

Wintec / Waikato Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Gail Pittaway

In the country

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is a Senior Lecturer in Creative writing, Storytelling, Myth and ritual and Media Theory, in the School of Media Arts at Wintec, Hamilton, New Zealand. She has published poetry and short stories as well as articles, chapters and papers in the discipline of creative writing, papers on New Zealand literature, the history of food writing, New Zealand cookery books and publishing. In 2015, she co-edited 'Minding the gap', a collection of essays on creative writing in Australasia, with Dr Thom Conroy. She is currently a Doctoral candidate at Central Queensland University, in the fields of creative non-fiction and food memoir. Gail lives in the country, in the lush Waikato region of New Zealand.

Keywords:

Creative writing – poetry – Gothic – New Zealand

In the country

You are inside, at table
It is twilight, winter,
and the house is beginning to distinguish itself,
with light, from the surrounding gloom.

A knock at the door
a woman, distressed, looks in at you
and says –

‘Do you own a dog?’

‘A Labrador?’

‘It’s just been killed on the road.’

Then, breaking down,

‘The bastards, they swerved right at it,
then just drove off.’

So begins the horror.

You gather up the still warm pet,
too heavy to carry,
so in the dark you park the car in the middle of the road,
roll her into the car boot
and bring her through the gate to bury her.

You dig a grave by torchlight;
so much earth for such a short life
and, sobbing, come in to the fireside,
where the children have laid her in state on her favourite rug
scattered with Paris daisies

‘Lottie’s still dead’, says Max as you kneel down.

A year goes by. A knock at the door.

Outside, through the glass, a man, in singlet and shorts
One side of his face a livid rash,
so the whites of his eyes catch the flash of the kitchen light.

‘Do you own stock?’ he rasps.

His voice sounds threatening.

‘No, not at all, not even a dog.’

‘There’s a beast on the road some ways back –
someone needs to get it off, or
there’ll be a nasty accident.’

Your husband goes with him.

He does not return.

Was it a ruse, you wonder?

How vulnerable you are,
in the country,
in the privacy of night;

that anyone can come
and take your husband away,
to look for a beast that you don't own.

Eventually, you go out to look for him
but there is no sign –
only vast skies
the odd flicker and twitch in the leaves
a distant drone of trains.

You go inside and prepare for life
without a husband.

Anything can happen after all
in the country.

Eventually he comes in and says
 'No sign of the beast.
 but he must be out there somewhere.'

Research statement

Research background

This poem is autobiographical writing, or life writing, based on a sequence of events that occurred when my family relocated from a city to a country dwelling. It fits into the genre of New Zealand Gothic as defined by Ian Conrich: ‘New Zealand fiction, its literature and film, has repeatedly portrayed spaces of isolation, loss, and despair, of a rugged, wild, and treacherous land that can assail and entrap’ (2012).

Research contribution

The title of the poem is an ironic reference to conventional tropes of country living as rustic, idyllic; traditions which come from Greek pastoral poetry, exemplified by the *Idylls* of Theocritus. There is also a sly allusion to reality television shows such as *Escape to the country*, where the reality is not all bucolic either.

Research significance

‘In the country’ represents work towards a collection of poetry, *Stamps*. Poems in this collection have been published in such collections and anthologies as *TEXT*, *Emergent*, *Love Street* and *Please send money*. This poem was peer reviewed before publication.

Works cited

Conrich, Ian 2012 in David Punter (ed) *A new companion to the Gothic* Blackwell Reference Online, at http://www.blackwellreference.com/public/tocnode?id=g9781405198066_chunk_g978140519806629 (accessed 1 February 2018)

Theocritus 2003 *Idylls* transl Anthony Verity, Oxford: Oxford UP