

Paths Crossing and Wires

Bernadette Hall

In 2001 I visited Hone at Kaka Point. I drove down from Dunedin in our old white Merc with his friend from way back, Peter Neville who is blind and Huia, Peter's black Labrador guide-dog on board. And my friend from primary schooldays, Nicki Trevathan. She works part-time as a volunteer with the Foundation of the Blind.

I'd shared a reading with Hone in the Student Union in Dunedin in 1996 when I held the Burns Fellowship. The most beautiful moment in the event was when he invited Peter to recite the poem, 'Rain.' Peter stood up in the audience with Huia leaning in against his legs. He read the poem by memory with those glorious Maori vowels that marked Hone's speech too. Never had I felt the rain so palpable, so mysterious in its tracery over the human body. The meniscus that Cilla talks about in her poems, the movement in and out and through things, was broached. The poem was alive in all its capacity.

I heard another version of 'Rain' when I took part in a tribute to Hone organized by Doc Drumheller and the Catalyst Collective in June this year. Tamariki, boys and girls, from the Language Immersion Unit at St Albans Primary School sang a newly scored version of the poem. It was exquisite. The whole performance buzzed with life and energy. After their item, the choir sat down on stage and waited patiently through adult presentations of poetry and songs. One little boy found his own belly far more interesting than the entertainment that was being offered. Unobtrusively, he stretched up and scrunched down, making the folds in his belly jump. He's the one I suspect will grow up to be a poet.

During that trip to Murihiku, Nicki taped parts of our conversation, in the tiny shack where the famous poet lived, right up against the sea. Tangaroa, full and brimming just across the street.

Hone in a lavalava. We sipped whiskey; we'd brought some down with us. Talked there and in the pub where we'd taken him for dinner.

He loved the old car, sang 'Oh Lord won't ya buy me a Mercedes Benz' all the way round the road.

He was heading off to Durban on the 20th of May to do a reading in South Africa. 'DurBAN, DurBAN,' he played with the word, sang it over and over, turned it into a nice little bit of Italian opera. 'It's a bit late now to sort of suggest someone else. (Laughs.) Aren't I greedy at my age?' (Chorus of NO!)

'Well I'm knocking hard on 80 and I don't mean kilometers per hour.' We all offer to carry his suitcase but no, he's going on his own. 'I like to meet strangers.'

Peter had sold him his first Amstrad typewriter. 'I got a few books outa that one.'

He talks about the archaeologists at Otakou. 'Have you met any, have you met any. They're nutty. (Laughs.) They read the ground like a book.' But you feel that he's excited by the notion. It sounds like the beginning of a poem.

He tells a long involved story about the Hoovermatic washing machine that makes such a helluva noise in his house. 'And the neighbours say, "Hone, Hone, what are you doing over there?"'

We bellow with laughter. The way he says it you know it's a joke about sex.

The same neighbours come over and cut the grass for him and bring him fresh flowers each week.

'Oh oh, there's an adoring person under the table.'

(Hone is feeding Huia with scraps from his plate.)

'Hone no!'

'Oh?' (He's perfected a look of childlike innocence.)

'Hone!'

'That's my fellow tribesman, my fellow tribesman, that's Ngati Kuri.'

'You're in trouble, you're in trouble.'

'Peter, he's still feeding your dog.'

'Oh Hone.' (In tones of mock tragedy.)

'Now he's crying into his handkerchief.'

(Uproarious laughter from all.)

'All this fish.' (He pokes at it disgruntledly with his fork.)

‘There you’ll have to have some vegetables.’ (Clatter of cutlery on plates.)
‘Hey Hone where are you up to with your writing?’
‘Um... There’s a... I’ve ...a kind of book launching. Wait a minute, it’s Te Mata, you know, Te Mata cos they come down and said well what have you got and I said well you have a look, said c’mon. So they took a whole lot ...a bundle away for a new book – a winery.’
‘Matua?’
‘Te Mata ...they thought I looked a winey type, you know. Not whining, winey. So I said yeah OK well what about a few bottles.’ (Glug glug, all into their glasses of wine.)
‘Cilla’s got a lovely new book.’
‘What’s the name of it?’
‘A lovely new book.’
‘What’s the name?’
‘Oh, Markings. It’s Markings.’
‘Barking!’ (He pulls a funny face, cups his hand behind his ear as an amplifier, won’t wear his hearing aids. And all of us laughing.)
‘No, Markings. It’s lovely.’

At the Court of the Paua Queen

The waka slides up the river.
The poet, sitting under the caparison,
a fringed sunshade,
(how the women love him)
beams from under his curly white wig

O fol de rol, fol de rol dee

Takes a fine lace hankie
from the cuff of his embroidered sleeve,
waves it at the ladies-in-waiting,
he’s already propositioned ten of them
and now it’s the turn of the Queen.

Steps off into a whirl of wings,
the silver gulls, the peacock on the lawn,
the glitter of crystal, lyrics
to the pretty lute, the viola da gamba.

‘Pray tell me, sir, what is the nature
of that which you do?’

‘Oh just a little nothing,’ he replies,
‘with a touch of Aphrodite and Priapus
and a hint of King Solomon’s Song
and The Sermon on the Mount, oh yes,
and a pinch of Jeremiah.

And Shakespeare and Baxter
and Mao and Zenophon and Hotere
and Billy T. James, why not,
and did I fail to mention Wagner?

And then there’s Tangaroa
and that naughty trickster, Maui.
You’ll know *them*, no doubt, ma’am,
right out at the edge of the Empire.’

Salut! He gives her a wink
and swallows an oyster.
‘All of them, ALL OF THEM, grist to my mill.’