

# CAPITAL

ISSN 2324-463-6



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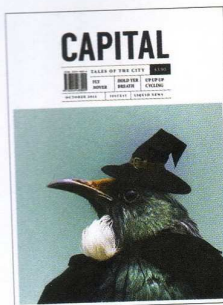
OCTOBER 2014

ISSUE 15

LIQUID NEWS



# CAPITAL



## THE COVER:

*A very New Zealand take on Halloween.*

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## SUBSCRIPTION

Subscription rates \$77 (inc postage and packaging)  
11 issues per year  
New Zealand only

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Post Box 9202, Marion Square,  
Wellington 6141  
Deliveries 31-41 Pirie St, Mt Victoria,  
Wellington, 6011  
ISSN 2324-4836

Produced by Capital Publishing Ltd



PRINTED IN  
WELLINGTON

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manufactured under ISO14001 Environmental  
Management Systems

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## MADE IN WELLINGTON

For awesome or October.  
Even though it's Spring here and no Autumn mists in  
which to trick or treat, celebrating Halloween is established  
now. I know, I know it's a 'ghastly American sugar fuelled trip,' but, as  
I may have said before, I'm all for building more festive community  
events into our calendar. If we want community spirit let's develop it.

We at *Capital* like birds, as you may have noticed already with our  
monthly What the Flock column, and this month we are celebrating  
with our own cover bird ready for All Hallows Eve.

Also this month Iona Pannett, a hard-working and committed  
Green councillor, gives us an overview of the Basin problem, or is it one?

Beth Rose alerts us to a growing competitive sport, free diving and  
the perils that lurk in the deep, while Melody Thomas looks at the rise  
of upcycling and how we have taken to it with gusto.

New contributor Jamie Melbourne-Hayward takes a milky look  
from Cuba Street to Cuba.

My thanks to the French Embassy for the opportunity to publish  
the delightful reminiscence of writer Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut, former  
resident of Randell Cottage.

By the time of our next issue we ought to have a new government  
in place and life in the capital will resume its usual rhythm, political  
gossip still swirling but without quite the same fervour.

Our sales and readership numbers are growing month by month  
and we are enjoying the progress. A cafe copy was spotted being  
eagerly read in Riverton (deep South) recently. Questioned by our  
visiting locals, the proprietor said he had lived in Wellington and had  
organised a regular supply for himself and customers.

We are delighted with your feedback and comments. Please keep  
them coming.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Alison Franks

Editor

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## TWO SEASONS AND COUNTLESS TREASURES

WRITTEN BY THANH-VAN TRAN-NHUT | PHOTOGRAPHED BY EVANGELINE DAVIS

In January 2014 Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut swapped the boulevards of Paris for the windswept hillsides of Wellington. Here she reflects on her six months living and working in Thorndon as the Randell Cottage's writer in residence.

I'm back in Paris now and living my second summer this year. After a spell of cold and rainy weather, the temperature has risen again and I hope the white Japanese anemones will settle nicely under my rose bushes. In between their roots are bits of New Zealand soil, and some of their leaves once stirred in the Wellington wind. They are my links to a small garden on a hill in Thorndon.

It has been weeks since I left, but I still return to Randell Cottage in thought. I only have to close my eyes and recall the familiar routines: pulling up the shades of the entrance door in the morning and leaving it open, lifting the sash window in the kitchen to let the wind fill the rooms, connecting to a wi-fi network named Writers Trust. That's how it was for almost six months and I can still feel the cool brass of the hexagonal



*Randell Cottage in Thorndon has been a writers' residence for New Zealand and French writers since 2001. Vietnamese born / French resident Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut spent summer 2013-14 there working on a new book. Her books about Mandarin Tan, a 17th-century Vietnamese detective, have been translated into several languages.*

doorknob, the little snib that keeps the lock retracted. The front door stays open most of the time, a luxury one can afford in this part of the world. Bird-songs and occasional music drift into the house. There are no locks on the gate, no shutters on the windows, just a welcoming threshold.

I remember the light in Wellington. Golden rays on the afternoon of my arrival in January, washing over the cottage while shadows gathered beneath the hills; pale light reflecting off a blank grey sky; black light on hot pink flowers and tangerine-coloured leaves, when magic took over the Botanic Garden; illuminated words cut into Katherine Mansfield's metal skirt; the glow of a bus brushing across the Braille sculpture on Lambton Quay.

I remember the string of yellow and red lights moving along the coastline as I looked across the Lady Norwood Rose Garden from the spur above; darkness closing in on the harbour under clouds grazed by a dying sun. And the silver sliver of a moon sailing through a sky studded with unfamiliar stars, the Southern Cross to remind me that the Equator lies north and the South Pole is only 5,400 km away.

There were days of rain, but not enough to dampen my memories. Drizzles and showers, the sound of drops skipping on the path or pounding on the iron roof just meant more moisture for the plants. And weren't we surrounded by water anyway, with the harbour beckoning below, lustrous or leaden, depending on the mood of the clouds? I would run down to the wharf, racing through the old tombstones in Bolton Street Memorial Park, to watch people jump off planks, their bodies in flight before they hit the icy water. Beneath the surface, clinging to wooden poles, yellowy crabs and star-shaped creatures watched them fall in slow motion, shrouded in a veil of bubbles.

Of course there was the wind, chasing clouds over Tinakori Hill, making airport windsocks fly frantically while airborne

planes dipped and yawed – the kind of wind that lifts a giant eagle with a wizard astride and messes your hair when your picture is being taken. And you know you're not in France when a wind from the south means chilly weather.

I loved this place where the moon waxes and wanes in the opposite direction to the one in the northern hemisphere, where people drive on the left-hand side, rotate clockwise at roundabouts, and swim laps likewise (yet run laps anticlockwise?). It's all a matter of symmetry and it forces you to change your point of view.

It has been six months of ongoing discovery: trevally and tarakihi, red cod and hoki, kumara and Smitten apples, flat white and magic slice, hangi and fish & chips. On the track of an extinct endemic gecko, I stumbled upon feisty kaka, clever kea, a precious white kiwi, two nearsighted kune kune and one short-lived baby fantail. I had mesmerising encounters with birds and beasts drawn by French explorers in the 19th century. I pored over atlases printed in Paris in 1826 while sitting in the National Library of New Zealand, 19,000 km away and 188 year later. All this thanks to a book collector named Alexander Turnbull whose grave I always ran by on my way down to the city centre.

I was surrounded by books: *Two Worlds, First Meetings between Maori and Europeans, 1642 – 1772*, written by Anne Salmond; *The Mijo Tree* by Janet Frame; a pile of works by New Caledonian authors. In the Cottage were books that gave me a glimpse of New Zealand society: short stories by Katherine Mansfield and other Kiwi writers, *The Honey Suckers* by Victoria McHalick, novels by Fiona Kidman and Kirsty Gunn (the Kiwi 2009 Randell Cottage resident), *The Collector's Dream* by Pierre Furlan (the French 2004 Randell Cottage resident), so beautifully translated by Randell trustee Jean Anderson. And one very special book written by Susan Price: *A Mind of His Own, The Childhood of Hugh Price*. It tells the story of



the young boy who, with Beverley and Susan, would later gift Randell Cottage to the Trust, making the writers residency possible. It contains old pictures of houses, ships and trains, toys and stamps, notebooks and certificates, things that make up a life and keep its memory alive. Above all, it shows the love of a daughter for her father.

Every time I opened the gate, I was reminded that Randell Cottage is a Wellington landmark: the round metal plaque states that it is a Notable Home – Home of Sarah & William Randell, bricklayer, and their ten children. On several occasions, from my desk, I sighted groups of tourists peering into the garden. Behind waves of pink anemones the small house with a red roof elicited looks of appreciation and it felt nice to be somehow a part of a historical place.

On my numerous visits to Te Papa, I would stop at the World of WearableArt exhibition, where clothes from past international shows held in Wellington were on display. I marvelled at the creativity of the designers: a gown bristling with spikes of polished wood, a shiny laser-cut dress crafted after a Rorschach inkblot, a bodice etched with an ancient map, under a coat lined with paua shells. And a corset of white china whose blue willow pattern had been directly lifted from a plate donated by Beverley Randell. Once again, Randell Cottage appeared in the warp and weft of Wellington's cultural fabric, as history wove itself into art and beauty.

Even at the movies I was reminded of the Cottage. Relaxing in a velvet-clad sofa at the Light House Cinema where I saw *What We Do in the Shadows*, a parodic vampire movie filmed in Wellington, I followed Taika Waititi, Jonathan Brugh and Jemaine Clement on their nightly prowls. True, they were keen on any unclogged artery, but they definitely demonstrated good taste when they singled out Denis Welch, my predecessor at Randell Cottage.

During my residency, I went to the South Island to hike with my husband Joël who came to visit; to Christchurch, Auckland and Palmerston North, on my tour of the Alliances Françaises in New Zealand; to New Caledonia where I was warmly welcomed by Nicolas Kurtovitch (the French 2007 Randell Cottage resident); to Australia to give talks at universities in Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide.

I left many times. But always I left lighthearted because I knew I'd return.

I roamed endlessly around the Botanic Garden where blue and purple hydrangeas grew in a fairytale hollow. I watched the seasons pass as roses bloomed and withered, their petals scattered by the wind. I felt the temperature plummet and saw the light fail, when the summer song of the cicada ceased sometime overnight. Time was catching up on me.

So I tried to outrun it by doing more, cramming my days with new experiences, stretching them till three in the morning. I hopped on bus 10 to the zoo, bus 11 to Seatoun to do the Eastern Walkway, took the East by West Ferry to Eastbourne. I committed to memory the sound of traffic lights signalling it was safe to cross, the tug needed to open the letter box by the gate, the shimmer of the silver fern globe floating above Civic Square.

The last moments I spent with my friends in best-loved places: dining out and drinking ginger beer at Sprig & Fern; having tea at the Cottage; indulging in an afternoon flat white at French Cancan; returning to my favourite haunt, the hole in the wall on Bond Street called Fisherman's Plate, with superb Vietnamese soups and derelict decoration.

All my travels and experiences fuelled a blog I kept over these two seasons in which I sought to capture the moments and encounters that made this residency so special. It tells of the lectures I gave at the Alliances Françaises in Wellington and Palmerston North, the reception at the Résidence de France where I was officially greeted by Ambassador Laurent Contini, the annual general meeting of the Friends of the Randell Cottage, the presentation I gave at the National Library, just a week before my departure...

In the end, at five in the morning on 26 June, Golum watched Fiona Kidman and her husband Ian give me my last Kiwi hug.

And yet, half a world away and ten time zones behind, I haven't lost my bearings. Just as explorers of old, hoping to return, buried bottles in the sand to mark their passage, so I've left a part of my heart under long white clouds – right here: 41°16'42.8"S, 174°46'06.3"E. ■