

Kopuwai

Stefanie Seddon

You never lose the view you grow up with. Whether it's a windswept mountain or the sea or a tower block, the images that frame your childhood stay with you. They hang in your peripheral vision; an ever-present reminder of where you come from, a common connection to the people who still share that view.

In my case, the connection is Kopuwai, a ninety-foot rock standing tall in a southerly wind. In a parched corner of New Zealand's southern alps, the river-swallowing giant of Māori legend looks down from the summit of the mountain range that bears its name. I grew up in its foothills, part of a long-distance rural community, shaped by the mountain's over-arching physical presence. This was the backdrop to the first half of my life.

I still carry some of Kopuwai with me; a rough-hewn gold nugget, prised from one of its snow-melt creeks by my father, thirty years ago, and cast into a ring by a London jeweller; it draws me back to the place I remember, squeezing my skin so tight it leaves a mark that doesn't fade.

I've spent exactly half my life now on the opposite side of the world to that mountain, putting down roots in the country my forebears abandoned generations ago. In that time, I've felt its absence sharply. I've put up pictures of it in my house. I've made it the subject of my writing, where it assumes different proportions – where everything seems twice what it was. The colours appear more vivid, the summers hotter, the winter storms more dangerous. But, with time and distance, my connections feel more fragile. It's a fragility rooted in displacement, in the feeling of 'otherness' that so many writers have tried to unpick in their work. A fear that I'm no

longer identified as a local in the place that I still call home; that I might become an outsider – a wandering summer tourist, looking on. A fear that my relationship with the landscape and people will change, that the mountain's steel-blue outline might become a faraway smudge in the haze.

In my memories, people are mixed with the mountain. My father, like thousands before him, panning for gold on its southern slopes, the high country spreading wide like a rumpled quilt. My mother hanging out the washing with snow at her feet, sheets billowing sideways in the wind. Tom, the farmer, long-nosed sheepdogs racing at his heels. When I do go back, every couple of years, I always call in on Tom. He's ninety now, his memory patchy, and he spends his days indoors. He recognizes my Dad, and me also, but it's like he can't quite place us in time. Not that it matters; we talk about fossicking, sheep, the wool price. Then we talk about the mountain. No one has spent more time on this mountain than Tom, but now his connection with it is changing, heading into unknown territory. No longer his place of work, it now seems an adversary. Dangerous scenes play out in his head – storms, accidents. When his son goes up to move some sheep, Tom paces the house, agitated. He peers out the window looking for cirrus clouds at the summit, innocent wisps that warn of danger to come. Like tiny specks of gold, worn smooth by the creeks that wash them to the valley, his memories are travelling further from their source. Unlike me, he has never left this place, but I feel we have this in common – both now inhabiting a world where our memories of the mountain that shaped our lives have been skewed by distance and time. Like Tom, I'm changed, but still connected. Both of us catching ourselves looking back, trying to make sense of the view.

Stefanie Seddon

Stefanie Seddon's short stories have won the Bristol Short Story Prize and the Commonwealth Short Story Prize for Europe & Canada, and have appeared on Granta.com, addastories.org, TSS Publishing and in *The Mechanics' Institute Review* and the Bristol Prize Anthology. Stefanie grew up on a farm in New Zealand and completed an MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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