

SOUTHERN // CROSS

Susan Wardell

Ask Alexander Graham Bell  
about all the things that swim through wires

the argent fish of hope and despair  
spawning far from home  
(some eaten on the way)

Ask him what lies beneath the industrious currents  
of the South Pacific

a lonely grey eel  
snaking between continents  
like a single outstretched arm, as long as memory

You can ask Alexander  
about the rivers of our voiceless voices,  
about the taut vessels of desire we sail in –  
their minute metal languages, their building and dismantling –  
about economies of the senses

but he is busy now, growing eyes as he sleeps

and we are the ones left with red strings  
roping us, ankle to ankle  
harp strings  
hanging from our fingertips

and the bright coils of our irises  
awash with blue light, saying:

Come here, I want to see you

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This poem was written for the University of Otago 2020 'Writer' competition, and was awarded first place (Staff Poetry category) by judge Dr. Sue Wootten.

The poem responds to the competition prompt 'Only Connect...', which is the epigraph from E. M. Forster's novel, *Howards End* (1910). Given this prompt, and given the timing of the competition (shortly after New Zealand's major national COVID-19 lockdown), I aimed to use poetic language and metaphor to evoke some of the themes of my academic research around embodiment, affect, and intimacy in digital spaces.

The title of the poem refers to the Southern Cross Cable Network; commissioned in 2000 to become one of the major trans-Pacific communications networks, connecting Aotearoa New Zealand to the world, via a total of 28,900 km of submarine and 1,600 km of terrestrial fiber optic cables. The final line of the poem refers to the first words ever spoken on a telephone, in 1876, by Alexander Graham Bell speaking to his assistant Thomas Watson at a distance of 13 km.