

Baking Day



K-T Harrison

“If you say you are a writer, then that is what you must do. If you say you are a writer, then writing is something you can’t not do. Get some tools for your toolkit and hone the craft.”

Ko Taupiri te Maunga
Ko Tainui te Waka
Ko Waikato te Awa
Ko Ngati Mahuta, Ngati
Paoa, Ngati Haua nga iwi.

K-T Harrison completed the Master of Creative Writing at AUT in 2010 and is currently preparing a proposal for a PhD at Waikato University on ‘The power of storytelling to effect change.’

The animals weren’t hungry this morning. Henry, the cat named after the hospital where I work in Hamilton, was minus a few more patches of fur. She rubbed her patchy body against my leg. There’s a few hairs still stuck to my trousers. She’d only played with the Whiskas in her bowl. Henry’s got yellow eyes that glow in the dark. In the dark, and when she’s about to pounce. This morning they were the dull muddy orbs of lazed contentment. The purring began long before her eyes closed, and then she slept. Lulu, the dog, sat up, yawned, licked his nuts and then farted. His tail thumped up and down on the floorboards and I gagged at the foul stench that wafted my way. He’d been digging again, too. An old bone lay beside him. He sniffed my fingers and then licked them. He growled. Perhaps he smelt the blood, but I’d washed my hands: twice. Thump, thump went his tail. Then he returned to sleep and snored through his nostrils and through his doggy dreams. The little weaners just sniffed at the concoction I offered them. The moist breath they exhaled fused with the steam from the hot mixture. Titoi, the spotty kunekune, grunted and snorted in her pen. She didn’t attack her food today. She ate daintily and sparsely, as all ladies should. Once, she went missing for three days. A lady down the road brought her back home. That lady bred Dalmatians. Titoi had blended in well with the spotty dogs.

The scar on the right side of Titoi’s puku was a neat weld now. She had been on her way home from another one of her adventures when the dogs from down the road had chased her through the paddock next to the house. I raced out with the sawn-off and blasted the air. The dogs took off. But I was too late. She’d tried to squeeze through the barbed wire fence. The rip left an ugly gape that took four months to close.

She continued to stray to the other farms and root around all over the place. This upset some of the neighbours. One of the farmers offered to put a ring in her nose.

“No. That would be painful for her, and besides, the ring won’t make any difference.” In the end, I penned her so she had her own place where she could root around to her little heart’s content.

THIS IS THE CROSSROADS at Te Hoe and I’m sitting on the Hall steps. If I go left I’ll be at the off-ramp at the end of the road that leads to State Highway 1. The day the sign went up, the locals raced down there and took photos.

The expressway passes by the garage where travellers used to stop to refuel their cars, and refresh themselves at the restaurant called Cowgirls. That’s where Tui worked. She had to work somewhere to support herself after Sam had run off with Theresa. Salesmen were the best customers; they always came back, they paid up, they were married so there weren’t any nasty-bugs lurking, and they didn’t make weird demands on a gal. And, they didn’t fall in love. Truckies fell in love. Fast and furious, they could be done and dusted by the time Cookie had grilled up a medium rare with chips and eggs; and

salad on the side. But Tui thought it was probably the food they were in love with more than her; Sam had left, after all.

The cowgirls don't dance there any more. Tui lives in New Plymouth with her husband, Brian, a truck driver from Opunake. The ramshackle buildings are empty now. And the fast cars speed by.

Both sides of the locked glass windows of the community notice-board cabinet at the top of the steps are cracked. Dead flies and dust lie at the bottom, and the notices are yellow and curled up at the edges. A dance was held in July. The year has faded. It started at eight o'clock. It was a BYO, and supper provided by ladies-a-plate-please was served. Ladies didn't have to pay, but it cost their gentlemen escorts five shillings and sixpence. My Auntie Emily told me that I had been made in the car park of this hall at one of those dances. She'd said that my mother and father sneaked out to make me in the back seat of Granddad's car. For a long time I imagined that I had been whipped up in a bowl in the back seat of his car. I thought about my mother getting all the ingredients together in a bowl and mixing me up like a cake out of the Edmonds. My father would have stayed in the hall to dance with all the other ladies because he's good at dancing. I wondered how long it took to mix me up. And I wondered if they took me home straight away and placed me in the oven to bake. Or did I sit in my bowl in Granddad's car and wait for the dance to end. I used to think that, tired out after all the dancing, they'd slept through my baking and I was left in the oven to burn. Black.

THE HALL DOUBLED as the picture theatre. I used to get in for nothing because of Granddad. He had a lot of say in the community. Nanny used to buy blackball lollies for me to eat at the pictures and when I got home she would give me a bowl of ice cream, since I didn't have one there. They cost too much. We had to stand up for God Save the Queen. Granddad used to stand at the back of the hall and salute until the song was finished, then the lights would go off and Granddad's voice would tell us all to, 'Please be seated.' The cowboys rode around on their horses and shot at the Injuns. Every time a redskin fell off his horse, we cheered; and when a pale-face fell off his, we booed. Then Dr Who and The Daleks came to Te Hoe. The Daleks scared us more than the stories they told us about the Patupaiarehe. When Nanny coughed at night she sounded like a Dalek. And then one night they took her away with them. And they never gave her back. I looked for her when the Daleks came back to the hall, but she wasn't with them. Once when we went to Hamilton, I saw the tardis. I sent a thought message to Dr Who to make the Daleks come back

to Te Hoe and bring Nanny back with them. They never did come back, so we had to watch the cowboys chase the Injuns around again. And shoot at them. Again. And Nanny stayed with the Daleks.

THE BUILDING ON THE CORNER of the road straight in front of me used to be a garage. Shreds of dirty paint-flakes from the 'OBIL sign drop onto the weeds that grow beneath the bolt and thick chain-secured door. The blackberry on the eastern side grows thick and is almost up to the roof. The fruit are shrivelled lumps of brown. Grey planks of curling-up-at-the-ends timber are stacked against the other side. Slaters and earwigs must breed between the planks; birds hop about and peck at the ground there. They feast, fly away and return for more. The spindly blackberry vines twist around and weave in and out of the stacked planks and their barbs dig into the aging wood to grip-crawl their way along and upward. Upward they climb, pulled by the sun and they cling to the wall with their hooks that claw.

Auntie Emily said that in 1931, Nanny Pakira had jumped the fence with the Pakeha man who ran that garage. Nanny Pakira got pregnant from the fence jumping and Auntie Moira, that baby, is now 73 years old. This road straight ahead passes through the valley, and ends in a cul-de-sac that's wide enough for the milk tankers to turn around in. The farmer allows access to the creeks where you can set hinaki. In one part of the creek, the watercress grows thickly. You can pick watercress while you wait for the hinaki to fill with the sleek and slippery silver-belly eels. The watercress stalks are so fat, they pop when you pick them. Pop. Pop. And the bag fills in minutes.

There are caves up in the bush. Way, way up where the creeks must begin. No one goes up there. Auntie Emily said the Patupaiarehe used to live in those caves. 'Patupaiarehe, my behind,' said Granddad. 'They're cowardly Conchies. They only come out at night. They're scared of getting caught and being sent to Somes Island in the Wellington Harbour. If I get my hands on them, I'll boot them all the way down to Wellington.' Every Anzac Day, Granddad got dressed up in his uniform and got drunk. Every other day, he just got drunk in his normal clothes. 'They'll wish that the Patupaiarehe got them when I catch up to them.'

One Anzac Day Granddad got so drunk he fell asleep and burnt holes in his uniform. He wasn't allowed to be the usher at the pictures any more because it was the hall committee's uniform. And he had to give it back. After that I had to pay at the pictures, so I stopped going. Granddad never did catch up with the Conchies. He died in 1967 and he left the farm to me. Every now and then the

stories resurface. Someone will say they saw something strange up there, and the tongues start to wag. And the old stories are given another airing and another living. I wish that was so with my Granddad.

MAUI GROWS DOPE up in the bush. Harvest brings activity to the valley. This road is busy most days then. So, too, is the sky. Helicopters hover over Hapuakohe Maunga. They come every day, but they don't stay long. The Coromandel yields bigger harvests with bigger busts. Maui bakes, too. Packages of powder. Pure poison. Every one knows. But donations of a whole beast, a pig, a mutton or a lamb, will keep most mouths closed except at kai time. A generous koha to fix the church roof that sags, or a team of workers to put in the new driveway, perfume and jewellery to make someone smile, or books for the school's new library; and the people turn around and look the other way.

"By gee that Maui is one aroha fulla. He looks after us and our kids. He's our future all right." After the harvest the shiny new Four-Wheel-Drives park up at Maui's house. And then drive away.

THE ROAD ON MY RIGHT goes through to Hamilton. Over the one-way bridge, turn right and carry on, all the way. The blue hall still stands where it always has since I was little. I pass it on my way to work each night. The whare paku, labelled Tane and Wahine, lean against each other like the drunks that used to use them before they got too drunk and pissed anywhere. That's where Taihuri got married. And we had Bimbo's tangi there. And Margie's and Uncle Pita's. And we had Nanny's unveiling there, too. I loved hearing the whaikorero and the waiata at the hui. Granddad would talk for ages. After the big kaihakari had been eaten, the korero and the waiata seemed to change when the kegs rolled in. One time, there were two mini-tankers. And at Koro Taimana's unveiling, there was a tanker, just like the milk ones, except full of beer. It was empty when the truck returned for it three days later. But Uncle Hare and them had gone down the pub and brought flagons back.

Us kids used to sit by the fire and the grown-ups' music and singing bellowed out each time someone opened the door:

*I tenei po, I tenei po,
piki whara to taiaha hemu hemu ra
hemu hemu ra, hemu hemu ra
piki whara to taiaha hemu hemu ra.*

The younger Taihuri played the guitar. Michael put a piece of corrugated iron over the embers and we put pipis on it. We all had a feed. The hot pipis burned my fingers, but hot and salty went good with the cold and bitter beer Michael sneaked out

for us in jugs. We drank straight out of those jugs. Michael played the other guitar, then Ina and Terry joined in and soon we were singing the same songs as the grown-ups.

The singing inside came out of the windows. So did the clapping and cheering. Someone in there was doing a drunken hula. The door opened,

...I tenei po, I tenei po,

Lucy stood on the step outside the hall and lit a cigarette. The door opened again,

...piki whara to taiaha hemu hemu ra,

Johnny walked out and the door slammed shut. Lucy and Johnny walked towards the creek.

"Just going to check the hinaki," said Johnny, when Michael asked where they were going.

"Can I come?" said Michael.

"Nah. We're all right. You fullas stay here." Lucy giggled and tripped over and Johnny picked her up. He felt her all over to see if she was okay. They held hands and staggered along the path, and then the glowing cigarette disappeared. They were gone for a long time.

By then the pipis were cold and rubbery and the jugs were empty. Our fire was almost out.

The door opened,

...hemu hemu ra, hemu hemu ra,

"You fullas seen Lucy?" said Max. He was Lucy's husband.

"She's gone down the cree..." Michael elbowed me.

"Shhh."

Too late. Max strode down the path. "Lucy..."

Johnny was the first to return.

"Who's got the big waha?" I think he glared at us, but his eyes were swollen and bruised up and his nose sat crooked on his face, so I couldn't tell.

Max was next. "Ina, go in there and get your mother. Lucy fell over. She's broken something."

...piki whara to taiaha hemu hemu ra.

I used to sing that song. I knew the words to all the grown-up songs. We all did. But we didn't know what they meant. Now I appreciate the learning in my hearing when Granddad used to speak. The waiata my Granddad sung weren't rude. The songs of the drinking grown-ups were. Rude. Crude.

Inside the hall, the beer flowed and flowed.

THE CREEK BEHIND THE HALL has dried up. And the people don't go to that place any more.

A convoy of police vehicles race through the crossroads. They don't slow down to look left or right. The cars whizz past the home-kill butchery on the corner opposite me. That's where I get Lulu's bones from. Soon the police will pass the barn with the faded old Mickey Mouse painted on it. They will give it no heed. They will drive by the plantation of pine trees that Granddad and Uncle

Russell and them planted during The Depression. Some have started to bend. No one noticed when they were ready to be chopped down and sent to Japan. The Police should be up to the cabbage tree that I pissed behind two hours ago now. It's just another tree. Why would they look at it? How could they know what's buried in the drain there? They will find the gate locked when they get to the farm. It will take them some time to cut through the padlocked chain I threaded through the fence and the metal bars on the gate. They may see the brand new Four-Wheel-Drive parked in the driveway. They might laugh at the rusted old Holden Rodeo parked in front of it. She did. Some may climb over the fence and they may notice where Lulu's been digging this morning.

Lulu will open his eyes and see the strangers invade the property. He will bark at them. He's a dog. Henry will look up from her bowl of Whiskas, her yellow eyes will glow. Titoi will grunt and oink and her piggy eyes will beg for food. The weaners will munch on the bread that I brought from the bakery in Huntly on my way home this morning. It's been soaked in the reconstituted milk powder I bought from the RDI in Taupiri last week. The bread sops will be cold. The wee animals seem to enjoy it that way.

One policeman will knock on the door, and beside him two will stand poised on the freshly swept porch floor. Some may peer through the windows. They will see everything neat and tidy just as I left it. One will see the bodies in the bed that I covered with the patchwork quilt Aunty Emily gave us. He may see the red sky she'd sewn from an old dress she cut up. He may see the spiky red grass and the harsh red sun. He may not, but then surely he will think it odd that the little lambs that frolic have red wool. They will hear the telephone ring. It has my bloody finger prints on it from when I called them. But no one will answer Aunty Emily's call. There is no one there that hears. The one will bang on the door again. Loudly and then louder. But no one will answer.

It's a baking hot day. I sit on these steps at the crossroads and I wait. I'm too hot to walk and it's too far to run. And I got nothing else to hide in any more. They'll have to replace me on the night shift. They'll find a replacement. They always do. She did. It's a baking hot day. I'll just sit on these steps that overlook the car park where I was made. And they will come. Soon. And they will take me out of this oven. I wait.