

Westerly

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The gales that accompany spring in Manawatū are howling.

We sit just inside the Roaring Forties, a belt of wind circling westwards around the bottom of the globe at latitude 40. This region is formed by wind, carved into shape by the predominant westerly, which bends trees and hedges to the east as if they're praying. There is no forgetting the wind here. It swoops into the region, shakes things up, then continues on its way. The wind bowls heavy objects down the street, whistles round buildings, makes it hard to stand upright. When walking, you must hunker low to the ground to avoid being lifted off your feet, *Wizard of Oz* style. But in winter I miss it, as heavy smog hangs over the city from wood burners turned up against the damp cold. And in summer, I wish it would return to freshen the hot, dense air.

A broken window latch in my bedroom bangs against the frame. As I try to fix it, I see the fruit trees whipping around, immature fruit dropping to the grass. The wind takes a tithe – it did, after all, blow some of the soil here.

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The day is muggy; the temperature gets up to 24 degrees. It's US election day; the results are tantalisingly close, and I call on a friend for moral support. We arrange to meet at a café, and I walk into town.

An old lady leans on a wall, shopping trolley at her side.

"Are you all right there?" I ask her.

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“Just waiting for the wind to stop,” she says. Some hope, I think. I press on while the woman waits, gathering her breath for another push.

At the café, my friend tells me there are rumours that the Canada geese at the lagoon are going to be culled, because they shit on the ground. I tell her there’s human shit in the lagoon, and she says, yes, there’s a sign on the bridge.

Canada geese were introduced to New Zealand early in the twentieth century as a gift from US president Theodore Roosevelt. At one point, they were thought to be extinct in North America, because of over-hunting. Conservation efforts brought the geese back from the brink, and introduced them to new areas, where they continue to clash with humans over territory and resources.

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Tired of trying to understand the US election – the mechanics of electoral colleges and swing states, and how so many millions of people could vote for a man like Donald Trump – I go for a twilight ride. I head west into the sunset, along the river path to He Ara Kotahi bridge; the sky is layered orange, blue and black. It’s busy at the bridge: people are drawn towards its lights like moths. Three girls take selfies. A young couple wrapped around each other face out towards the water. A man leans on a bike decorated with a string of blue lights; a boom box on his carrier rack plays John Lennon.

Christ you know it ain’t easy, you know how hard it can be. The man tips his head back and exhales a long stream of vapour.

I ride back to the crackle and fizz of fireworks.

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Guy Fawkes' Day. The little boy across the street tells me,
"We're having fireworks tonight! 'Cos there was this man, and
he tried to bomb the Beehive."

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Strolling through the city in November, it's easy to see why
Palmerston North was once known as Rose City. The slogan
related to the rose trial grounds in the esplanade, a fragrant
heaven of apricot, burgundy, coral, lavender and gold in
summer. But roses grow all around the neighbourhood too: a
tiny variety poking through a fence, its blooms so far along the
yellow spectrum they're almost green; voluptuous, peach-
coloured beauties sprawling in a border; long-stemmed,
elegant, acid-yellow roses clipped into formal standards in a
front lawn; hot-pink blooms scrambling boldly through a tree;
and the deepest blood-red, velvety, romantic rose climbing up
a shed. The city is en fête. Today's light breeze carries the
scent of the roses towards me: liquorice, clove, lemon, violet. I
inhale it, because soon the bushes will be whirling in a gale,
and the flowers will be gone.

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A cold front moves in. I wake up extra early with freezing feet.

I struggle against the wind on my lunchtime walk
around the neighbourhood. A wind chime tinkles. It's recycling
day, and escaped rubbish flies around the street. It's not just
litter that bowls along in the gale – the recycling bins have
mostly been blown over too. A gust of wind almost lifts me off
my feet. At the traffic lights, I hold on to the streetlamp while
waiting to cross, so I don't get carried into the road.

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The city's roses shiver in the wind. My white
'icebergs' turn brown and bedraggled in the wet.

Children play soccer on the field behind my house; a
couple of girls huddle into their hoodies by the goalposts. The
roar of the wind lifts the children's screams high into the air.

Rain, hail and gales grow stronger over the evening.

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I umm and ahhh about the weather but am desperate to get
out for a ride. There's a strong westerly, so I head east.
Deserted river path. Someone has stencilled *Cyclists this is not
a race track* on the path. There's no one about. I speed up.
Wheeee! Through the market gardens. Warm salty aroma of
cows, and spicy smell of celery from the fields. A burnt-out car,
and fresh black tyre marks on the road. Smoke from a bonfire
hazes the road ahead. A bird of prey swoops, white in the
light. Wind whistles across the fields; it's so strong it blows my
helmet back from my forehead. Gusts push me out into the
road. I tack into the wind, like a yacht. Traffic is sparse but
every time a car approaches, I'm worried I'm going to be
barrelled into its path. I abandon the road and head back to
the river. Safely home, I check my Strava cycling app. Personal
Best out, Personal Worst back.

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Since I started cycling (after my car died), wind is no longer
just wind. It's a strong westerly, an occasional easterly, or a
chilly southerly straight from the Antarctic; a head wind, tail
wind or side wind. My ear-warmer is in the wash so I ride bare-
eared. The geese sit by the lagoon with their heads tucked

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under their wings, the draught ruffling their feathers. A pile of goslings sleeps on the grass.

Along the river path, bare willow branches clatter. The roiling river is the colour of milky tea. I tug down the zip of my rain jacket just as I reach the bridge, where the wind thunders off the river; it turns the coat-flaps into a sail. My ears start to hurt. I stop to get my breath back under the pine trees at the top of the hill, where there's some respite from the onslaught. The wind soughs through the branches. Swifts are tossed around the sky.

A mountain biker bombs past.

"Too windy for this, eh?!" he shouts. But it's not; it's exhilarating. I get back on my bike, and the wind pushes me up the hill, a hand in my back.

The wind can be friend as well as foe.

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Today is hot, cold, wet and dry in turns, but always windy. I go to the university campus. A broken blue umbrella has been stuffed in a bin. A broken red umbrella sticks out of the next bin.

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I pick a spray of 'Wedding Bells' roses from the garden, and put them in a vase by Mum and Dad's wedding photo, taken in spring 1959. My parents were just shy of their 25th wedding anniversary when Dad died aged 56, only a year older than I am now.

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On the back deck, chameleon roses turn from bright lemon to pale yellow to vermilion to flushed pink to speckled white, before the petals fall and scatter on the breeze. But this is not the end.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' hails the wind as both "Destroyer and Preserver": blowing away the old, bringing the new.

In the petals' place, tiny rosehips incubate the seeds of the next generation.

I go through the garden gate and walk round the field. A pink, blue and grey sunset, dark clouds scudding across the sky. A little girl runs out on to the soccer pitch and turns cartwheels on the grass, arms and legs spinning like a turbine in the wind.