



Poetry Series: Poetry written post suicide for Indigenous youth in Aotearoa New Zealand

Jason Haitana

Artist Biography

I belong to lake river and mountain peoples, Te Ati Haunui a Paparangi, Ngāti Tūwharetoa and Ngāti Maru ki Taranaki. I work in mental health and addictions where I meet and help many of my people, and I write words, as I heal with words and so heal others too. Writing is the expression of myself, and I use it to bring hope and healing to all peoples who fight against the dark.

Artist Statement

This series of poetry and prose was written to provide a cathartic examination of self. I use poetry to illustrate the darker corners in us as Indigenous people, and the darkness that sits in our souls, diminished as we are, in some ways, through our lives in this world. Through poetry I talk to the experiences of all those people I have been in touch with, who passed through suicide, in a means to acknowledge them, and love them, and hold them in my heart and in the hearts of others. Most of all it is about the experiences that mar us and darken our light, and in which, through beauty and words, we and I rekindle hope in others and light their fires again.

A Vision of Winter. Memories of Summer.

The long and winding road; it drifts in and out of my dreams sometimes and whispers to me of memories that I hold dear.

Far as I am now, as I write, from the rivers of my homeland.

It reminds me of where I have come from and where I have been; where I am now and where my road will take me.

Let me tell you a story.

My story, if you will, is of dusty tracks and wild water flowing, and trees that made shadows dance in the sun. Of the darkness and the light that lived in me dancing one then the other in the long afternoon of my youth.

Once, when I too was lost.

I was dreaming of a brighter day
Of a place where I could stay
For a time from the turmoil in my world
Keeping my demons at bay

I listened to the sound of the wind
Whistling through the trees
A storm is coming
To me, in me, from me

And with it thunder rumbling
Filling my world with light and sound
Energy racing!
A deep throated roar! A flash!

The storm comes
And with it I am free
Of the shackles
That once bound me

Lost on the quiet back roads with the sounds of cicadas around me and fantails flying into clouds of midges. They dance in the dust and the light, twisting and turning never staying still.

To our people the fantail was responsible for the presence of death in the world. Māui-Tikitiki-a-Taranga, a hero, touched by the sacred, thinking he could eradicate death by successfully passing through the goddess of death, Hine-nui-te-po, tried to enter the goddess's sleeping body through the pathway of birth.

The fantail, warned by Māui to be quiet, began laughing and woke Hine-nui-te-po, who was so angry that she promptly killed Māui.

The katakata or laughter of the fantail signals many things. Most of all it signals change, and transformation, change which would forever be etched deep inside one's soul. Death is such a thing, or so it was to my mind then, moving from one shape to another, dancing forever like fantails spiralling in the air.

The southern winds sing
Bringing with it
Tears to blinded eyes
With eternal skies
That reach to heaven
Cast in copper
I sing to the dust
Clinging like rust
Take me to clear skies
And sunbeams
That fly
Across pale skies
Where my soul weeps
With the beauty of it all
As I fall
A ball of fire
Flaming
As I tire
And sleep
In my dreaming
Deep in my soul

The world I walked through was old and tired, worn, and yet the day was bright with promise, and the many paths that beckoned called to me with the turn or bend in the road.

We are travellers of many roads in our lifetime, and we arrive at many strange and wonderful places. And so, it is with the worlds of shape and form, we move and merge, becoming more than what we were the day before.

I stand in the wind
That comes off the mountains
And streams
Becoming dreams
In the mist
And the rain
I am a child of the land
Caught up in
Moonbeams
And sunshine
Misting clouds
And proud mountain peaks
Born amongst the snows
Knowing little of other places
But knowing
That I have worn other faces
Silence is a memory

And it is clean and soft in my heart
Remembering

He is of average height, average build. In his mid-twenties running from a life that he didn't know if he wanted, running to a future that he didn't know would reveal a world of hurt.

Knowing where he would go and the hurt and suffering that lay ahead, I acknowledged those. But I also knew that there would come joy and happiness that would come only through moving through the shadowy unseen that is darkness. I know this and more, and quietly sit and reflect on him, who is gone now, and all that is left writes to the ghosts of my past. For I had to go through the night to gift my beauty back to the worlds. To return to where there is sunlight and the promise that our ancestors heard and believed. And in which I believe having seen that and much more. In hope and faith that life and the light, which was promised to us all, loved us always. The darkness in me in those days was a terrible burden to bear. I knew nothing of peace and happiness; loneliness was my friend and lover. Even with people I felt alone; and unwanted.

The twilight echoes with cicada song
Long the afternoon reigns
The light fades slowly
Soon to be gone
Yet memories remain
Faded in the light
Remembering colours
In the quiet of the night

I had an unhealthy fascination with death and the dead. The beauty that lives in all things, and the many stories there are were blind to me. Nor did I know that all things are on journeys and the burdens we carry we can leave for a time and pick up when we have breath and strength to do so.

For we are never alone,
Our ancestors walk with us, and love us, caught as they are in worlds of beauty and dreams, before returning to life, to sing again to the stars.

Time stands still for no one
It lingers
In the quiet of my mind
I wonder at what lies around the corner
And what I must find
I sat there once where you were
In the sunlight
And I wondered at dreams that came in the night
To still a heart
As memories of dreams passed me by
Clinging
To the sun's last light

And so, I hold onto life and love
 My heart and soul
 As one
 Speak!
 Of peace!
 But most of all in wonder
 And awe
 At the way the sunlight
 Falls

The passage of life to death and back to life lay at the roots of many of our stories and legends. Of which, in some, the fantail stood at the door from one world into the others. Others speak too of the tui, whose prayer brings the sun into the skies. Once I was lost and alone and healing lay dormant and heavy in my heart. But walking the ancient places of my ancestors and feeling the land breathe around me, a song began to sing in my heart. It was sad, yes, but there was hope there, and something beautiful in me began to breathe.

The storm has passed
 And when I turn
 Weary eyes to the sky
 I fly!
 My spirit soars
 And the anger in me
 Turns to peace
 When I see
 The things you taught me
 I have no regret
 For things happened as they did
 And yet I wonder
 If in your heart
 You knew that you mattered
 You are me
 I breathe the same life
 The struggles of our shared ancestors
 And their strife
 We shared
 The sorrows and pains
 Of the people of the land
 And you are free of that
 Of the many chains
 That binds us to the blood
 In this land
 Farewell and blessings on you
 May you come to the light!
 That shines bright

On your head
 Let it be said
 That even though we had our differences
 We were the same
 That you are me
 And I am you
 You are my people
 Be free

I walked along the meandering road alone with this weight of sadness on my wairua or spirit. I remember how heavy my heart was the burden that I had accumulated not only through the darkness and light of my life, but all those other lives that lay like layers unknown on my soul.

I remember him in that golden afternoon of my memories. I recall him to my mind now as I write to you. I am all that is left of him, the boy that hid in the closet, hoping the darkness would not claim him, and, in which through my walk, amongst ancestors, in my land, amongst the streams and rivers and hills, he remembered.

And was remembered.

The sky darkens.
 light flares
 and flies through sun-streaked cloud.
 A beam of light strikes.
 last from an amber dying sun
 the night softly and slowly
 has come
 The noise of the day fades.
 here where I stay.
 The twilight lingers
 and sets with the sun.
 my day, quietly, is done.
 The night flows
 streaming, light passing,
 through my hands.
 Silence rules
 a silent land

It is with tears in my heart I remember and smile sadly to myself knowing the road he would go and the choices he would make to have peace in his life. They would be hard. Of struggle and hardship, to mould him into the man I am now. To survive, knowing that the memories of a land at peace, slumbering amongst ancient hills, amid a southern summer, that there always is hope.

Walk your land, sing, even with the awakening of the sun as the tui calls; feel the wind and rain on your face and laugh with the fantail.

Drifting in a sea of golden haze

Set in sunset skies
The falling sun dies
On the western horizon
The heat seems to stay
In the motion and noise
Of an ordinary day
As I sit here and wonder
Hearing in the distance
The summer thunder
And as I sit here still
Listening to the hum of a fan
As it echoes and scratches
Feeble against the heat
I yearn for the rain
My heartbeat is one with the land
A child of mountains and rivers and streams
Clear lakes with hills
Set in green mirrors
Streaming past my mind
Memories
In my dreaming
That I always find
In sweet moments like this
To me that is bliss

I walked alone along the gravel watching as the land shifted and rose, dipping into steep gullies where streams flowed racing for the Retaruke river that travelled with me, a familiar friend.

Who was I?

What was I?

Where would I be able to go to free myself from the demons in my heart?

What beauty lived in me waiting to be born anew in the delicate spring when the force of winter drives me into my shadow?

I am here
With tears in my eyes
Where the light shines
Gone from your sight
I will never leave your side
I promise; I will always be there
Alive
In your thoughts
When the tide of life rolls in
Never to leave you alone
I never knew you
But I see something of me

In that carefree smile
That hides the sadness
That lived in your heart
Where do I start?
When one is lost to the stars
Dreaming of one day
Making it afar
I shake my head
And instead
Look more at what I can do with my life
Knowing what I know
Knowing I once thought as you
That all life has meaning
Seeming scheming
For something better
That the four walls of a room
And locks in people's hearts
I will remember you
I fight for you
I am you
And to that
I will stand true

And so, I walked, and watched the land bask in the long summer sunlight as the heavens opened with great piles of cloud.

I watched old farm sheds and a shearing shed past me by rust red on ancient timbers leaning in forgotten corners of the world. Buildings forgotten in the corners of my mind. I watched as steep stark hills cut through with rushing waters surged upwards towards Rangī-nui-e-tu-nei. Urging itself higher and higher. Of the people who settled here and had great hopes for a good life and quietly passed over and left the bare bones of ancient houses behind.

The heat settles
the tides of the day pass
away to the night.
I settle down
to watch the passing of the light
Yesterday has gone
To those memories
Part of me longs
Crickets sing bringing relief
after the rain.
Brief: and then it is forgotten.

Are they to be forgotten too like me on this summer's day? Not even a whisper of a memory; on this long day in the past of my forgotten and forgiven youth. Yet the land remembers, and will always remember her children, even when we are lost to ourselves.

Dark has drifted in
 Dark warring with amber streetlights
 As the night dances on the horizons
 And laughs at the light
 The sound of traffic echoes in the valley
 As the stream sluggish makes its way to the sea
 To seas of blue green
 Mystery
 Reaching through a patchwork quilt
 Of field and bush and orchard
 The mark of human occupation
 Heavy on the land
 Reaching the sand hills on the coast
 Where its journey ends
 So, my friend
 I turn to you in the heat of the late afternoon
 And watch as the sun touches your hair and eyes
 Thank you for coming to see me
 As the light dies in the skies
 And the night climbs into the dark
 Thank you
 Goodbye
 Until I see you again
 Under blue summer skies

So, I walked and as I walked, I dreamed and saw visions in the light of faded dreams and illusions on this shell of life. They whispered promises of better days and the hard knot in my heart eased somewhat with the bend in the road, and the rows of poplars that reached to the skies.

Winter sets in
 Clouds heavy with rain
 As the dark holds close to my heart
 And shadows swarm in the morn
 Long nights
 Adrift I sing to the stars
 To a forgotten one
 Forlorn
 Born amidst the storm
 Life got too hard for him
 Gentle lights dim
 But I will remember your name

I hope you would do the same
When it is my time
To climb the highest stars
Afar
Be well my friend
For this is not an end
For this is not an end

We are not alone we who remain. We are not lost those who leave us so suddenly. The way to the light belongs to us all, through the sorrow and those things that pulled us down in life. For all paths lead to the same place, and our ancestors' songs will sustain us as we travel there, to hope for a new place to be born under another sun.

Where have all the people gone
that made this place alive
With the songs of children
Now, tears running down the face
of trees in this space
The songs of the bush and the rain
Where there is no memory
of pain
They have gone!
Beyond this world
They fly!
In the other worlds
and dance to moonbeams
Shadows shifting in the pale light
Of stars and the fires
Of mortals with hearts full of desire
For it is true
We fly!
We are seeds from heaven
and we will never die

He kākano ahau
E kore au e ngaro, he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea.

I am a seed
I will never be lost, for I am a seed sown in Rangiātea