

Where Stars are Strangers

Poppy McGill, Epsom Girls Grammar School

Dear Sister,

The stars here are strangers. Their light shines in a harsh way, so different from yours. It's empty here with endless snow and long winter nights reign above day. I've seen the sparks fly from the *Teliketu's* tail as the Aurora's colours shift and ripple like feathers on a korowai. It's more beautiful than we ever dreamed.

Sometimes the night feels so empty and wide, as if the black will swallow me up, and that's a frightening thing to think of as a whetū. But I hear your song in memories, and I feel the mana chant in my heartbeat.

Few people live on this frozen tundra and I often find myself leaning in closer to the land, their whispered dreams rising up to my seat in the sky.

I hear wishes for love, warmth. To make it home safe, make it through another harsh winter. For more time holding loved ones, preserving the memories of those gone. Eventually the sun rises and night doesn't last forever.

Yesterday the wind carried the scent of pine so sharply that I mistook it for damp ngahere after rain.

I miss the way you laugh before storms. I miss knowing exactly where to find you beneath the clouds. Sometimes I wonder whether you still look for me when night falls, or whether the sky has learnt to live without one of its stars.

Know that my thoughts are of you and our family.

I will see you again soon,
Hiwa.

Hokoi Waipunarangi,

The tongue they speak is so different here. I long to hear waiatas of Te Reo again, for something familiar in such an unfamiliar place.

Red dirt cracks beneath the sun, the only respite for gum trees and critters coming from a cool wind and occasional trickle of a stream. The heat bears down, wrinkling your vision of far-off mountains. A few of the stars here seem familiar, though they keep their distance. There are so few clouds in the sky that I've nowhere to hide my thoughts.

Occasionally I hear the faint voice of Grandmother Papatuanuku carried across the ocean upon the wind. Her song reaches even here, and Grandfather Ranginui is never far. It's almost like I'm back home, the tuī's warble floating in the background.

Do you still chase the rain on the hills? I hope you do. Sometimes when the wind shifts, I can almost believe you'll come running over the ridge with a storm at your heels.

The people are as wild as the land, but they possess delicate whispers. Sometimes I catch myself listening for one that sounds like my own.

Yet the other night I saw the strangest sight. A young woman with her face resting on her palms and her elbows upon the windowsill. While no prayer was murmured nor wish softly spoken, a sigh rose from deep within the figure.

It struck me. There was something familiar about it. A longing.

For a moment, I forgot whether that ache belonged to her or me.

I watched for a while after that sigh escaped her. She clung to the windowsill as if trying to hold it in place. I wonder whether home can become a place you carry rather than one you return to?

If I go back, will home still know me?

Aroha nui,
Hiwa-i-te-rangi

Waipunarangi,

Do you remember what I said before I left? I felt a restlessness deep inside. My mind was filled with stories of the other side of the night sky.

Throughout my existence, I've collected the wishes from the souls below. I've watched, an outsider viewing these emotions blurred through stained glass, never fully grasping what they meant.

But I now know. A wish fills my mind with grey clouds threatening to spill. I finally understand the waiata behind each desire.

I don't wish for discovery or more adventures. For power or a golden pedestal. I am content.

What I wish, every heart yearns for.

To belong.

Beneath the sky, I searched for something I thought lost. But I know where I belong: where forests are filled with toiere, waves batter the black sands and the wind howls freedom upon the long white clouds.

Yet I find myself afraid. Not of the journey home, but of what's waiting at the end. Have the forests learnt a different song while I was gone? Have the waves forgotten my name? Will you still confide in me, or has another sister taken my place beside you?

Maybe it's foolish to fear such things after all I've seen.

Even so, I cannot stay away. If home has changed, I'll learn it again. If I have become a stranger, let me become family once more.

I've missed you dear sister.

I am coming home.

Hiwa.