

# **Deception River**

**Peta Tait**

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*Deception River* explores human—animal relations with intersecting poetic and realistic expressions to capture three differing perspectives. The first voice offers a poetic evocation of landscape and alludes to the sensory experience of animals moving through the landscape. The two characters also love this natural world but contrast pragmatic and idealist approaches to animals living there. Robert climbs on to a high ledge overlooking the mountains in the area of Arthur's Pass only to find the younger man, Chris, there with a camera on a tripod. Robert assumes that Chris is also hunting deer but as the play unfolds, Chris reveals that he is there to photograph them. The play is set just prior to the 1970s animal liberation movement.

Characters:

Chris in his early twenties

Robert in his fifties

Recorded female voice

*1962. A high ridge below the mountain peaks in New Zealand's South Island.*

*Chris stands motionless looking out.*

Female Voice Over *Speaking Slowly*

White snow fades grey  
in the sun's rude glare,  
ash tussock spreading  
to here, once more.  
Uncovered, no cover.

Rock face dries sharp,  
the white waters cheer  
a loud, wet warning,  
beware, green stones.  
Slippery steps, treachery.

*A camera with a large lens is positioned on a tripod beside Chris. He looks carefully through the lens and scans the horizon. Suddenly, he swings the camera around as Robert enters. Disappointedly, Chris returns the camera to its original position.*

*Robert enters noisily carrying a heavy pack and a rifle and puffing at the end of his climb. Chris walks over and helps lift the pack off Robert's back.*

Robert      *Top of the world! Robert and Chris shake hands. Chris, my boy.*

Chris        *Robert. Robert collapses slowly down rubbing one leg. Chris stands looking out.*

Robert      *Robert laughs. It would only be you sitting on a high ridge in Arthur's Pass this early. Pause. Mind if I wait for my Angus to catch up?*

Chris        *Free country.*

Robert      *Seen any ...*

Chris        *There! Movement ...*

Robert       Where?

Chris         Along there. *He points to the direction of Robert's entrance.*

*Silence. They look out.*

Robert       Bugger! Missed it. *Chris nods.*

Chris         Family well?

Robert       *Good-natured laugh.* Yep, I'm a lucky man there. Yours? *Chris nods.*  
*Robert is looking around.* First trip of the season too? *Chris does not react.* Looking round. Where's your old man?

Chris         I'm ... alone.

Robert       Haven't seen him in the pub recently defending old Holyoake, his beloved Prime Minister. *Pause.* He should come up with you, anything can happen in these parts. One time he and I were up here, and I went on ahead and got marooned. Night came in too fast and I couldn't get down again to where he was setting up the camp. It was very dark. Clawed my way around and I could hear the creek in the distance through the night. Anyway I fell in and then couldn't strike the matches. Wet through. Torch had gone flat; no sense of time. Got back to camp after first light. Anything can happen. *Pause.* It's getting light early again.

Chris         The low hills are turning yellow with gorse...

Robert       Could be a good year for honey. *Pause, nods to camera.* You carry up all that gear with your rifle?

Chris         Folds up.

Robert       *Looking out.* You're a dark horse, sitting up here with a camera under those mountain peaks. *Pause.* Getting ready to photograph your kill?

Chris         Snow's disappearing down those rivers, cold and fast ...

Robert       Too right. Watch out for flash floods.

Chris         Angus and you walk in up the Deception?

Robert       We came in from Kumara yesterday through Goat Pass and Bluff Creek.

Chris         Water's crystal clear over brown stones; no rain for days.

Robert You're thinking the weather's about to turn wild, aye?

Chris I'm walking out today.

Robert *Looking up.* Mount Rolleston's clearing, it'll hold. *Robert reaches over and takes a thermos flask out of his pack and pours a tea which he shares with Chris.* Have a ham sandwich. Alice made them. *Robert hands Chris a mug.* *Chris refuses the sandwich.*  
No? You used to wait for me to bring out Alice's sandwiches.

*Long pause.*

One year I did get stranded going in from the other side of the mountains up off Lake Sumner. Bloody freezing. I'd gone up with Roy Street on our annual leave. We'd waded the river but when we came back a few hours later it had flooded. Couldn't cross it. Had to wait three days for the big melt to pass before we could get back across.

Chris Anything can happen.

Robert Didn't even raise the 303 that trip. We ran out of food.

Chris See anything?

Robert One stag too far away.

Chris Did it watch you?

Robert *Pause.* It might have.

Chris They spot us first.

Robert You're a quick shot. If anyone will get something you will.

Chris To keep warm a couple of years back, slept the night leaning on a carcass with lice crawling over my head.

Robert *Robert squirms.* Yep, you get results with that Parker-Hale cut down. *Pause.* Do you remember that weekend trip with the four of us when you put the cold tea in the beer bottles? *He chuckles.* Angus thought it was funny too. You'd both turned eighteen. Your pack was overweight even then. You insisted on crossing first because you were the heaviest ...

Chris Ugliest. It was the side stream in Jade Creek, roaring down between big boulders.

- Robert        So it was. Your old man fell in! You'd crossed rock to rock in waist high water, holding your pack up, without losing your balance, and stood waiting on the other side. I was following behind your old man. He didn't make it, missed his footing and started floating down the river. You grabbed him by one finger and held on and I grabbed you. Nearly lost him. Touch and go that time. *Chris laughs.* Packs were soaked through! *Pause.* Are the morning's still damp up here?
- Chris         Mist comes in low and wraps white spray around the tussock. The early morning air has no colour.
- Robert        Never much of a sunrise in September.
- Chris         No pink stain spreading across the grey, not even the promise of dawn snow.
- Robert        Nobody told these bloody sandflies they're early.
- Chris         Falls cascading down the slopes everywhere.
- Robert        Like giants' pissing. *Laughs* Your old man could stand up with them.
- Chris         *Pause.* Photographed his secret one in winter light.
- Robert        His secret one?
- Chris         His waterfall. Remember? He'd wandered off the track looking at rocks ...
- Robert        Too right. Puts a blindfold on me so I won't tell anyone where it is. After all these years of coming up here together, he did that. I don't see what's so special about finding a waterfall. *Pause.* How could he have discovered it.
- Chris         I guess Maori travellers would have found it.
- Robert        What's he up to this weekend?
- Chris         Gone fishing.
- Robert        Trout?
- Chris         Trout!
- Robert        He should come up with you. The driving is much easier than in our day. And we used to have to walk further. One trip, we'd left old Lizzie where the shingle road ended and began to walk in. We'd planned to stay in the

huts. It was getting late in the day when we reached that red tin hut on the flood plain, you know the one. I opened the door, walked inside and yelled blue murder; the straw was moving with mice.

Chris           Bet those mice got a fright.

Robert          Yep. Stayed there anyway. Too tired to walk on. Yep, much easier these days, driving the Arthur's.

Chris           Maoris crossed the mountains at Harper's Pass.

Robert          Well, old man Dobson and his sons found the shorter way, didn't they.

Chris           No cattle grazing on the creek beds or red deer on the ridges then.

Robert          Deer were set free over a hundred years ago, before they'd even cut a horse and cart road. *Pause*. When I was your age, it used to take twenty-four hours to drive the shingle road coast to coast through Arthur's and over the Otira in the Model T Ford. But back then the top speed was 30 miles an hour. Todds made a fortune with that Ford franchise.

Chris           From chrome and metal dreams.

Robert          Yep, we drive to the mountains every chance.

Chris           Must feel like coming home.

Robert          Your father and I have come up the Waimak (Waimakariri River) all our lives.

Chris           Every river and ridge has a story, aye.

Robert          We got eleven not far from here one trip, eleven.

Chris           So I've heard before. But we deceive ourselves that it's a free contest. That arched-brittle hooves might out run a metal-straight bullet; *Ironic tone*. That ears alert to the crunch of a twig or a carnivore's scent on the air will outwit us. You have to give them more ...

Robert          They ruin the bush.

Chris           What's left? *Pause*. Ever seen Wekas?

Robert          Nope. They were hunted out before I even came up.

Chris           The National Park's reintroducing them.

- Robert        Why? A bird's not a meal for a man.
- Chris         They're protected.
- Robert        Ahh. *Pause*. Angus must have stopped for a breather. Tired out from the week's work.
- Chris         Labouring?
- Robert        Meat works, in the sticking pen. They're being "stiffened" there, not killed. The head is bent round a post ...
- Chris         *Chris shudders*. Hard work!
- Robert        Good money. He says he's saving to go back to study, but Alice and I think he's keen on someone.
- Chris         Sacrificing himself then?
- Robert        What do you know?
- Chris         Nothing.
- Robert        He's not giving away anything about this girl.
- Chris         He's young.
- Robert        Alice and I married before his age. It was hard but we managed. I worked all day in the office and had a second job digging spuds, and then we only could afford the food that she farmed. The world's changed. She milked thirty cows by hand, filling the cans and cranking the separator. *Laughs*. She called those cows by name and they came to their stalls; and she had them wearing jersey covers against the southerly. Sold butter, made bread, and I chopped the wood and picked fruit. We kept hens too, Sussex, langshans with feathers on their legs. One time the dogs got in and killed most of the hens, but we ate even the livers out of the carcass, the sweetbreads ...
- Chris         Alice told me about her large garden with gardenias and magnolias ...
- Robert        Did she? *Pause*. She's still got some camellia bushes. So what about you, met anyone yet?
- Chris         I like my freedom.

- Robert            Still travelling with the power board?
- Chris            I'm up high on the poles these days; ice on wire, light on wire. I'm promoted above digging the post holes with a shovel .... *Chris swings camera round.* Something moved down there. *Robert grabs his rifle and gets it ready.*
- Robert            Same one?
- Chris            Can't tell. *Pause.* Last night his coat was gold in the fading light.
- Robert            Antlers?
- Chris            "the stag of seven tines" (*Song of Amergin*).
- Robert            A big one then.
- Chris            Yep.
- Robert            We might get the bugger yet. *He moves to look out.*
- Female voice over    "I am a wide flood on a plain,  
I am a wind on the deep waters.  
I am a shining tear of the sun  
I am a hawk on a cliff"
- Robert            *Comes back.* Looks like we can't get on to that ledge above. I'd better stay put so Angus can find me. *Pause.* First took him deer stalking when he was nine. We found a baby pig and kept it at the camp as a pet until we were leaving. I told him it got away. He worried about where it got to for months.
- Chris            It takes longer than a life-time to know the river and those ... clouds.
- Robert            Come on Angus, what are you doing. *Robert moves across the stage looking out for Angus.*
- Chris            *Chris speaks together with female voice over.* There's lickable snow above the tree line; above the grey dry branches with bleached brown bark tips; *Chris continues* far above the plains weathered flat like bulldozed terraces.
- Robert            *Calling out.* Mount White has a lot of deer.
- Female voice over.  
Stepping through yellow brown tips  
brushing softly against the legs,

nosing green grass, white flowers,  
catching the water's joy  
turning and flowing forward.

Robert *Returns to sit down.* Don't think we'll get higher.

*Sound of a loud single rifle shot. Robert leaps to his feet.*

Chris Damn.

Robert Guess Angus has found your stag.

Chris *With irony.* Yeah.

Robert Hard to tell where the shot came from.

Chris Only one. He might have missed it.

Robert Can't see anything.

Chris He might have escaped.

Robert The beech trees are blocking our view.

Chris Hope Angus missed.

Robert *Pause.* He'd give it to you. He's like that.

Chris I was going to shoot him ...

Robert You'll get the next one.

Chris ... with my camera.

Robert Shoot who with what?

Chris The stag with this camera.

Robert Angus would love a photograph of his catch.

Chris I'm not intending to kill the stag.

Robert You're not?

Chris I don't have a rifle with me.

Robert        Then what are you doing climbing up here?

Chris         I came up with a camera.

Robert        *Pause.* Who sees these photographs?

Chris         No-one. I thought no-one would find me, no-one would get up this high.

Robert        The family must expect you to come back with some meat.

Chris         You weren't lucky every trip.

Robert        But that didn't stop us trying. What brought this on?

Chris         An encounter a couple of years back. I came up onto this ridge and found myself face to face with a young doe. We stood looking at each other, until the doe looked away. For a moment I could see what she saw, this panorama and me, blind, a salivating, greedy predator. *Pause.* I started to see a new world.

Robert        Didn't raise your rifle then?

Chris         No.

Robert        You let it run off?

Chris         You can't deceive someone you've looked in the eye.

Robert        I don't understand.

Chris         I couldn't take her life.

Robert        Why not? An animal's an animal.

Chris         So are we. It would have been like shooting hope itself.

Robert        Hunting was in my ancestors' blood well before ...

Chris         So was singing ...

Robert        ... they got to these shores ...

Chris         Lured by the promise of a poor man's game park ...

Robert        We've a right too!

Chris           It would be more honest to farm deer like cattle.

Robert          Can't see it myself.

Chris           See what?

Robert          Why you'd bother coming up here then.

Chris           We can't just look at every ridge as a source of food.

Robert          Or a family secret.  
*Long pause.*  
                  That shot explains what Angus's been doing all this time.

Chris           *Sadly.* Yeah.

Robert          I'll go and help him.

Chris           Approach from behind ...

Robert          For sure.

Chris           *Looking up.* Take care.

Robert          *Looking up.* Those clouds are getting darker. You might be right. *Exiting.*  
Bring your photographs over some time for Alice to see. She won't get  
this high.

Chris           *Calling out.* Shall I bring the ones of the waterfall? *Robert stops, nods and  
exits.*

*Chris looks through the camera lens.*

Female voice over

Black bark rings and rims,  
Tell of quiet damp secludes  
And dark green shading  
that deludes and hides  
from light and pursuit.

*End.*

