

Duty is Joy

Karlo Mila

The theme of this edition – creativity in ethnic communities – has special resonance for me. Initially, when I began writing poetry, it was a truly personal endeavour. I wrote poems about my own experiences, hardships, heart-breaks – what I call ‘in a shoe-box under the bed’ type poetry.

After my first book of poetry was published - and particularly after it won the Jessie MacKay Best First Book of Poetry Award - the business of writing poetry has become less individualised and more ‘community owned’. What I mean by this is that the poems are much more responsive to community needs, issues and events. This is not such a huge shift, as my poetry has always been ‘reactive’ and about issues that ‘move me’. But now, there is also a sense that as a community member – and as a Tongan and a Pacific person in New Zealand, I must also use my poetry for ‘service’, where it is appropriate.

An example of this was when HRH Prince Tu’ipelehake and HRH Princess Kaimana and their driver, Vinisia Hefa were tragically killed in a car accident this year. At the Memorial Service I read poems composed to mark their passing.

Honouring Tu’ipelehake

Why are they still talking idly on the radio?
Why are the cars still moving on the city streets?

For we are in a distant land
that does not understand
that our prince of peace
has fallen.

We are in a distant place
that does not face
our loss.

Today many Tongans
living separate lives
divided like knives
will mourn as one.

Our hope has risen like a starlit wave
and crashed back into the sea.
Leaving only unforgiving ocean,
dark, blank, deep green.

- No one can tell their fortune on this salty surface
- No one can see their reflection in this bitter glass
- No one can fish in this deep, it is empty of all hope

We will don black
and like a flock of flying foxes
our grief will take flight across the diaspora.

Ours will be a sacred flight
through the deep of night
and the dark of sea,
back to the beginning
back beyond memory.

We will head to Lapaha
navigating the stars
we will leave the sun behind
and enter the moon
wings of skin stretched over fingers
trying to touch death.

Recognising that in life
you tried
to cross a divide

and touch the people
heart as your guide
conscience as your compass
side by side
We, the people,
mourn you now.

The Prince of the people has fallen
And we will descend silently like rain
into an ocean swelling
with tears.

I also wrote another poem shortly after this. And it was written for all those who were involved in organising the Memorial Service. It has a completely different tone - much less formal and beautiful. It is essentially a 'ranting' poem. One that was a reaction to the gate-keeping and negativity that goes on in communities - especially when there is politics between community leaders and an element of nastiness about who has the right to be taking leading roles. This poem was called 'A Commoner's Lament' but is not really about Tongan commoners, as such, but rather about negative politics that occur in all tightly-knit community groups.

A Commoners Lament (For S)

Yes it is us.
The ones from the bush
The haua ones from town
The ones who can't speak Dongan
The ones who can't speak English kood
The ones from that tiny little island somewhere,
nowhere
The ones who have lived too long in New Zealand
The ones who never had flush toilets where they
grew up
The ones who didn't even go to Tonga High School

Yes it is us,
The ones who come from the shithouse
The ones who nobody approves of
The ones who don't know that their people are
nobody from nowhere and should shut their mouths
- other people should be speaking -
The ones who are too well educated, they should
shut their teeth
The ones who took that money - haven't you heard
that rumour?

Yes it is us
The ones who raise everyone's eyebrows
The ones who are not from good families
The ones who are from a good family - I feel sorry
for them - they must be ashamed
The ones who had nervous breakdowns in their
twenties, fakasasele, vale, vale 'aupito
The ones who are too clever
The ones who are too dumb
The ones who are too pretty
The ones who are too ugly
The haua ones from town
The kaimu'a ones from the bush
The ones who don't know their genealogies
The ones who think that bloodline is all that matters
The ones whose houses never had any toilet paper
The ones who had too much toilet paper
The ones with the identity crises
The ones who know too much
The ones who don't know anything
The ones who are too young
The ones who are going senile
The ones who don't even live in Tonga anymore
(for crying out loud, how dare they)
The ones with the big mouths
The ones with the fat heads
The ones who eat-front, kai-mu-mu'a
Fie eiki, fie ma'olunga, fie poto, fie me'a
Who the hell do they think they are?

Yes it is us.
We are the voodoo dolls
who are pricked
and poked
in every place possible
from every direction.

Yes it is us.
We are the people.
And we are the ones
we have been waiting for.

I have just recently arrived back from Tonga. I was asked with a small group of others to assist the Office of the Lord Chamberlain to write website text for the Palace Office website, the official website of the Monarchy. On a political spectrum, I am usually left of left, so it was an unexpected role and opportunity. Any astute person will recognise that politics in Tonga are not clear-cut, nor black and white. Democracy as an ideal is fairly faultless;

however, the Bush Administration is indicative to me, of how different things can be in 'real life'.

While in Tonga, I was stunned to see the way the media misrepresented, printed untruths and had a somewhat callous disregard for the fact that essentially, this was a family in mourning. I think that I have learned that choosing to walk on the side of 'righteousness' and truth is never straightforward and you can't always take the same road.

For someone born and raised in New Zealand, I also learned what a pleasure it was to serve the Lord Chamberlain, Honourable Fielakepa; a Noble of the Realm. He was a true leader and inspirational in his quiet and good mannered way - this was an interesting learning for me, who had little experience - and some suspicion - of nobility in Tonga. It was a crash course in Tongan history, Tongan culture and the Tongan way of life. Although I have lived there before, I had never sought to represent Tongan culture on paper, nor describe Tonga in an authoritative way to others. It was only working in a team environment in partnership with cultural experts and history buffs that this kind of work could progress safely.

It was a vivid learning experience for me and a good reminder that you never really do 'know it all' - there is always more to learn. The best you can do is ensure that the framework you hang your thoughts on, is open enough to accept new learning even when it challenges what you thought you knew.

While in Tonga, armed with new knowledge, I wrote a poem for the late King that can be found on the website¹² and is printed below.

Duty is Joy

(A poem for His Majesty King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV)

Tu'i Tonga,
a divine line
to Aho'eitu.

You too,
son of Tagaloa
surfing through the waves
conquering the sea.

You too,
like Maui
reaching for the sun
defying gravity, catapaulting,
a comet into they sky.

Warrior Kings
of Ha'atakalaua
the throne of your bones,
an empire in their eyes.

Kings of Kanokupolu
ghosting your every move,
legendary strategy,
unifiers of people,
creators of a Kingdom.

Three ancient bloodlines
course through your veins,
Tu'i Tonga, Tu'i Ha'atakalaua, Tu'i Kanokupolu.

Poetry of Queen Salote, faithfully
inscribes the path where you have found your feet,
the strength of Tungi in your stride.
You have travelled the world, and
with strong and steady hands
plucked the best of what you've seen
to make a kakala for your people
as it has never seen before.

Musical notes,
float at your bidding
into the islands.

The alphabet itself,
bends at your will,
'b' arching into 'p' to please you.

Your crowning legacy
will be
the education of your people,
minds blossoming open like heilala in the sun.
Your people will never perish
Ki he lelei taha.

The road has been prepared.
But the prayers of your people
have kept you here.
Now that the sun has set in the Kingdom
the nation is adorned in darkness
only the ironwood tress stand still
for the people's hearts

¹² www.palaceoffice.gov.to

are at
half mast.

We remember your legacy
Ko e Tonga Mo'unga ki he Loto.
Tonga's strength lies in a mountainous heart,
and you were Tonga's mountain –
the pinnacle of the people's heart.

How blessed we are by your life of service,
How we strive to climb the heights you've reached,
Leading always, by example, "Res ipsa loquitur".

Two days after arriving back in New Zealand from Tonga, I was asked to teach a poetry workshop for a school holiday programme in Otago. This was an exciting group of stunning Pacific young people who took to poetry with talent and interest. The poems were focused on the suburbs that they lived in. We completed a 'five sense' exercise... i.e. what does your suburb sound like, smell like, look like, taste like etc. The words the young people thought of were put up on a whiteboard and then we all wrote poems using those words. My poem, which is a bit provocative (I actually have a lot of respect for Helen Clark) used the words selected by those young people.

Floor Show in the Southside

Behind the pub
Helen Clark is tagging
the same old same
rundown houses
where island kings eat Chinese takeaways
and island queens krump
so fast so furious

Behind the pub
Helen Clark is dancing
like a taupou
a slow ta'olunga
to an orchestra of dogs barking
and a symphony of sirens
she does a siva
to the soft sounds of stealing

Behind the pub
Helen Clark sings
with a choir of tight clothes
and one house alarm crying
like a solo trumpet

after too many drinks

Behind the pub
Helen Clark is firewalking
the fine line between donuts
and fresh cut grass towards
a drive thru umu
of chop suey, steak and cheese

Behind the pub
Helen Clark is sailing
like a true island princess
blood on her back
blue bandanna in her hair
a marijuana leaf
tucked behind her ear.
sailing staunch on ghetto sewage
sailing scared among a wasteland of churches.

At "Absolute Rush" program, Sept 2006

The poems I have selected for this edition all represent to me, the way in which creativity occurs in communities. I feel a part of many communities, the broader New Zealand population, the Tongan diaspora, the Pacific community, and many others. Each is a site of creativity and inspiration. I am confident that creativity is the sacred space where we are able to bridge exceptional diversity and difference and find common understandings and true empathy. This is where we create peace, insight and acceptance – in realms where there are often too many politics, people are divided and respect for others is challenging.

Karlo Mila is a poet of Tongan and Pākehā origins with ancestral connections to Samoa. She was born in Rotorua in raised in Palmerston North. Karlo has worked in Nuku'alofa and went to school at Tonga High School, as well as in New Zealand. She is a PhD student at Massey University where her thesis examines the health and wellbeing of the Pacific generation born and/or raised in Aotearoa. She has written a collection of poetry titled "Dream Fish Floating", which recently won the Jessie MacKay Award for Best First Book of Poetry in the Montana Book Awards. She is juggling writing a new book with raising two boys, completing her PhD, participating actively in the community and doing contract work in the area of Pacific research and evaluation. She is passionately committed to improving the position of Tongans and Pacific peoples living in New Zealand.