

THE HOUSE

The house grew from the crown of the cliff. A collection of angles and corners thrusting stubbornly into the wind, restrained within a skin of overlapping wood slats. Long ago, it had been painted white. The wood was stained now and the paint peeling away in places, as if the structure had feathers or scales. Thick, clouded windows watched the beach to the west, and looked down across the whispering fields of gorse and tussock sloping from its entrance.

Tim liked passing the house on his paper run. It was so different from the squat – the identical homes speckled along the quiet roads of the town. It seemed to him that the house and cliff had occupied the coast since time began. It's as if they would remain forever, their combined height pressing into the sky, and tilting towards the sea, while behind them roads and buildings spread across the hills like fast-moving veins.

It was a long sunlit day when she arrived. Tim was slightly out of breath, having cycled to the crest of the hill. He stopped as the gravel path levelled out, and looked out at the sea, drawing in deep breaths of sunlight and wind.

The sea, restless and glinting, held his gaze, and it was a while before he noticed the girl in the doorway of the house.

Tim had always found the Hamiltons dull. They seemed to inhabit the old house without belonging there. The girl, however, stood before the house, as if her slim shoulders bore and understood the weight of its presence. Her hair tangled about her, caught by the wind.

Bright spots of light gripped the eaves and ledges of the house and it seemed to Tim as if he was looking at an old photograph. He stood for a while, and then shifted his weight back onto his bike and pedalled up the driveway.

As he was approaching, the door opened and Mrs Hamilton appeared, embracing the girl with one arm while taking a bag from her with her free hand. She was smiling at something the girl had said as Tim reached the house, newspaper in hand.

"Oh Tim," Mrs Hamilton called out to him, "How are you this morning?"

"Well," said Tim, smiling at her.

"This is Sophie," she said, waving him over.

Tim wheeled his bike closer, until the shadow cast by the house slipped over his shoulders and clung about him. The girl turned. "Hey," she said, tilting her head to avoid the wind catching her hair.

"Hey, I'm Tim." He was close enough now to shake her hand, but instead he raised his own awkwardly, fingers spread in a belated wave. She grinned.

"Sophie is my niece. She's staying with us over the summer," Mrs Hamilton said. "Perhaps this afternoon you could take her down to the beach."

Mrs Hamilton turned into the doorway, perhaps in response to some noise Tim couldn't hear. Past her shoulders he could see a dim stretch of hall. He could feel himself sway a little, moving through the cool air drifting from the open doorway. Tim, the girl and the woman caught within the quiet of the shadow whose borders held the crickets at bay, seemed cut off from the rest of the world.

Later, Tim and Sophie walked down the hill towards the town. "It's so pretty here," she told him, turning back towards him from ahead.

"Yeah," he said. She moved quickly downwards and he watched the ground, trying not to stumble on the uneven hillside.

"Can we go to the beach?" she asked. Tim had spent most of the summer avoiding the beach, wandering along the edges of the cliffs with the camera he had got for his birthday. Kids who were his age gathered in the creases of the shore, building bonfires and speckling the dunes with

beer bottles and cigarette stubs.

Sophie had turned again, continuing down the hill. Her wrists drifted wide – perhaps for balance, perhaps caught by the wind.

"Sure," Tim said. He had his camera with him now, and as he followed her, he tugged it a little closer to him.

They walked past drowsy afternoon houses before breaking free of the cafés and stunted apartment blocks that faced the ocean. It was a Tuesday and the main street was quiet. A few families moved along the boardwalk or sat in restaurants.

Sophie exhaled deeply, her eyes tracing the seams in the stretch of the sea. Then she grinned at him. "Come on!"

Tim had lived beside the ocean his entire life. He had spent a thousand afternoons collecting shells and digging trenches in the sand. But now, moving in uneven steps to catch up, he felt like a stranger. The year before he had travelled to Malaysia on a family trip. They emerged from the plane. Beyond a membrane of air-conditioning and linoleum, the alien city of Kuala Lumpur lay waiting. He had felt a strange, nervous excitement.

Now, watching her ahead of him, he could feel the memory around him. Sophie led him onto the rocks, darting between outcrops of stone, her hair streaming behind her. Long, golden swathes of light clung to the land as they were slowly dragged beneath the horizon. He trailed her movements, raising his camera occasionally. A shot of her laughing, skin alight with the sunlight. The enamel-like bones of a crab cupped in her hands. The blurry silhouette of her body, caught to the left of an ocean swell, breaking on a shard of rock. He slowed and framed the seconds into submission, until they were small enough for him to bear.

They travelled along the tips of the cliffs, and wound tracks through the forest to the west of the town. She tugged him by hand into the small, dusty cinema to where she crossed her ankles on the seats ahead of them and leaned into the screen. He watched the light change across her face as the projections flickered.

He would cycle up to the house. From its tangled, dormant form, she would emerge and together they would set out.

At night in his room, he leant on the wall behind his bed and looked over the photos. The glow from his camera screen brushed against his face in the dark. Like the smell of salt, or the scratch of sand in his palm. He hadn't managed to get the shot of her ahead of him on the beach; the moment moved too quickly for him to capture. Instead, he closed his eyes and thought about it. He struggled to calm the tug in his throat. He sat and slowed his breath, until he was unmoving. As if he were a statue and his room a picture.

One morning she took him inside the house, up to the attic. At first, he was disappointed. The house seemed like any other. It looked as if it had been renovated in the 70s – beige walls lined with tables, and drawers cluttered with photos and knick-knacks. But she stopped at the top of the stairwell and, from the ceiling, pulled a slanted ladder.

"This is my favourite part of the house," she said, almost whispering. "I'm pretty sure Sarah doesn't like me coming here, so quietly." She had begun to climb and turned back towards him. Soft clouded light escaped from the square in the ceiling. He watched her move into the dust before following.

It smelt of wood and age. The attic roof slanted upwards from both sides. Two small windows faced each other from opposite faces of the house, a shaft of sunlight from one travelling downward to the centre of the room. She had moved to this window, looking out at the sea. The light folded around her frame. The moment was perfectly balanced, as if all the strings of time and matter had been travelling since forever to intersect at this moment.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“It’s nice. You belong here.”

She tilted her head to the side, as if reassessing him. He felt sure of himself as he lifted his camera. She laughed and ducked away, leaving a streak across the image.

That night she found it difficult to sleep. She thought about her home, about her favourite cafe by the park and her friends. At first, she was fascinated by the house, but now she felt a little unnerved. It didn’t matter – summer would be over soon, she thought.

One evening he saw her while walking the dog along the beach. She sat on a sand dune. Around her, others laughed and shouted, their expressions harsh and ridiculous in the light of the fire before them.

She was facing a boy with dark hair. He leaned to the side to reach his drink and Tim could see her smile. A stretch of ebony sand separated him from the group, but he thought he could make out the thin shadows cast by her eyelashes onto her lowered eyelids. While the noise and flickering fire scratched at him, he liked the sharpness of that image.

And now it was night. He had left his bike behind and walked up the slope of the hill, standing before the house. Warm air swirled around him

A stretch of ebony sand separated him from the group.

as he offered himself up for appraisal. He imagined his ribs as overlapping lengths of wood. He knew about the lungs within the house, and the heart. The Hamiltons were out tonight, but from the eastern side of the house, warm light spilt out onto the grass. He moved close to the house.

And now he was beneath the window. And inside she was sitting on the sofa, on the phone. She was bathed in light. Her knees were drawn up to her chest and she leaned against an arm of the couch, not quite facing him. But her hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail.

Next, she lifted her hand to pick at a scratch on her forearm. Suddenly, the room was tilted and off balance. She was different with her hair back, with a box of tissues at her feet, a used one on the sofa beside her. They were unaware they were being watched. He became aware of the cold and the stones pressing into the arch of his foot – the distance he was from his home.

She said something into the phone, smiling. He felt strangely tangent, a boy in a field outside a house. But around him the movement of the gorse was a chorus. The wind and the crickets whispered among each other – something nauseous and desperate. The stars were small and sharp. The clouds moved too quickly above him. He looked behind him.

She placed down the phone. His gaze was drawn back to her. The sea against the rocks. The wings of an unseen bird. The cars in the distance. Ribbons of the world moved higher into the sky. And she rose and left the room. And he drew the window open and entered the house. 

AUTHOR ANTONIA SMITH

This month’s writer is a high school student living in Auckland, New Zealand. When she was eight, her pet chicken died and she composed several grief-stricken poems in response. She has been writing ever since. She recently had a poem featured in the *Poetry New Zealand Yearbook*, and hopes to get more of her work published in the future.



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