

Language at Full Stretch

Briar Wood

How to poroporoaki, write a tribute to the man whose poems encapsulated his life and times, the time of my generation's youth and maturity, poetry we can age to, if not always gracefully, at least to the tune of companionable belly laughs or shared tears? He brought Kiwi-isms and Maori English, Maori mythologies and phrases as well as homegrown philosophies of adult experience to performance venues and sixth form classes all over New Zealand. His work was central to our enjoyment of the pleasures of life and literature, sexuality and spirituality.

I never had the satisfaction of meeting the man whose poetry I grew up taking for granted but when I returned as an academic to his work I realized anew why it was so loved, so admired, the cultural breadth and scope of it, the terse tone of it. The short poems were as carefully composed, multidimensional and invested with historical significance as whakairo, as intricate as an engine. Although his was very much lived and breathed oral work it is equally complex on the page and it was writers like Hone Tuwhare and his generation whose poetry enriched the literary culture that gave people of my generation a literature to take pride in, wherever we are in the world, to guide us in life, to keep it real.

In my twenties, setting out to write, I realised that the Chinese market gardens I visited in childhood were where he had grown up and that maybe he was setting out for work to the railway workshop whistle I woke to on school days. His approach to poetry as a worker and craftsman was one I have respected always and knowing that his poetry had at least partly been formed in the area where I grew up made me love Mangere more. Tuwhare's appreciation of working class culture took the form of celebration and elegy rather than a romantic rage against industrialisation; he combined a profound appreciation of nature and landscape with a sophisticated love of people, for the best aspects of both Maori and Pakeha life. His use of the

vernacular was spot on – I can well remember the particular pleasure of school children in finding lines like ‘*gimme back me fuckin’ marbles / yous kids*’ not just for the iconoclasm of putting the rhythms of Kiwispeak and swear words into the ‘high’ culture of poetry which was mostly carefully edited for classroom usage but because this was combined with the eloquence of poems like ‘No Ordinary Sun’ as it opened a reader out onto an appreciation of language at full stretch.

He had an equally articulate understanding of ‘high’ culture and the way it could be integrated into everyday life. I grew up suspicious of preaching as well as religious references and rhythms; his poetry didn’t preach (he was no Baxter thankfully though he wrote his fellow poet an extraordinary moving tribute) and his poetry made an excellent substitute for reading the Bible. A fortnight ago I drove through Kaikohe and thought about his connection to a town that is changing quickly with the times and yet still recognisably the place of the era of his youth. He deserves a memorial there and in many places, but how best to farewell and remember the man who wrote the irreverent ‘To a Maori figure cast in bronze outside the Chief Post Office, Auckland’, wearing his politics in his words?

There are many tributes from people who knew him far better than I and whose closeness requires respect and great sadness for his loss. The oratory of the tangi lives in his work and he wrote many moving tributes – to Ron Mason, Martin Luther King, his mother, Heemi. He never wanted to be on a pedestal, so, raising a bottle of beer to him in London, and later a whisky (I’m writing this on Burns night remembering his relationship to Dunedin) only a poem will do.

From a Countrywoman

Stopped off in Kaikohe
on the way back through to Aucks
after staying with Maureen in Hokianga

bought fresh flounder
and green veg from a commune shop
admired the art work

thought of your mana
how you wouldn't want a statue –
you kept on the move

Papatūānuku grooved to
your rhythms, your humour
could dry Rangi's tears

and clear the sky.
On a stopover to London
I imagined your reaction of approval

to Hong Kong's re-sinification.
Your poetry travels on,
the song vines grow.