out? How does she know how to steer blind? And then, I see the puncture and the rip. And the blood that won't stop.

I flinch and I flinch for 40 years.

Today, I am sitting in the museum and I am searching through boxes of *Broadsheet*, 1975-1980. I am looking for the woman. I look for ages. Then I look through the contents pages:

Abortion

Abortion

But every issue is about abortion.

This issue is March 1978. New Zealand's Contraception, Sterilisation and Abortion Bill has been in for three months.

'How to get an Abortion':

If you can afford it – go to Australia

If you can't, here are the things women do:

1. The classic gin and hot bath method
2. Epsom salts
3. Quinine
4. Take 600mgs of vitamin C two times a day for 5 days, at the time period is due
5. Insert thin sharp object into the uterus (this would be the coat hanger method)
6. Force soap solution, caustic soda or other harsh liquids into the uterus (this was my great- aunty's method)
7. Suck out the contents of the uterus with a vacuum cleaner.

There are all kinds of warnings listed.

Finally, in the museum, in the last pile of *Broadsheets*, in the last issue, I come to a photo: It is her. The woman. She reaches across forty years, into my mother's bedroom, into my eleven year old chest, where she has been all this time. I contract and open and expand.

This is not the same article I found as an eleven year old, the woman is not emblazoned across a double page, she is in a small photo, bottom right hand corner. She is on a placard in a demonstration in my hometown: Women gather around her. "This woman died: We care. Support safe legal abortion". The curator tells me later this is a famous image. I don't know this. This is eleven year old me, on the bedroom floor, the scents of my mother around me. And her.

She is in a bathroom doorway, feet facing me, pigeon-toed. She is white, as white and as soft as my mother. The floor is dark and cold, her head is on the side, her arms are tucked up under her, her top half is almost peaceful, as if she might almost just be sleeping. In the foreground there are newspapers and tubing. An eight-shaped twist of dark tubing, like an egg timer or infinity. On her left leg there is a dark towel. Or maybe it is a blood-soaked towel, draped across the back of her white thigh. The scary bleeding out between the wide open vee of her legs – her final vanishing point.

I realise now there is no coat-hanger. No blood-red. It is black and white, this picture. *Broadsheet* didn't come in colour. But what I have not misremembered across this long *va* is her loneliness, her shocking bleeding-out-ness, her poor white naked body on the cold floor. I never forgot that. I never forgot that.