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This morning I went to see my friend Gabrielle who lives with her cat and some prayer flags through the trees. If she's opened her blinds, I can tell whether she's downstairs. But she's often in bed. She's very sick. Anyway, this morning she was making toast, the nurse was coming and I made a great mess of grass clippings all over her floor. 'Look,' she said and gave me a beautiful, battered bamboo broom to deal with them. Then the nurse came and I went to the letterbox and there was your postcard: *Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow*<sup>1</sup> saying you were going to Andalusia because that is what I need after my heart operation with lots of pain, but do you know some good cheap restaurants in New Zealand because friends are coming there in October?

We never went to the Mondrian museum that day. I didn't understand that everything was so close – is so close in Holland – or the Netherlands – which we never call it down here. But I wanted Vermeer and the Rijksmuseum. I'll sit, you look, you said when we got there. Too many people – I have a headache thinking about my park in Persia but look at the broom and the clouds in Little Street. Of course I wanted to see everything – if you live this far away and are a little bit Dutch... But someone who had to sit because his head hurt from thinking about his park in Persia – that was a new sentence, a new thought. And now it's your heart, more pain and Andalusia. Oh dear oh dear. Your poor heart – I hope you are still in love. Are you? It will be hot and Arabic in Andalusia. You will love it – all those arabesques. I have never been but once I walked the Camino and met a man from Andalusia who knew about trees. He said there was a tree from New Zealand in Cataluña called metrosideros, with red flowers. We have a tree called a pohutukawa with red flowers but I didn't think there could be one in Spain. Anyway, when I came home, I discovered that it really is called metrosideros – which means iron heart – it's a very tough tree AND there really is one in Cataluña. V old.

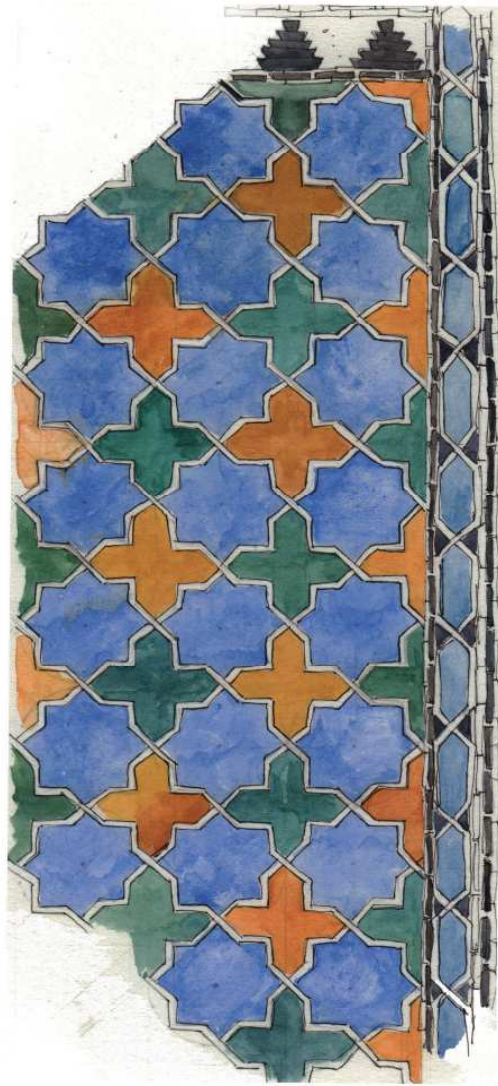
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But to your friends. There are many places to eat, especially in Auckland, but I don't know the South Island so well – I think of it as empty, cold, beautiful, and probably bad coffee. But I'm probably wrong – just haven't been for ages.

And now my neighbour across the landing is doing his violin practice – slow arpeggios followed by Bach – I know his routine pretty well. Soon Pierre the French hippy will wake and put the Rolling Stones on. He has a table and a mirror outside his flat – he lives on the ground floor and the children from the other flats seem to run in and out of his all day – it's the school holidays. I think he is a kind of Pied Piper.

I wish it was not your friends coming – but you could never bear the long flight – your poor head, your poor heart.

*Kia kaha*<sup>2</sup> is what we say here – like *courage mon brave*.



<sup>1</sup> *Composition II in Red, Blue and Yellow* is a 1930 painting by Piet Mondrian, with the three primary colours arranged as square tiles against a white ground.

<sup>2</sup> A Maori phrase translated as 'be strong, be brave, keep going, get stuck in,' according to [maoridictionary.co.nz](http://maoridictionary.co.nz)

<sup>3</sup> Catharina van Bohemen was born to a Dutch father and an English mother who met at the Princess Ballroom in Wellington after WWII. They had no other family in New Zealand, and her mother, an orphan who never met her Dutch grandmother, made her and her siblings write to Oma and Opa the moment they could hold pencils. Letters were almost sacred – a sign that they were not alone and that there was another place where she once belonged. She loves writing, receiving and reading letters. She has recently completed two essays in letter form about Jane Austen and is presently working on an essay about the Madonna in art – which may also be a letter.