

CNZ Randell Cottage Writing Fellowship 2023

Rachel O'Neill — Report

As I reflect on being the Randell Cottage Writing Fellow for 2023 I am in awe at what the rare convergence of time, generous stipend, unique living and working environment, and wrap-around community support has gifted me.

In addition to completing my third book of poetry and making inroads into my fourth, I am excited about the innovations it has allowed me to make in my overall practice that I feel will shape and enrich my creative work for years to come.

During my time at Randell Cottage I worked on a hybrid-form book-length poem called 'Symphony of Queer Errands' and began work on 'Master of the Female Half-Lengths', a book of prose poems and longer narrative poems. Both books are broadly inspired by the 'audial imagination', as Robert Frost so eloquently put it, and are grounded in a personal 'listening practice' I developed over the six months I was in residence at the cottage.

Running alongside the driving question—*What is the music of the moment?*—my 'listening practice' enabled me to be attentive to the sensory and imaginative nuances of time and place, particularly Thorndon and broader Pōneke. Furthermore, fascinating research forays into the intersection of poetry and music super-charged and invigorated my poetic enquiries.

Part of my 'listening practice' involved collecting 'found instruments' and sounds from my immediate environment that I would 'play', record and edit into sound design works, which in turn sparked a sort of 'audial image' that seeded various forms of poetry. Whether it was playfully reimagining a sausage sizzle at the Wellington Cable Car as phantasmagoria, or listening to the unique call and response of birds across the valley at dusk, sounds of all kinds became sensory portals for me. I felt it granted me access to a deeper reservoir of imagery, memory and emotion, which helped ground even highly imaginative and surreal poems.

The Fellowship enabled me to dive deeper into longer-form narrative poetry, especially lyric work that explores the visual potential of the page. A new work 'Soul to Body: The devotional papers of the hopeful eight' was inspired by the sculpture 'Body to Soul' by Mary-Louise Browne in the Botanic Gardens. Featuring 'shape poems' it explores tensions between identity and transformation and celebrates intergenerational healing. Through attention to the visual layout of words and letters on the page, I hope to invite the reader to co-create movement and rhythm and to energetically expand the scope of the poem.

During my tenure I participated in a range of author events, including being interviewed by Siân Robyns at the Randell Cottage AGM in June and by trustee Francis Cooke at the National Library in November. It was also a pleasure to be the subject of a video made by Godwit Films, exploring my work during the Fellowship. After reading several new poems written at Randell Cottage for the launch celebration of Pip Adam's novel *Audition*, one of these poems was later published by Paula Green on NZ Poetry Shelf.

In October, Pip Adam came to the cottage to interview me for an episode of the Better Off Read podcast, where I reflected in particular on the process of writing ‘Soul to Body’. Attending book launches and readings, hosting a writing group at the cottage, and building and strengthening connections with local composers, musicians, authors and collaborators, were all tremendously rewarding highlights of this fruitful time.

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to the wonderful Randell Cottage trustees and Friends and Creative New Zealand for granting me one of the most creatively enriching experiences of my career to date, bringing fresh vitality to my work, practice and life as a poet.

Ngā mihi nui,
Rachel O’Neill — December 2023