

Reflections on 2023 Caselberg Trust Margaret Egan Cities of Literature Writers Residency

It was an absolute joy and honour to live and write in the Caselberg House, as the inaugural recipient of the Caselberg Trust Margaret Egan Cities of Literature Writers Residency.

When I arrived, I was immediately struck by the light in the house and its rich collection of art and books. The space was cosy and inspiring. I admired the light on the bay. I learnt to chop wood and to start a stove fire. I woke to birds singing. I tracked the sun across the kitchen floor. I read, wrote and dreamed.

The beginning of the residency coincided with the Dunedin Writers and Readers Festival. It was a wonderful introduction to local writers and poets, focused on Māori voices. I will never forget the pōwhiri at Ōtākou marae, which opened the festival. It was powerful, moving and humbling. I thought about the karanga echoing through centuries, passed down from generation to generation. I was very lucky to be part of a festival panel on the art of essay writing. It invigorated my love for the essay form, as a way to explore truth while acknowledging uncertainty.

My residency project was an essay collection manuscript on art, intimacy, longing, and the blurry boundaries between private and public. I edited an essay on faded lipstick and letting go. I reflected on links between essays and the collection's structure. I researched architecture, feminism and women artists. While in Dunedin, I was fortuitously introduced to the art of Bev Moon, Anna Caselberg and Joanna Margaret Paul. I viewed their works at the Hocken Collections and Brett McDowell Gallery. This research informed an extended essay on domesticity, representations of housewives, women artists, and reconciling myself to a 'small' ordinary life. I've been attempting to write this essay since 2018 and am happy to have completed a first draft during the residency.

I read *Object Lessons* by Eavan Boland and *Native Son* by Witi Ihimaera, which explore how to write against literary traditions that have traditionally seen one as an object, rather than a subject. It was a timely reminder to write plainly and with *feeling*, rather than hiding behind theory and aesthetics. I read various works by Chinese New Zealanders and listened to Jenna Wee's *Asian in Aotearoa* podcast. I was fortunate to spend a few days in Wellington for Verb Readers and Writers Festival.

All this research, thinking and enriching conversations have given me further motivation to complete my manuscript. I hope to continue trans-Tasman conversations and am thinking about potential collaborations. The residency and the many generous people I met in Dunedin remind me to stay open to wonder and to give back to the communities that have nurtured me. *What does it mean to be a writer? What kind of writer do I want to be? What mark do I want to leave, now and for future generations?*

I'm grateful to everyone who met and spent time with me, the Caselberg Trust, the late Margaret Egan, and Dunedin UNESCO City of Literature. I'm particularly grateful to Nicky Page, Anne Shelah, Janet Downs and Lesley Hirst. The residency offered time and solitude for focused writing, as well as opportunities to engage with the local literary community. I loved learning about the lives and interests of those I met and am touched by their interest in my writing. Art grows from serendipitous moments and meetings.

Partway through the residency, when asked if Dunedin had stolen my heart, I said, "Dunedin has joined my heart." I will always remember my six weeks at the Caselberg House, Whaka Oho Rahi Broad Bay and Ōtepoti Dunedin with immense fondness and gratitude. Thank you for the gift of time, space and community.

Shu-Ling Chua