

A watercolor artwork featuring a bird in flight at the bottom, with its wings spread wide, showing intricate black and white patterns. To the left, a branch with green leaves and small red berries extends upwards. The background is a soft blend of light blue and green, with scattered purple and blue watercolor splatters.

Ko te manu e kai
ana i te miro,
Nōnā te ngahere.
Ko te manu e
kai ana i te
Mātauranga
Nōnā te ao.

TOITOI

STORY SEARCH

Write a story or poem inspired by 10-year-old Manea Heeney's incredible artwork and the whakataukī in Toitōi 14.

You may submit in English or te reo Māori.

Send it to editor@toitōi.nz and include your name, age, school and a parent/teacher's name and contact details.

Submissions are due on April 12, 2019.

We will publish the best story in Toitōi 16 with additional illustrations by Manea.

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Squiggles

One by one, hot tears flew down her cheeks. The words rolled around inside her head as she ran from the classroom; a bad song on repeat. *You suck! Such a dummy. A 12-year-old who can't read! Loser! Idiot!* Some of these were whispered to another person discreetly. Some were yelled loudly. Most were thoughts, concealed until facial expressions gave them away.

Rushing to the safety of the school garden, Alexis shrank down underneath a bush. She had hoped the new school year would be different but obviously not. This teacher would be the same as all the others, not bothering to try teaching her anything because she was so dumb.

When she heard someone coming, Alexis melted lower into the greenery. The footsteps stopped in front of the bush.

"Nice shoes." Alexis suddenly became aware of her bright red sneakers sticking out of the bush. "Alexis, are you okay?" Alexis took a good look at her teacher. Frowning, she realised how little she knew about him. She didn't even know his name!

In the first five minutes of the first day of school, she had been picked at random to read the teacher's name off the board in front of the class. Her, of all people.

Now, she looked at her teacher. He had watery grey eyes and sandy blonde hair. Aged freckles sat along his nose. At somewhere between 30 and 40, he looked fairly experienced.

"Hmm... not really," she said.

"What upset you, Alexis? Those kids called you names before you could even speak. Why?"

She took a deep breath. "Well, I took a long time to respond and..."

"Yes?"

"If I tell you, you'll think I'm stupid and put me with teacher aids. It happens every year." Alexis choked back tears and scooted out of the bush.

"Please Alexis, I might be able to help. It can't be that ba-"

"I can't read! Okay? They knew I couldn't read your name!"

The teacher sat silently. Alexis turned to look at him. "See, I knew you'd think I was stupid," she said bitterly.

Returning her gaze to the middle distance, she swiped furiously at her tears. The teacher shuffled forward.

"Alexis, why didn't you learn to read?"

Alexis frowned. "All of my teachers put me with teacher aids who taught me the alphabet, which I never learned by the way. It was just a mess of squiggles."

The teacher looked at Alexis curiously. "Squiggles, you say?" Scrabbling in his pocket, he pulled out a scrap of paper. "What does this look like to you, Alexis?"

Alexis sighed. "It's just a bunch of curvy lines dancing on the page," she said wearily.

"At my last school, there was a boy who had the same problem," he began, "everything was just a mess of black lines. He had a condition called dyslexia. Reading was hard and it sometimes gave him headaches."

"Hey! That happens to me sometimes when I try to read," Alexis said.

"The boy had to try other kinds of learning. In the end, he could read brilliantly." His tone became serious. "I think you might suffer from this condition too, Alexis."

"Can I learn to read?" Alexis asked suspiciously.

The teacher leaned over and smiled. "Yes Alexis, you can. But first, do you like it here in the garden?"

Alexis nodded. "Yeah, it's kind of my safe place, I guess."

"Then, I'm going to try something." Alexis' teacher began to pull petals off a flower bush and sprinkle them into shapes. Pointing at the first squiggle, the teacher said, "This is the letter M, it makes the sound mmm for mouse. Feel it."

Alexis ran her fingers over the shape, repeating what the teacher had told her. "Mmmm for mouse."

The pair carried on until they had covered the few letters that the teacher had made. "M and R are short for Mister, so can you try and read this to me, Alexis?"

"Mister, sssttt, s for snake, t for turtle, stee-, d for dog. Mister Steed. You're Mr. Steed!" she said.

Then, realising what he had done, she said softly, "Thank you, Mr. Steed."

