The Whales Tale (memories from the Parrots Perch)

By Apirana Taylor

The nor’wester howled. Shrieking at the sky. Moaning and groaning across the strait lashing the trees and hills. Raindrops bigger than golf balls blitzed the roof and pelted the windows as our house shook in the gale. Hail, sleet and ice dashed themselves into the earth like spears. Lightning cracked, thunder boomed as the wind and sea whirled about arm in arm in an insane dance flaying their skirts of foam, salt and sea spray along the coast as the sea went mad in the night.

The next morning the wind, rain and sleet fled, but the sea raged on continuing its assault on the land. Waves like mountains thundered in. The briny was a dirty brown sludge. Between the giant rollers, swells heaved to and fro swept this way and that by a mighty arm. The eddies, hiss and suck of the turbulent tide turned the bay into a giant turgid washing machine full of water swishing around and around. In this maelstrom, a mighty galleon or liner weighing a thousand tons would have been tossed about like a lightweight cork without a bottle.

The sea, like life, has many moods, depths, shallows and rocky pools. Here on the edge of the coast where the wind whipped scrub, clings for its life to the steep scraggy hillsides, the sea can lie flat as a mirror or gently roll in sun kissed curlers as the surfers wipe out. Boogie boarders jet in on the back of playful waves. The sun paints bathers, autumn summer gold, as whanau, friends and children bobble about in the water splashing and squealing with delight.

‘Dad dad,’ squeaked two of my daughters that morning after the storm, as I surveyed the mauled scenery, from behind the shelter of our salt frosted sitting-room window. The village was drenched and looked scrubbed. The roads were wet and shiny and the puddles glistened and sparkled morning light.

‘Dad,’ squealed my youngest daughter. ‘Dad,’ repeated her older sister. ‘Some whales have been washed ashore.’

‘Whales?’

‘Yes whales,’ called the children as they danced about the room.

‘We better go and dig them out,’ I said.

I’d recently seen a pod of Pilot whales stranded up north and the locals dug them out. ‘Get some spades and a wheelbarrow,’ I called as the youngsters bolted out the door.

My wife, our third and eldest daughter and my son joined us as we loaded up the barrow with two shovels and some rope. ‘We’ll get em out don’t worry,’ I said. We made our way down the drive out onto the street and headed for the beach.

We love it here. In late winter and early spring purple ragwort daisies and wild sweet pea coat the hills behind the village. They coat the hillsides with browns, greens and greys, with textures and tones like a giant mural. The sunsets can be muted or flaming and brilliant. Each sundown is different. There is a poem and a painting in every dusk.

When the pohutukawa trees blossom they tell us summer is on the way. The seasons often don’t come and go gracefully here. Winter gives autumn a hiding. Then spring and winter dance in the wind and fight for dominance before spring boots winter out the door.

On this morning spring hadn’t quite won. A muted sun was up but the sea hadn’t given up the fight. The ocean tossed itself around like a taniwha roaring and smashing itself about, frothing at the mouth.

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We weren’t the only ones intent on digging the whales out. Word spreads fast in Paekakariki. In a moment the merest murmur or whisper at one end of the bay develops into a hurricane at the other in less time than it takes to say, ‘sea spray.’ Paekakariki means the parrots perch which often seems apt.

Along the waterfront and down the streets leading to the parade, a kaleidoscope of people of all ages, shapes, sizes and colours trundled down to the beach to see and save the whales. There was a convoy of trolleys, wheelbarrows and carts loaded with picks, spades, shovels, a pram and anything else people thought might help, being pushed along towards the southern end of the beach.

Paekakariki 1996 was a diverse community bordered in by the railway tracks, Queen Elizabeth Park at one end and the sea which crashes into centennial highway to the South. Sometimes we disagree. We live in an enclosed community, washed over by the comings and goings of many different people like the flow of tides.

As we made our way along the beach we saw the whales. Three of them. As we neared the sands where they’d stranded the whales got bigger and bigger and bigger.

Wind gusts hurled themselves at us and hushed our gaping mouths as these titans thrashed about in the roil. My son ran towards them. Some of us slowed down. We looked at one another and then back to the drama, as step by step with wheel barrows, spades and shovels we neared this colosol fight of life and death.

We realised picks, wheelbarrows and shovels wouldn’t do it. We may as well have tried to dig these denizens of the deep out with toothpicks.

 Waves thundered in. The surge and swell in the gulf between the rollers hissed and roared. It sucked and blew the whales in as if they were pumice or flimsy lightweight bits of driftwood. These three behemoths, two adults and a calf were helpless. What could we do.

Never had any of us seen such a sight. I knelt down by my daughters

and viewed the whales as they saw them. The leviathans blocked out

 the sun with their mighty tails that thrashed about. From time to

 time they rested from their labours We could get close enough to

eye the whales eye to eye and see a very intelligent life looking

back at us.

There are sweet memories of life here. Once a tui copied the sound of a mobile phone and sang like one for several years throughout the village.

The pohutukawa trees in summer are resplendent. They are our country’s flowering Christmas tree.

Native bird life seems to be increasing. The acrobatic tui and plump kereru grace the sky more often. They feast on the flax buds, orange karaka berries, red pohutukawa flowers and kowhai. Some birds wing their way over from Kapiti, the island that sleeps off the coast of our eye.

On the train out of Wellington the hustle and bustle slips from our shoulders as we ride through the cutting at Pukerua Bay and the view pans into a wide expanse with the great bowl of sea far below.

With Kapiti in the distance, the lure of Te Waipounamu across the strait beckons, as we North Islanders look out from the shores of the main land across the water to the South Island.

Friends are lifelong, live close by and are seen daily in Paekakariki and so we feel their absence when they finally set sail across the great ocean or simply move on.

What is there to learn from this memory of the whales and their battle against the furies. A thousand bulldozers couldn’t haul them out. What is this and why, I asked myself. Our children stood aghast or ran about. Dogs scampered to and fro, or sat and watched as if puzzled by this struggle.

We couldn’t even kill the whales to put them out of their misery as they struggled in their attempt to thwart the sea that drove them in.

Harpoon or rifle shot couldn’t do it. I stood close to one of the whales and when I looked up felt what an insignificant atom of life I was.

The history of Paekakariki is like the wind in the hills. There have been battles churning the sea red as blood. The navigator Kupe named Kapiti centuries ago. Waka.. sailing ships and times when whalers were seen. The name Te Rauparaha the mighty chief sings in the winds of history.

Once when pods of whales on migration swam between Kapiti and the beach you could cross from shore to the island on their backs. Sometimes orca or dolphins cruise between the shore and island.

There is the true and epic saga of the twins Florrie and Pearl, two women nearly eighty, who found themselves challenged in a nearby paddock by a mad bull. Pearl patted the bull on the nose and told him he was ‘a lovely boy,’ The bull didn’t appreciate that and instigated a prolonged pursuit and attack, tossing Florrie into the air. With understated cool kiwi calm and grit under pressure Pearl and Florrie turned and defeated the bull with the assistance of a young nimble footed boy, a Maori toa, a warrior, who was armed with a broom which he wielded as a taiaha.

Jandals, footy shorts, old singlets or tatty rugby jerseys were the norm for everyday wear and special occasions in the village, which was once a workers railway town. I’ve met many bright people in Paekakariki who inspire me in many ways and who opt out of the system which is a train ride away.

It’s easy to romanticise and say this was the best of old kiwi towns. Quite a few Paekakariki homes were once propped up by bits of driftwood and sea shells. They were picturesque and looked as if the wind, sea, sun and salt had permanently blasted most of the paint off them. They have been bulldozed out of existence and replaced by mansions.

 Paekakarikians often reveal a dry sense of humour which is why many of the towns’ characters had an undying thirst and felt the need to spend a lot of time in the local pub propping up the bar and solving the world’s problems. This is the parrots perch but surely the perch wasn’t meant to be a bar stool. The pub was a dump but it had character like the old timers within it. Sadly like the batches, ‘ye old Paekakariki Pub,’ was bulldozed out of existence.

Sweet memories slip through our fingers. We live in a constant state of flux. Once many of us here seldom had a coin or two to rub together. Now our young hoping to invest in the future, to buy a house, to make a start, to raise a whanau, struggle to do so.

What does the whales tale say?

The tides had driven the calf into the shallows and the adult whales came in to try and turn their young one around and save it. They failed and all three whales were doomed.

These giant children of the sea float easily on water but once driven ashore they couldn’t support their own body weight. Their tonnage weighed down and gradually, like air forced out of giant bellows, crushed the life breath out of them. Time slowed down that morning as the struggle for life over death revealed itself to us in a gigantic slow motion panorama. Foam flew, flukes spumed. Whale blood flowed. Tails flapped and smashed with thunderous thwacks on the water. The whales called to us. They groaned moaned and sighed. It took time for them to die.

Why, I asked and received a lung full of sand gusted into my mouth for an answer.

The media buzzed around. Out of towners came to assist. Many of us, young and old of different colours and cultures worked together. We forgot our differences and pitched in, together, armed with little more than our hearts, in an attempt to help.

I walked about with a pointless length of rope in my hand. We grafted away. We tried and gave it our best.

The shoreline recedes, the beach is getting smaller. Giant boulders have been dumped along the coast to stop the ocean from grabbing hunks of road and washing it away. There are rising water levels overloaded with plastic. Attempts at restoration and replanting are evident.

Honour and respect of the title tangata whenua on this part of the coast should first be given to Ngati Haumia. The saying is ...

 Tainui te waka

 Pouawha me Wainui nga maunga

 Wainui te awa

 Raukawa te moana

 Kapiti te motu

 Ngati Toa Rangatira te iwi

 Ngati Haumia te hapu

 Haumia whakatere taniwha te tangata

 Mutu Mira te whanau whanui

 Tainui is the waka

 Pouawha and Wainui are the mountains

 Wainui is the river

 Raukawa is the sea

 Kapiti is the island

 Ngati Toa Rangatira is the iwi

 Ngati Haumia is the clan

 Haumia Whakatere Taniwha is the ancestor

 Mutu mira is the family

There are also the sage like words, ‘mehemea he potae ta kapiti ka ua.’ If Kapiti wears a hat, clouds on the peak, it will rain tomorrow.

Paekakariki is like the Nashville of New Zealand without the glitz. There are as many different good guitarists and musicians here as there are grains of sand on the beach and wonderful artists.

Many make an effort to support local initiatives such as the local primary school, playcentre, tennis club, the bowler, library and native restoration work.

Our halls of entertainment are filled with what we conjure up. Often this is a variety of energetic political debates over local issues. At such time ability to transcend the heights in terms of simile, metaphor, hyperbole, and powerful colourful epithets hurled at the opposition like bricks excels that of the world’s greatest orators. Despite this some of us are known to fall asleep at such meetings. One resident suggested we should put a sign up at the entrance to the village saying, ‘Welcome to Paekakariki. We protest.’

The hall is often used for art in all its forms, and wonderful concerts accompanied with mountains of sausage rolls tomato sauce and an adequate amount of suitable revitalising liquid refreshment.

The whales were buried in the sand long ago. The wind wafted the smell of putrid blubber about the village for weeks. Years later the tides washed up some of the bones and scattered them about.

We become salt living here on this thin wedge of coastline snickered in between the hills and ocean. No matter whether we live with the sea or try to fight it. The sea wins.

The sun sets with a poem every day.

 home

 rain washed

 sun blessed

 wind swept

 secret kept

 village on the

 lip of the sea

 calm and blue

 laced with waves

 or stormy Paekakariki

 people in Kapiti

 southern isle

 on the edge

 of my eye

 morning sky

 train ride

 from the city

 sunsets like

 jewels home

 for me

The End

About the author:
Apirana Taylor - Ngati Porou, Te Whānau ā Apanui, Ngati Ruanui, Te **Ā**ti Awa, is a nationally and internationally published poet, playwright, short story writer, novelist, actor, painter and musician. He has been Writer in Residence at Canterbury and Massey Universities. He frequently tours nationally and internationally visiting schools, tertiary institutions and prisons reading his poetry, storytelling and taking creative writing workshops. He has written six collections of poetry, a book of plays, three collections of short stories and two novels. His work has been included in many national and international anthologies.