

# THE Bucket Man

by Anna Smaill

The last time it rained was the day I turned ten. I remember because that afternoon, I walked home from school for the last time. A half-hearted shower, over before it really started.

Back when I was too young to remember, the government divided up all the land. If you wanted food,

you had to grow it yourself. Our plot was steep and dry, so Dad and Mum built terraces. I hated those terraces. The dust got into my hair and into my mouth and under my nails. I didn't want to be there. I wanted to be at school, asking questions, getting answers. "What happens inside a seed?" I wanted to ask. "What's dust made from? Where did the rain go?"

It was Gran who took pity on me. "Do you reckon you could lend me Jack for the water rounds?" she asked my mum. "The drums are getting so heavy to lift, and I want to take some up to Gordon."

Nobody refused my gran anything, so the next morning, there I was, piling the gallon drums into the cart. They were light and empty – hollow. Two for each of us, two for the fields, and an extra two for Gordon, our up-the-hill neighbour.

Gordon Ratana was totally cuckoo; everyone knew it. The whole flat roof of his house was covered in plastic 10-litre buckets, waiting for rain that never came.

"Why can't the bucket man get his own water?" I asked.

Gran gave me her best stare. Then she twitched the reins, and we made our way to the reservoir. The sun burnt down the whole way, but it was way better than being on the terraces.

"Do clouds have names?" I asked. I don't know where the question came from. We were driving back, the water drums heavy in the cart. I was looking at the small white streaks up high. Nobody paid attention to clouds any more, but I did. I liked trying to stare down the sky's big blue eye, even though it always won.

"Didn't they teach you that in school?" Gran asked.



“No,” I said. Thinking about school was like thinking about water when you were thirsty – it just made things worse.

Gran used to be a scientist. Dad once tried to explain her work to me. Basically, he said, it was coming up with new questions about the world and working out the answers. Maybe I never asked her about it because I was so envious.

“Those are cumulus clouds – Altocumulus.”

The word had a music to it, cool and calm. “How do they form?” I asked. “And why? And how do you know when they have rain inside?” I couldn’t stop the questions once they started.

Gran sat back and looked at me. I thought she would laugh, but she shook her head.

“You’re just like Ned,” she said, “when he was your age.” She was silent after that. Ned was my great-uncle. I never met him.

We drove all the way to where the old dirt track started. Gran pointed at the two extra drums. “Take those up to Mr Ratana,” she said.

I sighed and hauled them up the track, all the way to his crazy lean-to house with the buckets on the roof with their meaningless labels: potassium nitrate, silver iodide. Deep inside the shack was a strange sound. Metal clanging on metal.

I left the drums outside the door and ran all the way back.

I didn’t tell Gran what I’d heard.

The next day, Gran passed me something. A book. Books weren’t made any more, so it must have been pretty old. The paper was dry, chalky almost.

I opened it in the middle. The page showed the long, stingray shape of our island. There were black curved lines across it like ripples inside a drum of water.

“Know what they are?” said Gran. “Isobars. We used them to predict the weather. That was my research field. I studied weather. The climate.”

I tried to think of a time the weather wasn’t always the same and turned the pages gently. There was a name on the front page: Ned Dixon.

“Ned was a scientist, too,” Gran said.

“You both were?”

“Our father taught us to ask questions. And my mother. She was a geneticist. Her father was a scientist as well, and further back, his father. You come from a family of scientists, Jack. Questions are deep in your blood. I should have seen it. I’m sorry. I should have seen it before.”

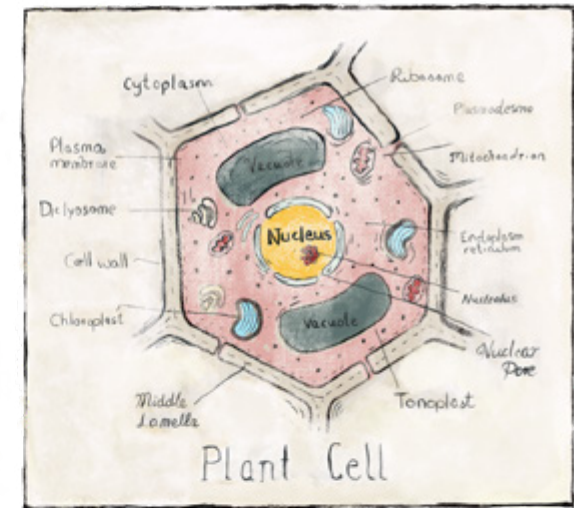
I breathed in and tried to imagine back then. There was a burn of envy. None of my ancestors had stopped school at ten. And what good had all their questions been? They hadn’t stopped the earth from drying up. But it wasn’t just envy I felt. It was excitement. And something else: the calm feeling of learning names.

That summer, Gran brought a new book on each trip to the reservoir. Each one had a name in the front. Sometimes her name, sometimes Ned’s. The older books were her father’s and mother’s, and there were older books still – my great-great-grandfather’s.

“Aren’t these out of date?” I asked.

Gran laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s all still true.” Then she took the book back to test me on the parts of a plant cell.

“Cytoplasm,” I said, carefully. “Nucleus. Mitochondrion.” I tasted the names, as cool as water.



At the end of each trip, I dragged the drums up the bucket man's track. The clanging inside was getting louder. One time, I craned my neck around the busted gate. Out behind his shack, I saw a huge object made from metal pipes all twisted together. The back half was covered in sheets of blue tarpaulin.

"Why do we get water for the bucket man, Gran?" We were drying dishes.

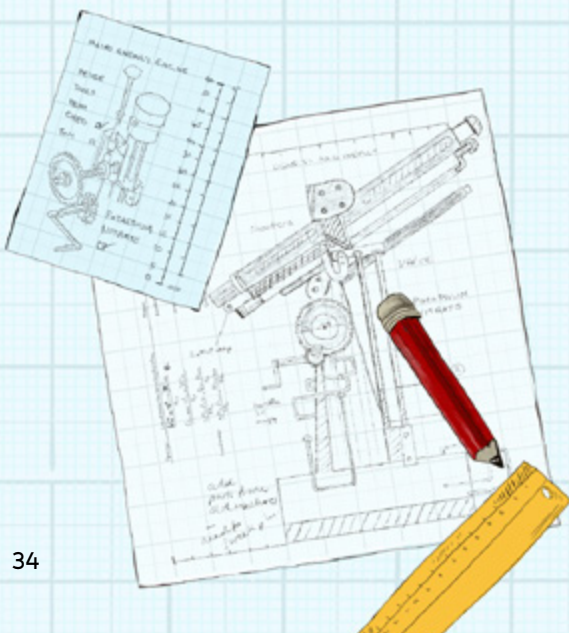
She spoke carefully. "We used to work together."

"Where?"

"Greta Point. We worked for the same institute. We were all trying to find solutions to the weather. Gordon latched on to one of my ideas. A silly one, really. It wouldn't have worked."

"I don't understand."

"He got fired. I've always felt guilty. Not that it made any difference. Soon after, the government closed us down."



"Is that what he's building up there?" Gran's eyes flickered. "What?" "There's always sounds from his house," I said. "When I drop off the water. Hammering. Other things."

Gran was silent. There was a crackle in the air. Like electricity.

Dad broke the news later that month. "I need you back on the terraces full time," he said. "Your sister's finishing school soon. She can help with the water."

Gran didn't meet my eyes. We had worked our way through the life science textbook, and now she was introducing maths. There'd be no time for that now.

That night, I went to her room. I knocked quietly, then pushed the door open. There was nobody there.

"Gran?" I whispered.

On the bed, there were sheets of grid paper covered in pencil markings. I looked closer. On the top was a sketch, a plan. Metal pipes twisted, an engine, a turret with a gun head. Next to the designs were formulae and equations. Before, they would have been nonsense. But not now. I was learning the family language. I could read the numbers and letters and knew they were names. Potassium nitrate, silver iodide. And I knew where I'd seen that machine before.

I saw what Gran had invented. I saw what the bucket man was trying to build. I saw that they were both as crazy as each other.

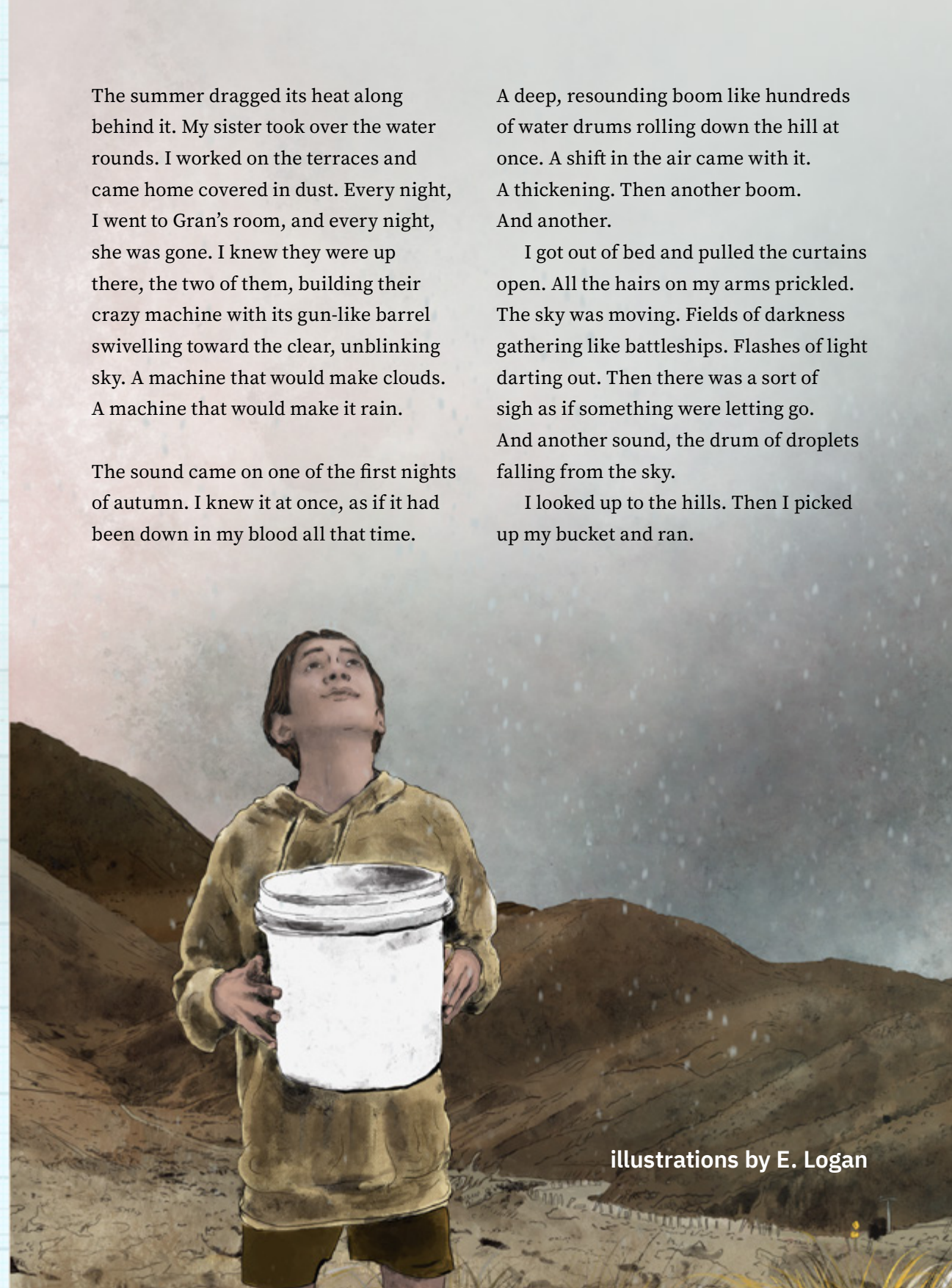
The summer dragged its heat along behind it. My sister took over the water rounds. I worked on the terraces and came home covered in dust. Every night, I went to Gran's room, and every night, she was gone. I knew they were up there, the two of them, building their crazy machine with its gun-like barrel swivelling toward the clear, unblinking sky. A machine that would make clouds. A machine that would make it rain.

The sound came on one of the first nights of autumn. I knew it at once, as if it had been down in my blood all that time.

A deep, resounding boom like hundreds of water drums rolling down the hill at once. A shift in the air came with it. A thickening. Then another boom. And another.

I got out of bed and pulled the curtains open. All the hairs on my arms prickled. The sky was moving. Fields of darkness gathering like battleships. Flashes of light darting out. Then there was a sort of sigh as if something were letting go. And another sound, the drum of droplets falling from the sky.

I looked up to the hills. Then I picked up my bucket and ran.

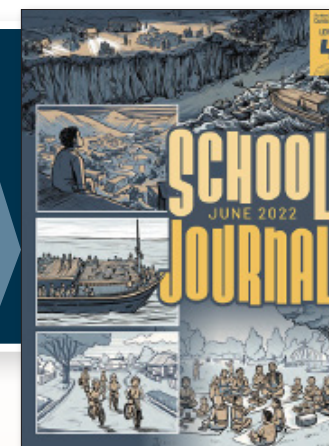


illustrations by E. Logan

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by Anna Smail

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Published 2022 by the Ministry of Education,  
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
[www.education.govt.nz](http://www.education.govt.nz)

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77690 573 7 (online)

ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū

Editor: Susan Paris

Designer: Simon Waterfield

Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop

Consulting Editors: Ariana Tikao and Emeli Sione

## SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 JUNE 2022

<b>Curriculum learning area</b>	English
<b>Reading year level</b>	Year 7
<b>Keywords</b>	ancestors, ancestral knowledge, climate change, disaster, future, grandparents, inherited traits, tūpuna, weather