Playing with poetry: Poetic representation of research in children's geographies of nature and adventurous play

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Abstract

In this piece, we undertake a methodological and creative exploration of poetic representation in children's geographies. Drawing on qualitative approaches to poetry as a method, we consider how poetic techniques have the potential to bring us into children's experiences in different ways and inspire more playful engagement with our research data more broadly. We present an illustrated series of research poems derived from our project on children's perspectives on nature and adventurous nature play in New Zealand. We invite readers and viewers to engage with these works and consider what disrupting traditional prose representations of research can add to critical children's geographies and beyond.

Key words:

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In this piece, we undertake a methodological and creative exploration of poetic representation in children's geographies. Drawing on qualitative approaches to poetry as a method, we consider how poetic techniques have the potential to bring us into children's experiences in different ways and inspire more playful engagement with our research data more broadly. We discuss the elements of our research process the led us to adopt a poetic approach and present an illustrated series of research poems derived from our project on children's perspectives on nature and adventurous nature play in New Zealand. We invite readers and viewers to engage with these works and consider what disrupting traditional prose representations of research can add to critical children's geographies and beyond.

Geographical research with children is replete with a particular suite of representational issues, largely centred on reconciling the tension between recognizing children's agency and adult researcher interpretations of data (Barker and Weller 2003; James 2010; Holloway 2014; Mason and Watson 2014; Ergler 2017). In our own work, we have grappled with this by endeavouring to adopt child-centred approaches whereby we use children's actual words to explain and define research themes, and employ data collection techniques that privilege children's first-hand experiences (James 1990; Punch 2002; Barker and Weller, 2003; Loebach and Gilliland 2010; Ergler 2011; Ergler and Kearns 2013). Yet, several research experiences have led us to question whether alternative forms of representation, outside the bounds of traditional prose, might be additionally beneficial in advancing our critical aims in privileging children's voices.

We have been inspired to rethink the very nature of our engagement with research data by wider calls in geography to invigorate or enchant our academic work with more playful approaches (Woodyer 2012; Woodyer and Geoghegan 2013; Horton 2018). Woodyer (2012) was one of the first to call for more ludic practices in our academic environments and, more recently, Horton (2018, 7) challenged us to "develop affecting modes of thinking-writing-researching, to cultivate an ethic of playfulness… as if these things matter 'big-time' for our work." The arguments for play are two-fold. The first is methodological; making space for different ways of doing academic work helps us to come to understand things differently and opens up the possibilities for new knowledge (Woodyer 2012). For example, studies by Rautio (2013; 2014), Pyrry (2015), and Hayes (2013; 2018) show that approaching and playing around with mundane everyday experiences and research practices in nonrepresentational ways can help to surface taken-for-granted geographies and, in particular, the relationality of diverse human and nonhuman agents. Such a lens allows a focus on how interactions between human and nonhuman actors matter in the moment they are produced rather than contending with their symbolic meaning per se (Horton 2010; Rautio 2013). We suggest that 'playing with poetry' is one way to engage with how our child participants related to the 'messiness' of the nonhuman world and each other over the course of our research. Second, from a critical perspective, explicitly taking up more playful approaches is a way to confront the binary that sets out play as the domain of children versus adults, as well as the social and spatial binary between (academic) work and play (Woodyer 2012). The latter point has broad implications for how we do geographical research, particularly in contexts where neo-liberal pressures may override possibilities for taking pleasure in our work (Skelton 2018). We thus experimented with a more playful approach—or as Horton (2018, 6) calls it a "ludic intervention"—in our academic work on children's geographies, one

that incites the joy and fun in geographical research and involves "doing stuff that feels good" (Horton 2018, 6).

Our foray into poetry as a playful method was prompted by a project exploring children's views on nature and adventurous nature play in New Zealand. The benefits of children's interaction with nature have been well-documented, and can include physical, mental, and social well-being (Freeman and Tranter 2011; Chawla 2015; Ward et al. 2016), while adventurous play can promote self-management, risk assessment, and resilience (Niehues et al. 2013; Malone 2016; Ward et al. 2016). Emerging research has also begun to critically engage with children's so-called 'nature deficit disorder' (Freeman et al. 2017) and children's assumed affinity for nature (Taylor 2011). Our study aimed to contribute to this work by centring children's perspectives on nature and adventurous nature play to tease out the nuances in children's experiences and definitions of these concepts. Our classroom-based research involved asking students, aged eight to ten years, to complete two drawings: one of nature and one of adventurous play in nature. The researcher walked around the room while the children were drawing and engaged them in discussion about what they put on the page. Our data consisted of a verbatim transcription of these roving discussions and visual material in the form of the children's drawings.

Three things became clear to us when we began to work with the data. First, although the children were drawing individually, it was very much a collective activity. Students reacted to each other's drawings, and the transcript reflected these interconnections (see also Rautio 2014). The ways in which this group dynamic contributed to the construction of the data became very apparent when we listened to how children responded to each other's drawings and descriptions of their drawings. We therefore felt that parsing the data into fine-grained codes would risk

disrupting the flow of this collective experience. Next, we realized that the drawings and the group dialogue were inseparable. The drawings could not stand alone outside of the context of the conversations about what the children were creating. Doing so would risk taking the drawings to mean something absolute about children's lives (Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999) or even applying drawing as a projective technique to get at children's unconscious (Reason 2010)—an approach at odds with our child-centred ethos. Finally, the language children employed to describe their drawings and talk about nature and adventurous play struck us as particularly colourful, vibrant, and rather poetic. We deliberated on how we might maintain the vividness of their talk within the collective context. Madge (2014, 182) recently proposed that "poetry is one of the more useful linguistic tools available to the geographer to attempt to express an affective geopolitics." Cresswell (2014) further emphasizes the distinct relationship between geography and poetry, noting that poetry is a way of connecting self to the world. We wondered if poetic representation might be a way forward, and what it could add to our work on children's geographies.

Richardson (1994, 516) and others contend that writing "form and content are inseparable," and thus by writing research differently, or writing research poetically, we come to know our subject in different and possibly new ways (Glesne 1997; Sparkes et al. 2003; Brady 2004; Sparkes and Douglas 2007). In this way, poetry in research can be engaged as a process or method of inquiry (Richardson 1994; Glesne 1997; Brady 2004; Furman et al. 2007). Proponents of poetic representation highlight that prose is taken-for-granted in realist or traditional research writing as authoritative; yet, prose is just one writing convention and is not more or less influenced by its author's construction than other forms (Richardson 1994, 518; see also Sparkes et al. 2003; Brady 2004). Poetry can even "challenge power relationships inscribed through

traditional writing practices" (Clarke et al. 2005, 915) by rendering the constructed nature of the text potentially more legible to the reader (Glesne 1997)—a feature simpatico with our critical aims. As Brady (2004, 628) says, poetry "shows itself as method" in ways that prose does not. Still, poetry as method is invariably produced within contexts of power relations that require ongoing reflexivity (Eshun and Madge 2012; Madge 2014).

If form and content are co-constitutive of knowledge, poetry has the potential to bring us into children's experiences in different ways. As an evocative form of representation, poetry creates a very different kind of experiential relationship for the audience (Glesne 1997; Poindexter 2002; Brady 2004). For one, due to its evocative nature, poetry can prompt readers to connect on an emotional level with themselves and others, as well as self-reflect on their own experiences vis-a-vis those expressed in poetry (Richardson 1994; Poindexter 2002; Sparkes 2002; Carr 2003; Brady 2004; Furman et al. 2007; Sparkes and Douglas 2007; Faulkner 2009; Madge 2014). This affective aspect of the poetic experience positions the audience into a potentially more active, versus passive, form of knowledge engagement (Sparkes and Douglas, 2007). Engaging with poetry itself is a process of meaning-making as poems can be read in different ways by different people in different places (Madge 2014). Second, poetry has both oral and written traditions, meaning that the ways we share poetic representations of research can engage our audiences as individual readers and in collective experiences of listening. Sparkes et al. (2003) make the point that "poetry does not just sit on the page when shared but is taken off the page by readers and/or listeners through the related stories that they inspire." Third, in line with the critical potential that Marston and De Leeuw (2013) articulate as a benefit of creative geographical praxis, the latter two characteristics of poetic representation lend to its potential as a transformative medium. Poetry can be a way to package research into consumable formats for

diverse audiences (Faulkner 2009), including into formats meaningful for research participants (Clarke et al. 2005; Eshun and Madge 2012). We thus considered how poetry could serve to share research findings with children as a means to re-balance power dynamics by producing findings in child-friendly formats. In this way, poetry may be an effective tool for translating research knowledge to audiences in impactful ways and for bringing marginalized voices into new spaces (Poindexter 2002; Sparkes et al. 2003; Sparkes and Douglas 2007; Carroll, Dew, and Howden-Chapman 2011).

Still, we want to be clear we are not valorising poetic representation as a 'better' or more 'natural' way of getting at children's perspectives, but rather suggest that it expands our toolkit for generating and communicating knowledge about children's (and adults') experiences. Given that most of the wider multidisciplinary work engaging poetry has done so with adults (e.g., Poindexter 2002; Eshun and Madge 2012), we hope that extending to children's research will open up new opportunities to critically explore methodological questions about this research practice—and also open up permission for researchers to take up playful approaches as part of methods to energize academic inquiry.

Poetry as method is operationalized in a variety of ways, from structured poetic forms (Lietz, Furman, and Langer 2006) to what Glesne (1997) calls *poetic transcription,* which involves condensing participant transcripts into free-form poems using participants' own words. As a form of data reduction or compression, some argue that poetry can help distil kernels of meaning and illuminate connections (Glesne 1997; Clarke et al. 2005; Lahman et al. 2011); poetry is an economy of words that at once shrinks content while painting a holistic picture of experience. Poetic expression also offers researchers a range of literary devices (e.g., alliteration, pauses, repetition) often unavailable in prose, which may be useful in conveying dimensions of

experience (Richardson 1994; Öhlen 2003). Proponents of poetic representation stress the importance of fit-for-purpose; that is, choosing the literary device that best meets the research and communication goals for the work, taking into account the intended audiences (Sparkes et al. 2003).

In engaging poetry as method, our purpose was to see if it would be a suitable medium to capture the *collective* context of the drawing activity and related discussions, as well as to adequately contextualize the drawings within the group dialogue. We also wanted to experiment with creating a research product that could have wide appeal, including to children. Ultimately, we hoped poetic representation would be a way to bring people into children's experiences with nature and adventurous nature play in a relatable way. Considering what form of poem would fit this purpose and be consistent with our child-centred approach, we decided to use Glesne's (1997) poetic transcription technique to create free-form poems that stayed close to the children's dialogue. This approach limited our manipulation of the text to reduction, relocation, and repetition, while permitting slight stylistic changes, such as interchanging singular or plural forms and articles including 'a' and 'the'; in one instance, we added the words "even though" to bridge two connected ideas. Our poems also approximate what Eshun and Madge (2012) call a research poem, meaning that we condensed the transcript and rearranged the text, but did not add our own substantive words. We extend previous approaches to poetic representation, undertaken mainly with adults, by including the children's drawings to construct an *illustrated* series of research poems.

We inductively identified seven broad themes in the transcript, including: (1) activities, (2) fantasy, (3) animals, (4) natural elements, (5) what is nature, (6) places, and (7) adventurous play. From these thematic groupings of text, we constructed five research poems; the fifth poem

combined several themes (activities, places, and adventurous play). We then selected drawings based on the content of each poem. These drawings are meant to situate the poems and children's words in the context of the drawing activity. Collectively, the five poems we constructed captured a majority of the dialogue from the drawing discussions. In presenting them as a series, we decided to open with "I am nature," which contains children's comments about what nature meant to them, to set the stage for the more specific aspects of children's engagements in nature that followed. We then included two poems that spoke to the more material aspects of children's experiences: mud and animals. From there, we moved from the material to the fantastical, with a poem that included children's imaginative ideas about nature. We opted to close the series with a poem focusing on the fun children attributed to nature, as this was, in a sense, a culmination of the elements from the previous four poems.

Traditional academic writing can often be a siloed and silent process. Creating research as poetry, on the other hand, afforded us the opportunity to co-create in a collaborative fashion that was nothing short of enchanting. This extended beyond the joy and fun experienced by the two researchers involved directly in constructing the poems, but was also transmitted amongst the whole research team as we discussed the poems and wrote this piece. Even mentioning our 'poetry paper' became an endearing reference that made us all smile. Our experience certainly exemplifies the proposition by Woodyer (2012), Skelton (2018), and Horton (2018) that more playful and poetic engagement with data can contribute to the wellbeing of researchers in letting the fun of doing research come to the fore.

We invite you to join us as an active audience member in this textual and visual experience (cf. Coyle, 2018), and to view the drawings and read the poetic representations below, both to yourself and aloud, separately and as a collection.

Where do these illustrated poems take you?

Poem 1: I am nature

Nature has given us everything
     Nature has given us everything that we're here to use
          Nature's right there
                    It was originally nature
          Fossil fuels, it was originally a tree
     Trees make basically everything.
I am nature.

Nature keeps you alive
     Makes the air all oxygen and stuff
          Is where things live
             Is winter and summer
          Is everywhere
I am nature.

human life-cycle
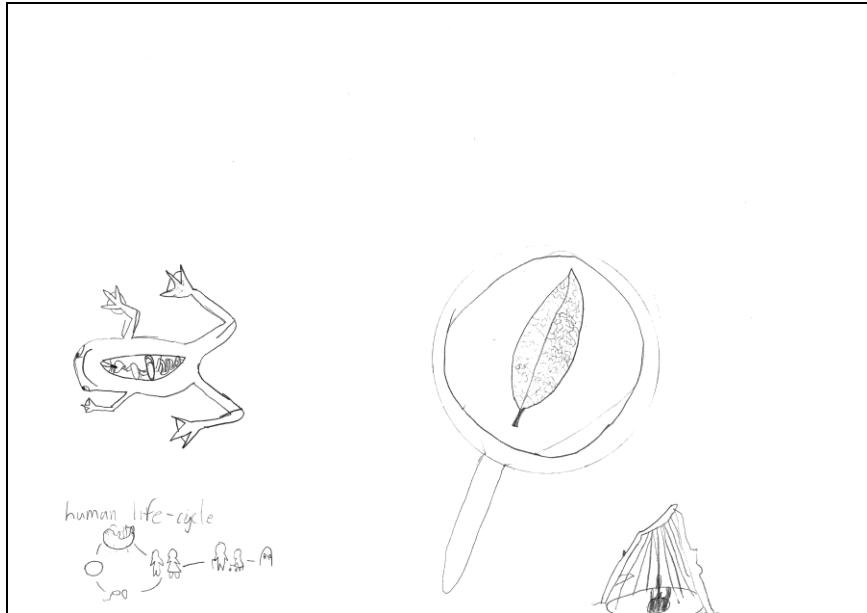
Poem 2: Mud!

Mud!
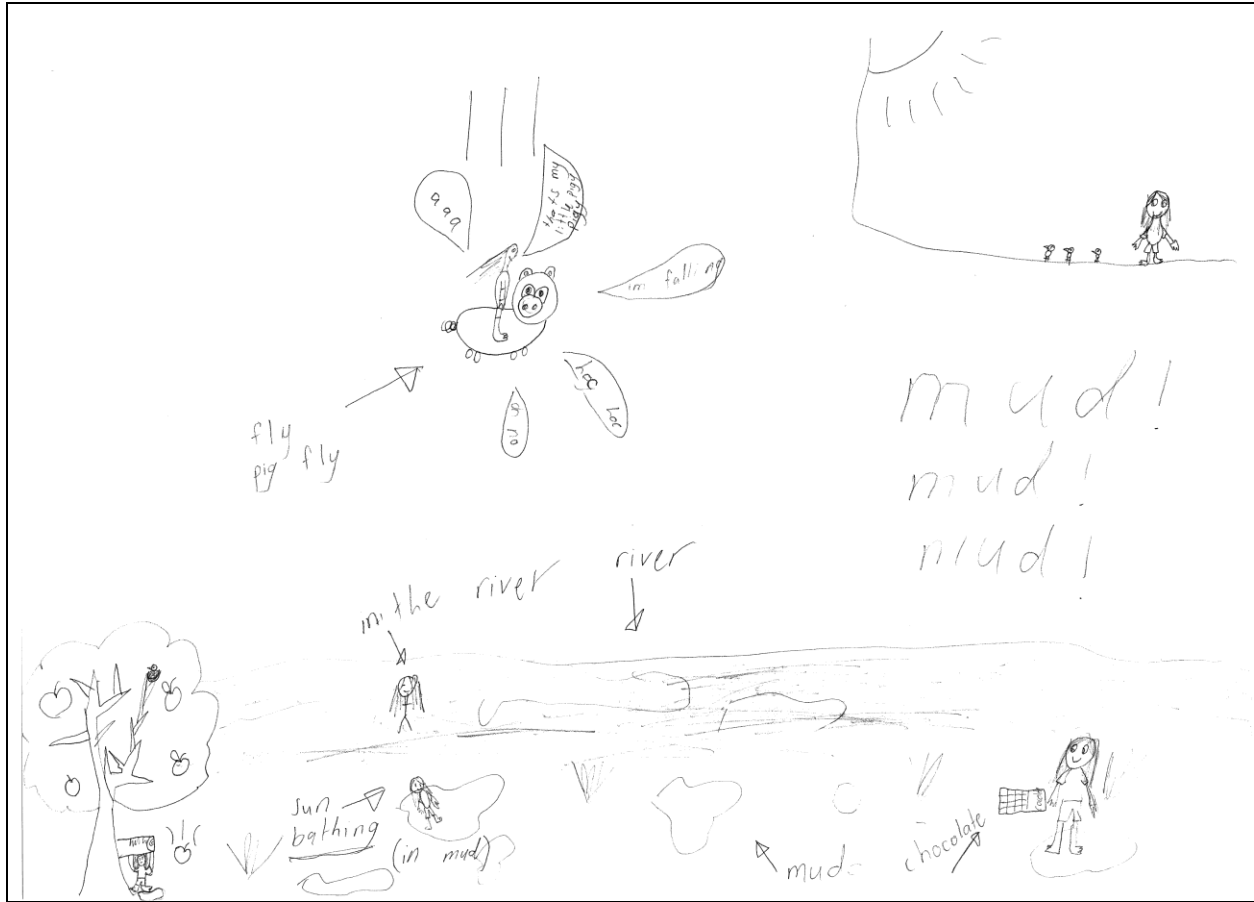After it rains there's mud puddles everywhere
I like getting muddy
Climb a tree and jump into mud
Flying off ladders into mud
Fun run mud run

Poem 3: My animals

A bee
A bird
A butterfly
A chicken, it ran away
A rabbit, got eaten by a hawk, I even saw it
A rabbit, our rabbit got eaten by a dog, our dog
A cow, it has a little bit of poop coming out. That's its utters!
A pig
A guinea pig
A flying squirrel
A carabus
A slug
I love my animals.

Poem 4: Moons don't have eyes

I daydream a lot and if there's no nature I don't know what to daydream about
Daydreaming of being an explorer
Daydream fighting, like two brothers fighting out in the wild
Using the umbrella like Mary Poppins jumping off stuff and flying
Playing your own game in your own world

You can get almost anything you want in my fantasy world
Candy and clouds and lollypop trees
Eating popcorn and licking trees
Lollypop trees

Use your imagination.

Poem 5: You'll be having fun

You'll be having fun

At Rainbow Rocks
At Mopanui
At Marupik
At Estuary, Lagoon, Pond, Harbour, Dock, Beach

You'll be having fun

Building huts, rafts, mountains, sleds, sand castles
Grabbing branches off fallen trees and tying them together
Riding motorbikes, or even a pig

You'll be having fun

Getting dirty
Getting off your bottom
Skiing, biking, running

You'll be having fun

Exploring around outside
Exploring the insides of a frog
Exploring in the woods and helping it to grow

You'll be having fun

Climbing trees, down big peaks
Playing in the creek
Sliding on pine needles

You'll be having fun

Diving, jumping, swimming, fishing at The Wharf in the summer
Falling off the boogie board
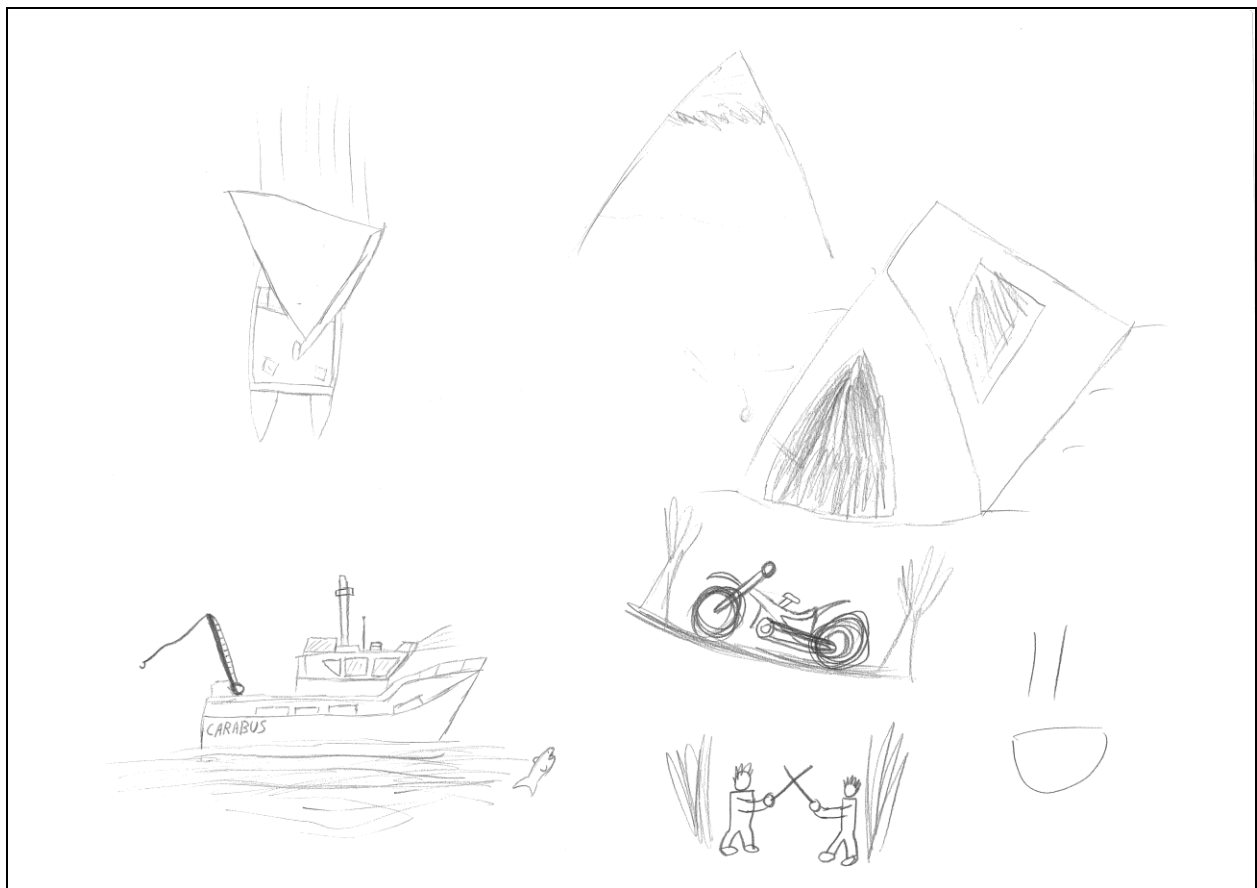Playing on a boat, raft, waka, kayak

You'll be having fun

Tramping
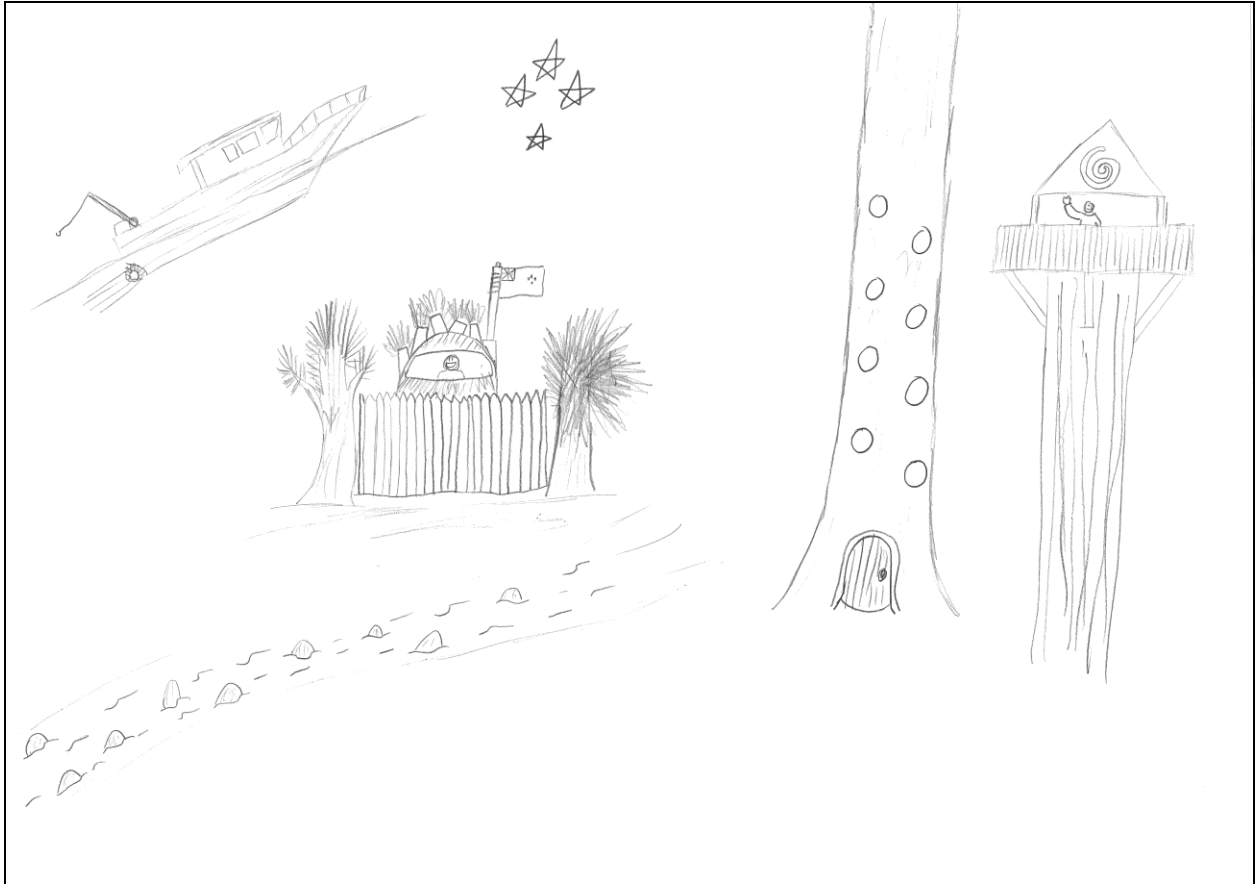Shooting bows and arrows
Jumping on a trampoline

You'll be having fun, even though

I broke my arm
I broke my elbow
I broke this one and this one
I dislocated my elbow
I broke that one

You'll be having fun

I like Jumping and diving off the whaf.

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