

## **Rowley's tangi – down the road**

**Brian Potiki**

O-A-Tia, highest point above Oruanui. You reach it up the well-maintained hard-packed dirt road that leads to the old house where Rowley was born and to where he was taken by his whānau from Taupo, after being found, still warm, by his wife, Birgitte. Dead of the heart attack he always expected would finish him.

They took him through the kitchen window, past the red table and forms, the wood-fire stove and into the front room; setting him hard up against the bay windows looking past a couple of distant houses, down the road to Te Waapu urupā where his mother and father lie together.

He and his whānau planned these things – the moving of the homestead from below (where his grandfather, then father ran a store servicing the passing traffic and sawmill communities) and his final resting place on a small grassed ledge – the sort of space where we'd all like to have our end, facing north so the first sun awakens many tūi thriving in trees lining the road. As dawn broke I sat there – six hours before the burial – and saw the same rosy-fingers that Homer described, appearing over the distant hills.

Hoani was the man. Rowley's close friend, shaven-headed (and ex-Vietnam he later told me) with loving memories of our mate – including Rowley's strong intuition. But it was Rowley's nephew Dean I spied first – standing outside the house watching us arrive, strumming one of the hardest-strung guitars I've ever played. Dean was one of Rowley's late touchstones – he'd read him one of his stories and if Dean said "that's good uncle" Rowley knew he'd nailed it.

There he was – our mate – or at least his shell. All bodies in coffins hold the merest trace of our loved ones (I first saw that with my mother, Jean). We - Jill and I with the others - were gathered to fulfill the most ancient contract, to ensure that wolves or enemies did not violate this remnant, this case of mummified flesh, this palimpsest. And we were gathered to kōrero and sing to assuage this shared grief.

House poroporoakī for a man who formerly loved the dangers of swimming in deep waters and who often strained the patience of his whānau with his whims, his stubbornness.

Candlelight flickered, firelight - a cold early-autumn night needing fires burning in this room, in the kitchen and outside.

Older sister Rose and fond daughter Tangimoana by his head on soft mattresses. His son Rere too. And sisters Evelyn and Joyce. And wider whānau. A rōpu from Hamilton arrived late (O-A-Tia is not easy to find) to tautoko Tangimoana, a doctor in their work practice. They couldn't stay and after their whaikōrero and waiata rich in harmony the man Hoani took the guitar and responded with a sweet ballad by Engelbert Humperdinck which was a bit more my – and Rowley's – style!

The cooks were up tending their fires early next morning (when I was enraptured at the urupā). Without electricity it resembled a peasant scene from Bruegel. Laughter, women's voices and peeled vegetables while below at nephew Greg and wife Nella's new house the men prepared the hangi.

Walking back from the urupā, I got a bit lost in the bush seeking one giant rimu that can be glimpsed from the road. In a couple of letters, Rowley, you wrote of the close escape (you loved these phrases, nē?) you had when you once couldn't get your footing in Taupo's swift-flowing waters (where it rushes to the Huka falls and where you loved to dive). You thought you were going to drown. I'd have written about this in my next letter and you'd have known exactly where that bush was and how close *I'd* been. Came out scratched and muddied...you'd have understood, made a generous comment.

So...no more exchange of letters, sharing of private adventures.

I was a pallbearer, solemnly helping to get you through the narrow doorway and out the window again, lying you tenderly on the verandah. The sun shone on you there and on your sisters and daughter by your side, the verandah of this old house, a paepae.

It was 11.00am and there was now quite a crowd.

This is what we're going to do, said Hoani: a kāumatua's poroporoakī, a brief service, his son and daughter and sister Rose, Taupo's mayor (who brought condolences from the Governor General), then the rest of us could speak.

Jim Moriarty made the connection with Wellington theatre in the 1970s. I read from one of the hundreds of letters you'd sent me Rowley over more than thirty years, showing your deep love of literature and the pleasure you took in writing. Many speeches honoured you, creative, child-like, friendly man.

Then lifting you into the station wagon and everyone following, most walking and chatting, the day clear and sunny.

And up, up to the tiny, old urupā. I'd never held the rope before – white, synthetic, thick. It bit into my hands as I – bird's eye view – saw you go deep into the ground.

Hoani led it all – the ceremony, the respect, the care taken.

And finally, a gay feasting, the food most delicious. And the catching-up that happens more rarely now. Some singing. That guitar though, metal strings unyielding like a medieval torture instrument. And Hoani was the man.

