



# PAINTING WITH POEMS

## By Arwen Flowers

New Zealand-born artist Arwen Flowers, utilises patterns through mixed media to explore intersections and parallels between European and South Pacific culture, with a focus on issues of identity. Patterns and symbols create a sense of belonging through familiar shapes and attached meanings. Arwen's artworks also reference land, oceanic and human forms as metaphors for place, and relationship to self and community.

Part of Arwen Flowers' creative process involves researching her subject and writing poetry to distill her ideas. This collection of her paintings (details) are presented alongside the poems that inspired them.

Arwen acquired her BFA from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland, and works from her home studio in Helensville, New Zealand.

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*Published online in August 2022.*

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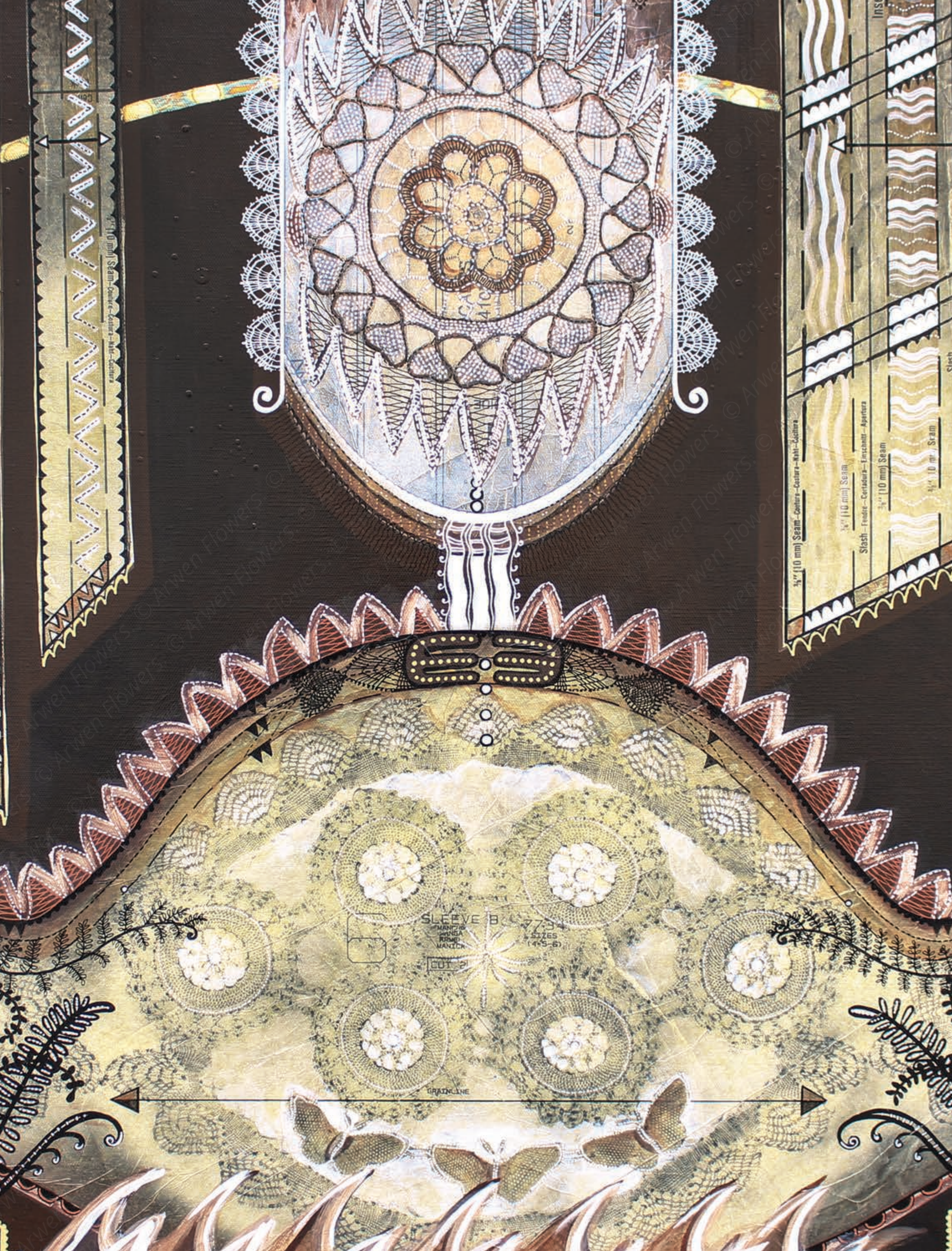
## This lush native bush

Little curls unfurl  
outwards to the tip of a droop  
branching veins and sporangia  
on the underside, upper side  
crowns of expanding silver  
ferns of ancient lineage  
with skirts of dried fronds, shelter  
epiphytic mosses as collaged tissue  
papery bio-cellophane  
diverse and intricate embedded  
from tall woody trunks  
young pikopiko shadow  
filmy shades of green  
against the light display  
— a temperate climate  
this lush native bush.

By Arwen Flowers

*This lush native bush (detail)*





## The Rainbow Story

There is a promise  
a pathway, a sign of changes.  
The band that gives knowledge,  
an arrow to point the way,  
or arched where lovers meet.  
The gold of it, and the transcendental circle—  
a centered peaceful state of being  
floating above a deep ocean of islands  
to rise and be born, or healed  
in flame, in spirit, by thunder  
or lightning, victorious and whole.

By Arwen Flowers

*The Rainbow Story (detail)*





## Mist, the nurturing breath

Mist rises  
Through leaf and branch  
Between fingers, reaching  
Sigh, oh sigh of breath  
The warmth of earth  
Reaching, yearning  
Sustaining body, limb, and heart  
Reaching, for heavenly lights—  
Her lover clothed in stars.

By Arwen Flowers

*Mist, the nurturing breath (detail)*





## Heart of the Pohutukawa

It was a battle I won.  
Though I fell, crimson spilled,  
to scent the sandy ground with fragrance—  
blood orange, white pepper,  
cinnamon, redcurrant and cassis.  
Still, I continue to breathe,  
fingers searching rock, pockets of earth,  
mouth drinking in salt-rich air.  
Incoming and outgoing tides  
mark passing time.  
I will stop bleeding.  
I will grow again  
from these many, wet, red, seeds.

By Arwen Flowers

*Heart of the Pohutukawa (detail)*





## Signs of Spring

Kowhai, Corokia flowering,  
in the hands of Van Gogh  
would be vase-tamed in porcelain,  
a view to treasure, gold framed.

Gaze upon these wild offerings,  
blooms sprouting from bare branches  
on which the birds feed  
singing their gratitude.

I gather a bouquet, gilded sprigs  
signs of spring and budding new love,  
to display in a dish, a platter  
dripping sweetness and promise.

By Arwen Flowers

*Signs of Spring (detail)*





## You are my Matariki

I see with many eyes  
I look up through this dark night  
studded with stars—a patchwork of constellations.  
Those legends and myths that wield overhead  
have never belonged to me.

I will stitch together a quilt studded with new tales—  
Here are my ancestors, mother, father, sister, and lover  
with their strength, faith and moral compass set,  
display truth-telling lessons to guide my way.  
A reclamation of sorts, and a beginning:  
I am reborn with the rising sun  
as winter turns to spring.

By Arwen Flowers

*You are my Matariki (detail)*





## The Precipice

On the brink of these ragged headlands—  
a forgotten jetty, anchoring wilderness to shoreline  
from forest to flotsam.

Flowing out to sea, my heart is a cascade  
following channels, scoured  
crossing a threshold to drop, gravity-led  
crashing and percussive over precipice, into crevice  
chewing the seam from the heart,  
the foundation of this mountain.  
The wind and I are wending nor'west and downwards  
across brackens and wet grasses  
to mingle in the smell of floating kelp.

At eventide, salt-laden scent drifts skyward  
a lofty spray chilled and caught in the leaves  
of my toes, in the wide-cast net of my nose.  
I am a fisher of the bounty that is brine and branch.

By Arwen Flowers

*The Precipice (detail)*





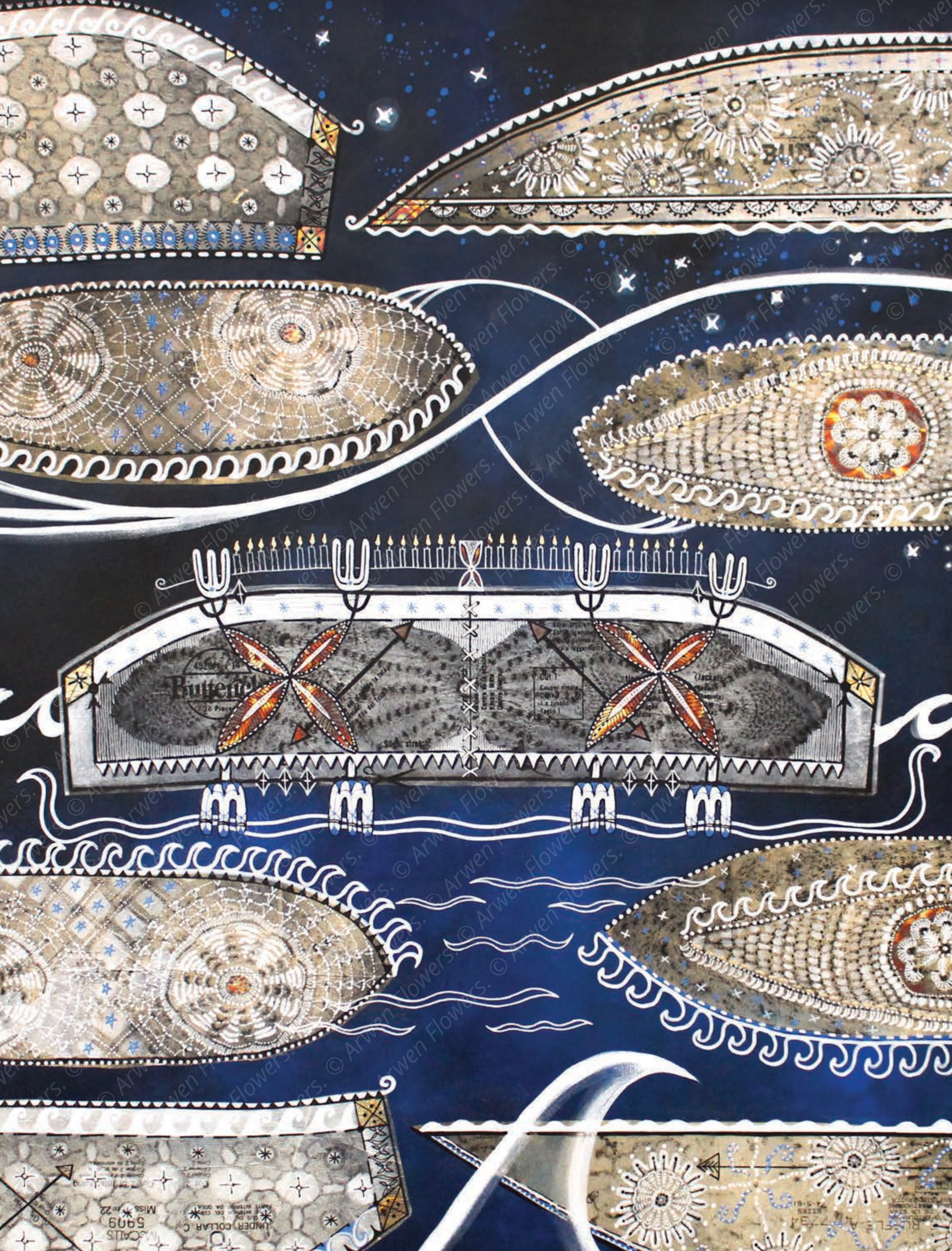
## A dream of home to shelter you

Tent of bones—  
deep footed in dune sands  
routed by winds wound  
through ribs, the woods  
of old trees bereft.  
But thoughts make seeds  
in clefts to cleave.  
Could that dreams bud  
to be watered incoming  
by hands, heart or fingered tides?  
To grow big, to shelter you  
my daughter and sons, a home  
made anew and anon:  
far more than sticks and stones  
or wooded bones near gone.

By Arwen Flowers

*A Dream of Home to Shelter You (detail)*





## Matariki reflected

This river is yours, and mine,  
in it our feet are washed clean.

Matariki newly birthed, rises  
in a timeless revolution.

We stand still and look down  
to see those lights reflected.

The universe is silent overhead.  
The waters flow dark and cold

Murmuring between wet toes  
the blood and bones of stars.

By Arwen Flowers

*Matariki Reflected (detail)*





## The Hull, The Bodice

Calculate latitude between  
a pair of bodies fastened together by lacing.  
A buoyant force equals weight of displaced fluid—  
Archimedes' principle.  
Structural strength, watertight, afloat, a tall ship, certain.  
This, such soft stuff—hair, yarn and brown paper  
'neath a copper sheath, defending.  
Dress, a fitted portion at the waist  
a variety of coatings, trustworthy,  
darts into one dart to align, unlike  
the mariner's compass, variable.  
I count the number of knots  
measuring sextant, angles between  
horizon and Sun, Moon, or stars  
while we sail this New Age.  
Watching the skirt-sail furl  
Watching the direction wind blows  
across soft water  
and hidden depths.

By Arwen Flowers

*The Hull, The Bodice (detail)*





## For Paikea, I cut off my corset

Black sand on hands and knees:  
below hem of sleeve and dress  
below collar-lace  
below heartbeat.

Baleen bones scoured in a night's tide  
brace-gripping—wet slipping  
below shoulderblades  
below cold feet.

Escaping the stitch-cage to breathe.  
Un-bound in my own bare-skinned freedom.

For Paikea, I cut off my corset.

By Arwen Flowers

*For Paikea, I cut off my corset (detail)*





## Together - Unbreakable

To hook another's arm  
each of us against the sky  
lend me grace  
unbreakable.

By Arwen Flowers

*Together - Unbreakable (detail)*





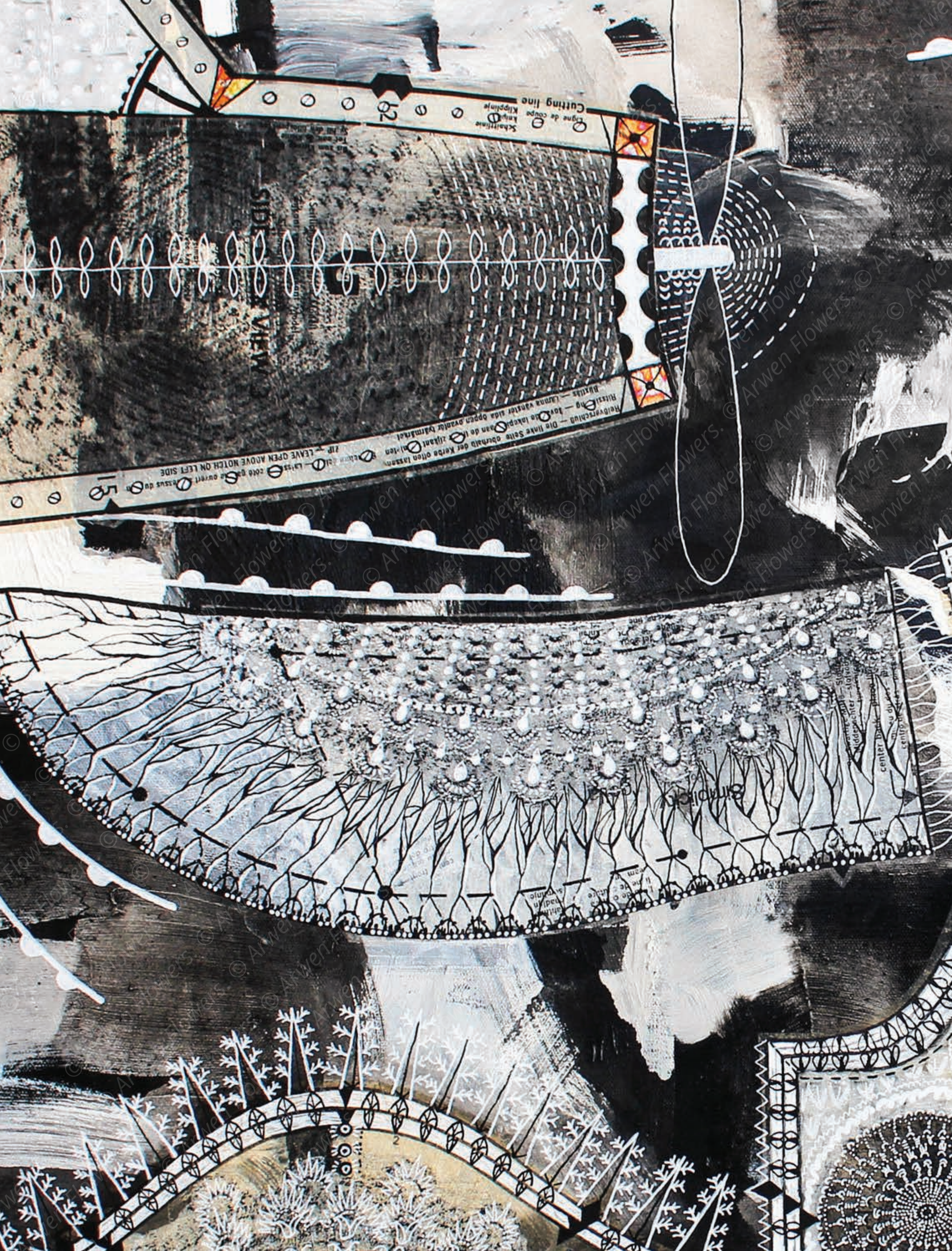
## Witness

I choose to lay my heart down here, praying it will rise  
to grow with hope, climbing to meet the sky, its blood  
branches, vessels as red as Ratapiki vine blooms,  
while Kauri, Totara, Tawhai Rauriki,  
Twiggy Coprosma and Kahikatea stand guard as witnesses.  
I speak of Kawakawa Pounamu, and take hold of that  
stone—  
carved healing from the earth that holds my ancestors'  
home,  
this same earth that will hold my own dark cradle,  
full of little seeds, each reaching towards the light,  
towards my spirit moving high among branches  
slick with rainfall, rich with new leaves.

By Arwen Flowers

*Witness - from the earth, this blooming (detail)*





## Lace Wing

I would like to be introduced:  
a new kind of creature—  
explorer, but no conqueror.  
Feed me on honeydew, nectar  
watch my metamorphosis  
from Lioness to Lacewing.  
I was Earth-bound, but  
like Amelia, I want to be first—  
to make my own wings  
and fly high across the Pacific.

By Arwen Flowers

*Lace Wing (detail)*





## Ancestral House

A skin covered frame; a tent, a house  
many older names carved on its pillars of bone.  
Underneath, we flame the deepest stars with hot breath,  
tales of home-places warm our blood, liquid  
veins pulse, inter-beat, and swoosh, fueling  
orbits around seconds and hours, decades, and decay  
while we lay down to empty, to rest, or rebirth.  
I am in the greater pool, meta-fish, morphing,  
freely navigating the cosmic net of time,  
offering whispers to unborn ears.  
Each fleshly bell ringing out  
its toll, never ceasing, from beginning to end,  
and yet again, to peal high prayers from rafters,  
up where my wide-open notched eyes are watching.  
Thighs release, my small body slithering  
onto carpets, onto the world, yet another time  
(already wriggling) wrapped with a woven cloth  
of silken threads, embroidered carefully  
with a future no one can see, just ahead, beckoning.

By Arwen Flowers

*The Ancestors (detail)*





## Remembrance

Greiving hands that lay heavy petals  
into the bowl, along with heavier tears.  
We all pass it around and drink.  
There will be no forgetting.  
Flowers still bloom in the rain, and we  
will watch as they bud again in spring.  
Seeds of life always find a place to take root.

By Arwen Flowers

*Altar of Regeneration (detail)*





## Birthing a new civilization

Stepping out from the Fertile Crescent,  
a sheltering cradle of the world.  
An urgency to see, to know  
patterned stars, galaxies that litter the ocean.  
I sail time's highway.  
Heaven's belly: a horizontal curve,  
a shore, misty bough-lined,  
shimmering along the arc.  
Here am I, under God's eye,  
watching silver-glimmer fish, scales  
weigh in to find they're worthy.  
I hope and arrive bountiful, voracious  
delivering future humanity  
between legs strong with journey.  
Abundant flowers gather  
blooming bloody at my feet.

By Arwen Flowers

*Birthing a New Civilization (detail)*





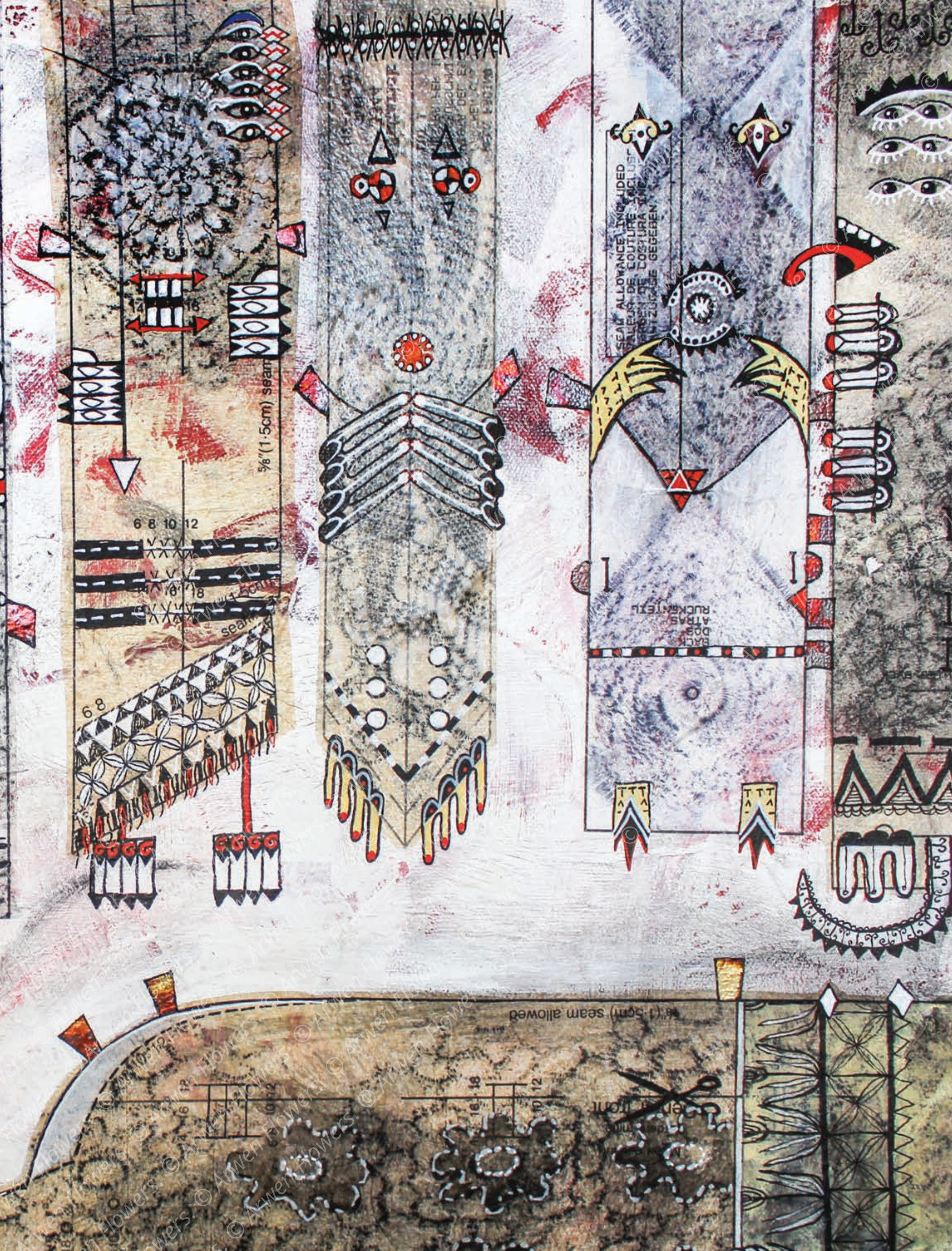
## My Pohutukawa - I am born of land and sea

I am from the land and the sea.  
When I was newly born  
my mother took the afterbirth and buried it  
under our favourite Pohutukawa,  
then washed me in a rock pool  
made warm from the low-tide sun.  
I still remember the shadows and shapes  
of seaweed floating across my eyes.  
The Pohutukawa flowers always bloom on my birthday  
when there is seafood, ripe under the waves.  
I never go hungry.

By Arwen Flowers

*My Pohutukawa - I am born of land and sea (detail)*





## Divine dress-ups

Pendulous heavyweight Gods  
descended to proclaim;  
tongues twisting in agitation.  
Quickly, with needle magic  
we made dresses large as islands,  
transforming Tapa and Lace.  
Monsters adorned, beguiled to transform,  
mincing, high-pitched deities.  
Oh, divine caucus!  
Bewitched to dispense benevolent joy  
posturing as Goddesses for the day.

By Arwen Flowers

*We made the Gods dresses of Tapa and Lace (detail)*





## Sailing the Matoaka

In the leap year of 1868  
transit begins, dividing  
Ireland to island and so,  
beginning with no end in sight—  
a year of the shortest day and  
this longest night, a listless night.  
When the sand from home  
shores have blown clean away  
I look overboard and wish I was  
no piece of lagan trailing  
one globe-side to the other.  
Borne along by a buoyant bridge  
the line of my heart, taught,  
the line of my mind, tracing,  
paths of leaving, ending.  
With one last jump  
to shore and who knows?  
Will this become another  
home, to serve as home?

By Arwen Flowers

*Sailing the Matoaka in 1868 (detail)*





## We give flowers

Opening in a glory, held with warm palms, with fingertips  
gently arranged on a marriage bed,  
at the door, around your neck,  
stitched to the cloth at your nose,  
arranged beside your meal,  
or laid down in grief; to fold and to close to the light.  
Perfumed and tender, or  
blazing with care, to ripen, explode, and disperse!  
Heart-blooms of all colours,  
for all loves, given,  
to you, for you, and you...

By Arwen Flowers

*We give flowers (detail)*





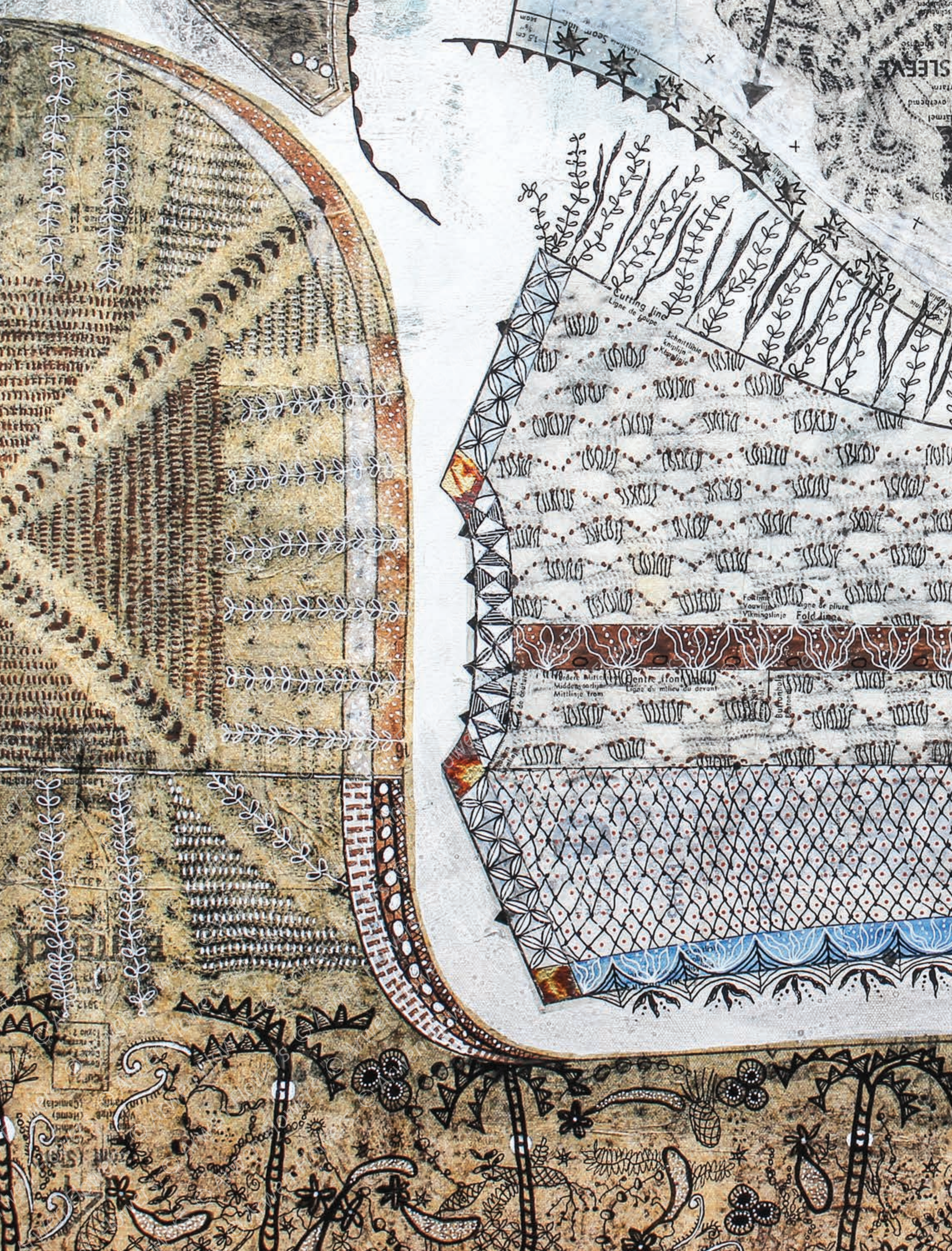
## The Promised Land

Miss McCalls walks today  
from hill to valley and out across  
a causeway leading to the sea.  
Leaving behind, passing through  
a fall unveiled, change apparent.  
Mr McCahon said it was there; an angel.  
Lit candles, put out a bowl to catch  
fishes of new life, whatever may  
swim hungry on a rising tide.  
Time had come to leave, set sail;  
collar detaching with nimble fingers,  
skirts billow-full of Heaven's breath.

By Arwen Flowers

*The Promised Land of Miss McCalls (detail)*





## Protection

The vessel of my mother,  
her furled sails and arched prow,  
are the keepers of her heart's  
treasures - me and my sister,  
swaddled with the beating,  
a rhythmic sloth and swish.  
Seawater keeps time  
here on the brim of the arc,  
where grain and plane shear  
longitude and latitude.  
In rough contours she  
navigates an ocean's womb  
to finds safe harbours.

By Arwen Flowers

*Roots in the soil (detail)*





## Counting the cost

I traded my skin for your shirts, under-bound,  
over-bound, for open seas, to find stamens and seeds.  
(Yours found mine but our fruit was cast aside,  
left to rot in someone else's hands).

What I gave for this passionate plan!

I called it freedom though I am slave to love,  
shackled to our dream.

Globe circumnavigated.

Later, again a woman corseted to dry land.

In my dark dreams I still sail 'round Cape Horn  
wrapped in a long skirt, bare breasts frozen,  
with empty arms open in mourning.

He wore my name for but a year.

My name lives on in the shade of night,  
Solanum baretiae.

By Arwen Flowers

*Solanum - The story of Jeanne Baret (detail)*





When I first met you, all I saw were differences,  
and many differences contained us.  
You saw a layered abomination, too proud to eat  
free-fingered or hold a wild language in my mouth.  
I saw the earth wrapped in soft bark,  
too strong for lace, and fierce with fire.  
Through the even stitches of time we learned  
how to undress, to share foreign clothes.  
Now we both have our bellies full and mouths alive  
with songs of caramelised nectar, and poems,  
cured by sea-salt.  
Our pacific hopes and dreams are woven  
together, we both bleed at the needle.  
We are not so different now.

By Arwen Flowers

*Both Beautiful (detail)*





## Promises (from parent to child)

We are the curve of an arc—  
a strong bridge, your foundation,  
firm earth under the horizon.  
Lift your eyes and walk,  
wear this cloak across your shoulders—  
made by loving hands;  
also the bowl in your bag  
and cooked foods.  
You are a seed-to-tree, a flower bud.  
You will bloom in the sun and the rain.  
You will get wet feet, blistered or bloody.  
Through the night and day, and coming again of night  
we will be your stars, bright moon, the solar flare.  
You will never be without light.  
The dark cannot silence your voice, or ours,  
or close our always open arms.

By Arwen Flowers

*Promises - from parent to child (detail)*