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Writing Sample

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From The Darling North
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Two poems

From *The Darling North*

HELLO KITTY, GOODBYE PICCADILLY

Imagine you’d come to Hawai`iki early. I don’t have Hawai`iki.
Imagine you were in Heaven. I don’t have Heaven.
Imagine you were in Paradise but at first you don’t recognise paradise, or smell it or touch it, because you miss earth too much, and being earthly. You miss the cold wind and you wish that instead of leaning into it reading it with your mouth and casting it aside like small-talk on all those occasions of cold wind you had gathered it up and kept it in a suitcase. Then you could carry it with you to the new place open it there and remember what cold wind feels like.

You say to yourself if only I had done that cold wind would come rushing back but you didn’t. In Paradise it is so hot your teeth loosen and creak in your gums and your hands hum. You notice dainty sandals, gold dresses red birds. You remember a coat, olive green, rough, sea-going you wore near the sea. The beach wall was scooped out by waves, and kelp rotted in your nostrils.

You wore your coat to Mass where the squeak
rang out into the still air above the people
   like modern bells
and you cricked your neck to engage with
   the baleful mosaic stare of the Jesus.
There was a department store
   where the air sprang with grey wool.
That was where your wore the coat
   but can’t recall the exact nature
   of how you needed it.
Imagine you’d come to Hawai`iki early.
   I don’t have Hawai`iki.
Imagine you were in Heaven.
   I don’t have Heaven.
Imagine you were in Paradise
   when you haven’t been there long
you look up and find streetlights swimming
   and people talking at an aquarium
and the jellyfish are purple
   and pulse like a heart.
After a day of hard light
   dusk falls suddenly
as if the dark were heavy
and the stream that flows close to your apartment
   becomes wetter and shinier
in the moonlight.
that you once climbed aboard a bus
   You can’t help recalling
   perfunctorily, like pecking
   an old relative
but you threw it away.
   You watch the news
   on and off
and the accent of the newsreader bounces
   until you lose it somewhere inside your ear.
   You hear
your own accent,
   which used to be beyond hearing, a dog’s whistle.
   Imagine you were in Paradise
and in that Paradise you notice
   that the sea is cloudy with sunblock
and rushes up the beach tinkling with the gold rings
   of newlyweds,
   and the metal detectors of the homeless
are made very happy.
   The hills thrust up sharply,
dark, and cars burrow through them like rabbits. You hear someone say on the warm air that if you take pork over the Pali road your car will break down and a woman in white will appear hitch-hiking and you vow never to do that.It is your first plan in Paradise if you can count plans in the place you didn't plan to go to which you think you can.

If you look for a book in a certain section of the Hamilton library a hand will tap you on the shoulder and late at night in the carpark of the Walmart where they disturbed the bones the bones will pick you clean if you’re not careful. You will be careful in Paradise.

You notice that some days the air is mauve and thick and someone tells you, kindly, about vog from the volcanoes and it makes you dizzy, the information, the politeness.

The island, the sea, the waterfalls are pretty. They close the schools on Fridays and it is hot. With a pang you remember the nose of a white cat. Imagine you were in Paradise but when you arrived you thought it wasn’t Paradise. You remembered crisp air, cold as a cave. At home you knew someone who knew someone, a shadow, and you would say hello. All day in Paradise you shake hands with strangers, rabbit ears on a wall. You don’t know. You don’t know.

In Paradise they sound the emergency siren all over the island every first of the month, 11.45 a.m. sharp. You jump out of your skin. It is hot anyway.

You spare a thought for the indentured plantation workers in their sugarcane cages, whose great-grandchildren perform dental surgery at Ala Moana Tower.

There was no shade. There is no shade.

Rents are high and people say it is the price
and others say there should be an excise tax so the children can go back to school on Fridays although they don’t really need school. In Paradise you don’t need anything.
You read in the paper that depressed kids are turning up at the Help Program with the red-haired gene they need help with in Paradise.

For instance the word ‘bong’ echoes through the university shuttle service, and the campus is full of stray cats.

There’s a certain peacefulness. Off-ramps with banks of tires, escape routes for runaway trucks.
You clean the bathroom mirror in Paradise and on the shelf below it a pink Post-it says ‘Dialects of Seeing’ in the round writing of your opposite.

You don’t clean it up. You know this is like a dream, this found thing, so ho-hum – no human endeavour. You didn’t make this up. You couldn’t make this stuff up, but you tell it anyway.

Bong bong.

Imagine you’d come to Hawai`iki early. I don’t have Hawai`iki.
Imagine you were in Heaven. I don’t have Heaven.
Imagine you were in Paradise and on arrival you remember what you had been told about Paradise at the little old cold school:

In Paradise you will sit for a long time looking at everything as if for the first time and you will understand.
You realise you that you like the sing-song of Pidgin,
an exhibition of empty rooms with carved wooden weeds growing out of the skirting boards,
a variety of friendliness.

Kim chee, mandoo, spicy ahu maki, manapoua buns, handbags.
(In Paradise you don’t need money.
A handbag is pure luxury.)
You think you see a sign saying Occidental Rugs
but you’re mistaken: your eyesight
which you thought would be fixed
in Paradise.
   It is dazzling and you are dazzled. The sea.
You walk about. You drive about
   learning the avenues of Paradise.
In the Chinese cemetery on the hill
   the names of the immigrants
under the colonies of lichen
   look out over the bunched handful of city, mini Hong Kong.
You wonder in passing
   about your body, its whereabouts.
Eventually in Paradise you discover a shopping mall.
   This development is a long time coming
because before you came to Paradise
   you bought meat, Brussel sprouts, rough socks.
In the shopping mall goldfish swim in blue ponds
   and perfume coils out of stores to engulf
you
and the song composed by the Queen
   when she was incarcerated in the Palace
   ‘Aloha ‘Oe’
   deposits its snippets in the warm air.
You stop at certain shops,
   and you learn them, and you like them
for their sound and smell
   and their meaning gathers
   like clouds which when heavy
fall on to the carpark, and gather again.
   And again you process along the upper level of the mall
and warm air bathes your feet
   and you incline your head towards price tags
and you fall in love with a cat-face
   and stroke a purse in its likeness
to have and to hold.
   Imagine you were in Paradise
   and in Paradise a funny expression
sometimes pops out of your mouth
   and your children laugh because
   nobody says that
here. (And here
you need to add that for your children
   this is not Paradise because for them
there is only childhood.)
You realise with a jolt that your children’s DNA
does not contain the expressions your parents used,
   that you use,
and if they took a sample of tissue from your children
   they would not be able to prove relationship
through work cut out, mind you,
time being.

On the way to the supermarket you see a film crew
shooting *Lost* out of a white trailer.

By the side of the road you see papery leaves
a layer of chlorophyll.

You try to remember the shape of the hills
that you looked at every day for twenty years,
their greenness, blackness, orangeness
but the only things that come are words
and so you put them down
and they will have to do.
But the hills were always going to go anyway.

And the words.

You try to remember the theme music to the news you watched
before Paradise,
the trumpets important like Yeomen,
but it falls through your fingers,
which doesn’t matter because it was always
going to become unimportant anyway.

In Paradise you try to remember
a tune your father used to sing while shaving.

*I dream of Jeannie with the light brown hair,*

but it is lost. You find
that in order to remember *It's a long way to Tipperary*
you need seagulls to be cawing overhead,
bells to be ringing out the Angelus,
your breath to be white on the air
as you run down the passage to your parents’
room,
school uniform bundled in your arms,
you need to be doing up the rubber buttons on your woollen vest
while the gas fire snorts.

The song would never have lasted anyway.

In Paradise you walk
down McCarthy Mall
between the acacia trees and their geisha sprinklers,
and you swing your briefcase because you have a job
in a place and you think
western capitalism meets eastern cat
and discard it immediately
because thoughts are like that
and this is Paradise.

Warmth rises through your body
and you realise that
you are cool
and the balconies of apartment blocks downtown
look like box seats for the Pacific Ocean
and for the Sun King, and you want
to wave from one, your fan, your beauty spot
and that the creaky wooden villa with light
coming through the floorboards
that you had lived in on earth
has fallen away, and you smile
at the thought of the bright new friends you’ve made.

The school you went to
topples into the cold gully below it, and magpies rise oodle-ardling
until they are full stops
and the extinct varieties of Hawai`i
fill your bookshelves.

A cat you knew once
who slept in your bed on cold nights with its face poking out
becomes mythical,
but you were always going to outlive it anyway,
and a cousin on your mother’s side falls away
but she was always elusive.

There is no brother
but a digital camera, no aunt
but a pair of shoes,
there are no grandparents but a hair straightener,
but they were always going. There is no coat,
but you were always going to lose it,
there is no cold wind,
but it was always going to be forgotten anyway
because of the nature of cold and of wind.

When you travel on the bus you are
a little chilly in the air conditioning,
and you listen to the voice announcing each stop
in well-articulated Hawaiian.

You know whose voice it is and you feel like turning
to the old Japanese woman next to you and saying,
I’ve met that man! You know people.

in Paradise. You remember the voice
from all the previous occasions of going on the bus
of which there are many now because you have been
quite a long time in Paradise,
and the voice is familiar
and comforting,

and when you get off the bus
warmth rises through your body
and it rises through your body and it rises
through your body, and you see

that you had to go some time

and that this is Paradise.
FLOOD MONOLOGUE

1.
You never discussed the stream
and no doubt the stream didn’t want
your discourse (its own merry way)
but now that you live by the stream
a mosquito has come up the bank
and bitten you, and the stream
is in your bloodstream. You buff
the site of entry like a trophy.
Your chuckling new acquaintance
takes your cells out to the sea.

2.
It goes all night, you tell your friends
drinking wine to warm the house
(already warm), and laugh of course
like a drain. Later in your roomy
queen you listen to its monologue –
ascending plane that never reaches
altitude. Your fingers stretch
from coast to coast to try it out,
this solitude, while water thumps
through the riverbed.

3.
You’re not exactly on your own.
Teenagers come and go, the screen-door
clicks, Cardinals mob a little temple
hanging in a tree. A neighbour with a bag
of seeds asks you if you mind
the birds. There is that film, and the flu,
but no. In the mornings earlyish
you slide the rippling trees across
(Burnham Wood) and watch
six parrots lift like anti-gravity.

4.

At sunset a rant about the dishes –
you’ve worked all day, unlike

some people! The tap runs. The sun,
tumbling over Waikiki, shoots through
the trees, gilds the stream (unnecessary),
stuns you in the empty room. Every day

for ten years (you realize, standing there)
you’ve crossed the bridge etched Mānoa
Stream, 1972, back and forth,
Except the day the river rose.

5.

Some facts: Mongooses (sic) (introduced)
pee into the current, plus rats and mice,
The stream is sick. All the streams.
Mosquitoes -your messenger and those

that bit the teenagers whose young blood
is festive like the Honolulu marathon –
could carry West Nile virus. Often fatal.
Probably don’t, are probably winging it

like you, and you will go your whole life
and only die at the end of it.

6.

The stream doesn’t look sick. It takes
a pretty kink near your apartment.
The trees are lush and spreading
like a shade house you once walked in
in a gallery (mixed media). The water
masks its illness like a European noble
with the plague – a patina, and ringlets.
You're pissed about the health issues
of the stream, and healthcare, because
it has your blood, you have its H2O.

7.

You think it's peaceful by the stream?
Ducks rage, waking you at 2am,

or thereabouts. Mongooses hunt
the duck eggs, says your son. Ah, you say.

That night the quacks are noisy, but
you fret in peace. Sometimes homeless
people sleep down by the river bank.
Harmless. One time one guy had a knife.

They still talk about it and you see him
ghostly like an app against the trees.

8.

All your things are near the stream,
beds, plates, lamps – you're camping

apart from walls and taps and electricity.
Your laptop angles like a spade,

and clods of English warm the room
(already warm). They warm your heart.

Overall you have much less, because
of course – divided up. But you're lucky
or would be if the stream was squeaky
clean, and talked to you.
The stream had caused a little trouble in the past, i.e., the flood. Not it’s fault. 900,000 people pave a lot, they plumb a lot. Then rain like weights. From a safe distance (your old apt) you watched your little water course inflate and thunder down the valley taking cars, chairs, trees. You saw a mother and her baby rescued from a van – a swimming coach, with ropes – the van then bumbled out to sea.

One apartment in your complex took in water in the flood. And mud. It was this apartment. You’ve known it all along, of course, because you watched.

They fixed it up. Lifted carpets, blasted fans for a week. Repainted.

It’s pretty good. The odd door needs a shoulder still. In certain lights though, on the wall, a watermark, the stream’s dappled monogram.

You’re talking clichés – water under the bridge, love letter from a lawyer, serious harm, sunk without you. The stream has been into your bedroom, and you in its. Remember reeds, coolness, summer afternoons. You loved the stream. Its stinging waters send a last message in lemon juice:
If I'm fucked, you're coming with me.
sincerely, the stream.