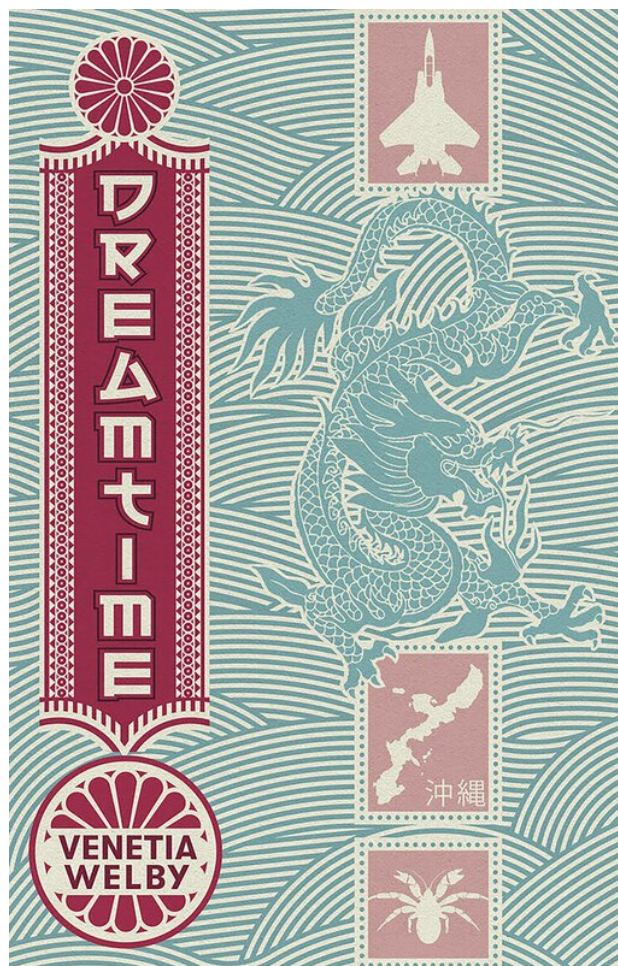


Dreamtime

Venetia Welby

Abstract: This is an excerpt from Venetia Welby's novel, *Dreamtime*, set in Japan and Okinawa.



woman's journey to Japan to find the father who abandoned her, a marine in Okinawa. It's set in the near future when both climate change and sabre-rattling between the US and China have intensified: sea levels are rising, commercial aviation's about to be banned – and anything can be justified in the face of the climate catastrophe and impending war. When Sol and her childhood friend Kit reach Tokyo, the gulf between expectation and reality becomes apparent; invisible boundaries start to shift. Soon they are joined on their journey by Hunter, a large marine who infatuates Sol and riles Kit. He leads them to the military heartland of Okinawa – and swiftly out of their depth.

I started writing *Dreamtime* after travelling through Okinawa and the Ryukyus in 2017. Having dreamed of the 'Hawaii of Japan' I was shocked to discover the reality. In the short time I was there a Ryukyuan man was run over and killed by a drunk marine, and there were two military aircraft crashes involving first a nursery and then a school. This, sadly, is far from unusual. In the novel, I wanted to explore a possible future for the island based on all that has gone on there since 1945. So, although the novel is set in 2035, various aspects of it have already happened or are happening now. In *Dreamtime*, the threat of China has led to an increase in US military might across the Ryukyus, but at 33 bases on the one small island its presence is no greater than it was after World War 2. Military exclusion zones and spin conceal much of what goes on now, and in the novel the prevalence of US virtual reality company Virrea has led to a new level of fake news. If one is not physically right there, it's very hard to tell what's really going on. When

Dreamtime tells the story of an American

the aviation ban prevents travel, Virrea enables the global narrative to be controlled.

Dreamtime is about abrogation of responsibility: Sol's father abandoned her when she was a little girl and this left her at the mercy of her abusive foster father. Okinawa is not protected by its coloniser, Japan, but left to the US military to pollute indiscriminately, and, even after reversion to Japan, to commit violence against without reckoning or restraint. On a wider level, humans are not taking care of the earth and its animal inhabitants. Instead, their fate lies in the hands of oil conglomerates and capitalist, jingoistic governments – and it is suffering. Pacific islands are on the front line.

In this excerpt, Kit and Sol go to meet Hunter in an area of Okinawa called the American Village, while Umitu, a Ryukyuan, speaks about her life on the island in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Okinawa.

*The Americans took me to a camp.
My people were dying of starvation and malaria
all around me.*

*I couldn't tell what was real and what a dream.
Who were soldiers and who evil spirits.
I left my own family to die – can you imagine
what that's like?*

*To carry on, to survive, that's not something
that can be done with a full sense of reality, you
see.*

*By the time they dropped the atom bombs, I'd
lost everyone I loved.*

*No one left was spared grief: nearly a third of
our population had been wiped out for Japan.*

My brothers were killed in the fighting.

And my father?

The Japanese shot him.

*They thought he was a spy, I learned, since he
wasn't speaking Japanese.*

*He was speaking what he always spoke:
Uchinaaguchi.*

It is, after all, our language.

*

On the left Kit sees malls, brand names: Gucci, Prada, Fendi. Golf supplies and beauty salons. An American wedding shop stuffed with meringue dresses. Bagels and coffee. A tattoo parlour. Here it is: small-town America. He was right – they should have come straight here and asked their own questions. Now chains such as Starbucks, the ubiquitous diner A&W and McDonald's take over, with the diamond-wire tessellations of Camp Lester on the other side. There has been no break in the sea of wire for miles.

'Look!' Sol is gesturing to a great Ferris wheel up ahead. 'That must be it!'

'We are approaching your destination,' says the car. 'You are about to enter the American Village. Get ready for a real fun time!'

'Fun times are sponsored by Virrea,' another voice interjects at terms-and-conditions speed. 'Don't forget to tag us in your Holograbbies!'

As soon as the car opens Kit's door, he can hear strains of turn-of-the-century US music and smell a damp Christmas. Strains of wet cinnamon and allspice through the rain that is now coming down in a deluge again. There's no predicting it – Virrea can't get it right, anyway. They head into the complex, keeping under cover through winding red-brick streets of pizzerias, burger bars and American shops. But it's not the America Kit knows. Here there's a milkshake on every corner. At least this theme park's free from the drugs and the gangs. No sun fugitives beating down its air-conditioned

doors.

A wide circular shop calls to mind the Rust Belt, its orange wall reflecting the drenched terracotta paving stones. Full Christmas regalia hangs from its corroded metal balcony; garlands of baubled fir shroud a Statue of Liberty shedding tears in the torrent. There's a Star-and-Stripe-spangled rocket – or is it a nuke? Massive Santas, a festive snowman and a couple of feisty gingerbread men look similarly depressed and dangerous, foregrounded by a palm tree. There is fake snow everywhere, and it forms an unpleasant brown mulch with the rainstorm. Must be plenty of homesick servicemen who buy into this shit; who have forgotten the reality of America and believe this mini version to be its quintessence.

Eventually they emerge at the bars and cafes of the sea wall, the wide sweep of Sunset Beach to their left, its water swelling and flexing. Sol points out a hostel that might do for later. Rain drenches a hundred happy-hour signs along the promenade and they take shelter in the first doorway. Their clothes and bags are already soaked. Sol fiddles with her Virrea and in a second they see Hunter swaggering up to them, unperturbed by the rain sheeting off his short blonde hair. He looks broader than ever in white shorts and a dark blue sleeveless shirt. Stubble of a distinctly ginger hue has sprouted prolifically in the past two days.

'Hey,' he says. Hugs Sol and shakes Kit's hand, powerfully. 'We're just down here. Come and join us.'

Hunter's grin is fully stretched, revealing his strong white teeth. Kit sees Sol slip straight into character, skipping along girlishly next to the great man, her thin arm threaded through his un-broken one. Kit falls back into file behind them, the old hierarchy instantly reasserted.

*

More and more GIs arrived – day after day they

poured in.

They stole ever more land to bulldoze, built noisy operations of death everywhere: tanks and aircraft, munitions and missiles.

No girl was safe.

They fathered many children.

*

The sea is lashing itself with its own tail, coming up over the walkway, and Kit feels again that he is in the presence of something ancient and raw and in no way benevolent. An eternal dragon, a kraken, a king; an army of bloodless octopodal aliens. As Kit's skin starts to tighten across him, prickling parcel wrap, Hunter leads them, dripping, into a rock bar imported straight from the US of A, where thousands of its identical siblings decorate the city streets. Replete as it is with Americans black and white, Kit now feels he could be back in Arizona. Sanitised safety: the soft-metal hits from the too-loud speakers; electric guitars on the walls and the coat-your-nostrils-in-lard scent of frying meat. Meat from the meat farm, from creatures genetically modified to meet demand in a world no longer conducive to the existence of sacrificial animals.

Kit follows Hunter and Sol over to a pool table near the back of the bar where the walls are lined with old American beer ads. There's a man already there, bent over the table to take one of the last remaining shots. Is Sol asking herself if this is her father? With a satisfying crack the 8-ball slides into the pocket and, as the man straightens up, Kit can see that he is younger and slighter than Hunter but the two look quite alike. The shorn austerity of his blonde hair makes Hunter's low fade and new stubble look decadent though. There's a button brightness to the man's green eyes that the slackness of his mouth belies. Kit takes in the

jeans, the T-shirt displaying some esoteric album cover.

'This is Finn,' says Hunter. 'Finn Garcia.'

'Heeey.' Finn fist-bumps Sol, then Kit: 'Heeey.'

'Hey,' says Kit in a curt, businesslike tone. He is disappointed that all Hunter has dredged up after disappearing for two days is this, this youth. They are clearly a few Orions down already and Kit wants to ask how long the USMC enforced the latest alcohol ban. One week? Two? He swallows and reminds himself that enduring Hunter is a necessary evil for bringing Sol home safely. And soon. It is at home, he realises, not racing around out here pretending to be travellers, that he and Sol might have a chance. This time next week, when she's had time to get over the jet lag, he'll ask her out properly. Dinner and dancing in Tucson's finest. Start again and take it from there.

'Wanna drink?' asks Finn, sinking the black. 'He's buying.' He grins at Hunter then leans his cue stick against the wall.

Hunter smiles ruefully. 'Hardly a fair game.' Kit sees that he has taken his arm out of its sling in anticipation of playing another shot, but now he uses his meaty other to reinsert it.

Woven among the beer signs are ads for 2-4-1 shots - Redheaded Sluts, Pink Starfuckers - and cocktails, king of which must be the mighty Trash Can, glowing green like it's made of plutonium and claiming to contain the whole bar. It comes with a warning: ¥2500 PUKE CLEAN-UP FEE. Beyond, there's a terrace wallpapered in politer notices: 'Dear Customers, Do not spit or throw anything else over the wall. Please use the garbage bins inside. Offenders will be penalized and asked to leave the premises. Thank you for your understanding. Bar Management.'

Kit sees Sol watching him and drops his eyes. 'I'll help you carry the drinks,' he tells Finn, but a robot waitress with pneumatic tits is already zooming pool-table-side.

'How can I help you boys today?' she asks with an improbably large baring of teeth. 'Same again? And for your guests?'

It is a matter of seconds before she zooms back with a tray of Orions, some nuts, something unidentifiable on toast. 'It's Happy Hour! Everyone gets a free appetizer in Happy Hour, silly.' She strokes Kit's arm lustily before whizzing back behind the bar. Sol looks daggers at him. He will never understand her, never thread his way through the psychic maze of small things that thrill her or fill her with despair. She is a language he has learned since infancy but he'll always find the grammar fucking impenetrable.

*

'Pig eaters' they called us.

Japan was pleased to take us back: the old colony and dumping ground.

It was a trick, of course.

The Americans never left.

Venetia Welby is the author of two novels, *Dreamtime*, out this year with *Mother of Darkness*. Her essays and short fiction have appeared in *The Irish Times*, *Spectator*, *London Magazine* and anthologies *Garden Among Fires* and *Trauma*, among others. She lives in the UK with her husband, son and Bengal cat.