

Kaitiaki o te Pō

Here at the age of thirty-nine I began to be old.

On Sunday night I had a dream about my friend Matt, who died suddenly of a heart attack in May. In my dream I was looking for a letter he had sent me that had something important in it, but I couldn't find the letter. As is the way with these kinds of dreams, there was this sense that my goal was always just around the next corner, so I seemed to endlessly move closer to what I wanted but never quite reached it. This was not the first time that I have dreamed about Matt since he died, and so far these dreams have not been happy dreams because they always leave me feeling weighed down with sadness.

On Monday morning then I woke in a flat mood, and found myself standing at the kitchen window after breakfast watching an empty chippie packet blowing around the garden. When you're down, empty chippie packets blowing around gardens seem like handy metaphors for life. On the other hand, it is usually better to go and put the chippie packet in the bin rather than construct metaphors about life.

Monday and Tuesday I had a history teachers' conference. I drove Cathy and Rosamund up to Victoria University and dropped them off before I parked the car in the university car park. Walking through Victoria University, it seemed like quite a different place from the place I had studied at in the early 90s: new buildings, new configurations of old buildings, and some of the familiar places too. It was a little unsettling. I was very young in that place, and have a lot of strong memories of people I knew then, as they were then, in those places, and seeing so many of those places changed sent a ripple through my past.

Probably it was my mood, but when I rounded a corner of the Hunter Building and saw a funny little statue I was suddenly transported across the intervening two decades to a time when I vividly remembered standing by that statue with some friends. It's rather an odd statue, a naked man holding a baby a little too casually in one arm, and the whole clay surface – of baby and man – handled roughly, like it was rendered with a butter knife. It is not particularly beautiful, but I was pleased to see it. And sad. The John-Paul who walked past that statue so many times twenty years ago is long gone, and so, sadly, is one of the friends.

There is a small, historic cemetery just across from the Hunter Building. A handful of gravestones lurch about on a wooded hill that looks down over the city and the harbour. It is a good spot, when you are twenty, to sit, and smoke, and contemplate the meaning of life. As I get older I become sensitive to the accumulation of memories, and the people in them. Although I have no belief in an afterlife, I become increasingly sympathetic to parts of the Māori view that we have a duty to the dead, that they live in us, and that we

carry each other forward into the future through memory and stories.

* * *

The first day of the history conference was not good. Our Minister of Education spoke for thirty minutes. She had a pre-prepared speech, which she waved at us and told us was terrific, but which she clearly had not written, and only read a couple of bits of. She spoke rapidly, and sometimes incoherently, sometimes retreading parts of her life story at school (I had read it already on her website), and sometimes giving us the party political message on education. She appeared to be a person who hadn't spent a lot of time listening to other people, but was very enthused by her own story.

After that we had three more presentations which left me cold, or simply bored. I was able to cover three pages of my notebook in doodling.

* * *

In the evening I watched *Brideshead Revisited* again with Cathy.

Here at the age of thirty-nine I began to be old. I felt stiff and weary in the evenings and reluctant to go out of camp; I developed proprietary claims to certain chairs and newspapers ... Here my last love died.

That is how *Brideshead Revisited* begins. In the past these lines, and the beginning phrases, played like a sad but lovely refrain – something like a piece for piano by Debussy – but now I find it all a little more discordant, and the first line in

particular quite jarring. It is as if I put on a record expecting Chopin's nocturnes and got Stravinsky at his most stridently discordant.

Not of course that things are quite as bad as all that – my last love hasn't died – but I am thirty-nine and I have begun to feel a little stiff and weary. I find that I make quite extraordinary noises when I stand up now after chasing some toy that has skittered into the furthest corner under the couch; that there is some creaking and exhalation as I attempt to clamber from the floor to my full modest height again. I also look forward to Friday nights and the couch and the TV and a glass of wine a little too much probably. Having been denied those things all week by the need to work, I sink with gratitude into my corner of cushions, laugh at Graham Norton on the telly, and then fall asleep until Cathy prods me awake and I lumber into bed.

My feeling of discomfit is not improved as *Brideshead* progresses.

I had been there before; first with Sebastian more than twenty years ago on a cloudless day in June, when the ditches were creamy with meadowsweet and the air heavy with all the scents of summer.

More than two decades ago I started university, and exactly twenty years ago I met Matt. At the end of 1993 he left for England to join his parents and get a job, and I see, looking at the inside covers of some books, that it was in 1993 that I read, for the first time, *The Picture of Dorian Grey* and *Brideshead Revisited*. It was also in the summer of 1993–1994 that some friends and I started a writing group, and I wrote a story called *The Hazy Days*, which was really my version of

myself and my friends, and which I thought for a long time would be my first novel.

We lit fat, Turkish cigarettes and lay on our backs, Sebastian's eyes on the leaves above him, mine on his profile, while the blue-grey smoke rose, untroubled by any wind, to the blue-green shadows of foliage, and the sweet scent of the tobacco merged with the sweet summer scents around us and the fumes of the sweet, golden wine seemed to lift us a finger's breadth above the turf and hold us suspended.

'Just the place to bury a crock of gold,' said Sebastian. 'I should like to bury something precious in every place where I have been happy and then, when I was old and ugly and miserable, I could come back and dig it up and remember.'

All of which is pure Matt. I remember him saying something very similar; that he would like to bottle a wine in every place he had been happy so that in the years after he could see in them the captured essence of that particular time, that particular summer.

When *Brideshead* first played on TV in New Zealand I suppose Matt was eleven or twelve years old, and I imagine it poured its heady mix of romance and ennui into him. Watching 'Et in Arcadia Ego' is like watching Matt both being formed and, in later life, re-enacting certain set pieces and moods on us. He is not Sebastian, nor Charles; he is both, and he is the mood of the piece as a whole.

I should say was. He *was* the mood of the piece as a whole. I should say 'was' not because he has died, but because he seemed to have moved beyond the book the last few times I met him. Despite the romance of the novel, none of us, who met in 1991 and 1992, seem to have sunk into the despair and isolation of either Sebastian or Charles at the end of *Brideshead*.

I felt certain I would, and felt pretty grim about things in 2003 and 2004, but thanks to Cathy and others I pulled through and find myself in 2012 fairly content with life.

As Matt seemed to be. Not always of course. I still sometimes find myself being gnawed at by dread, or nostalgia, and I'm sure Matt was the same, but the compensation for that has turned out to be people. Other people get you through.

Matt's death brought us all together for the first time since about 1994. I saw people I hadn't seen for possibly a decade, and it was good. I saw people I used to spend all day with every day: who I used to listen to music with, play role-playing games with, and talk nonsense with for hours on end.

We all went out to dinner and thought about Matt.

Many years ago Cathy and I had stayed at Matt's flat in London, and one day we decided to repay all of his generosity in hosting us by sneaking into his bedroom while he was out. There was something breathlessly exciting about what lay behind that closed door, and I am ashamed to say – but only a little – that neither Cathy or I could resist knowing what Matt's room was like. Because Matt was partly a fantasist, and always a late night fabulist, I felt like I should be prepared for anything when we pushed open the door and looked inside.

It was a small room, with a sash window at the end letting in a pale light. There was, I suppose, a wardrobe, and a small desk, I can't quite remember, every surface crammed with things anyway, but there certainly were – I remember it clearly – stacks and stacks of books, and a small, dishevelled single bed. It was the room of a well-heeled, post-graduate student of the arts who was still living at home. It was not the room of a thirty-something merchant banker living in London. It was a room that made me feel sad.

And so it made me sad to hear that he had died there. With his clothes laid out for the next morning. His immaculate, well-tailored clothes he loved so much, and his highly polished shoes. Laid out as he must have laid them out each evening. And so we learned, in the days and weeks after his death, about the opera tickets he had booked for the following week, and the children's clothes he had ordered months and months in advance of Christmas for his niece and nephew.

And other things.

That the last search on his iPhone had been 'angina'.

Or the loneliness of death. How much I wanted to see him, to look after him, to lay down by him and hold him. And couldn't. Like a war widow, I was left with an empty space that imagination had to fill, but could only fill with memories that burst like bubbles, and not the solid fact of his death.

So we went out to dinner. All of Matt's friends down a long table, and my younger daughter Rosamund at the head. The rowdiness of a happy restaurant, and good food, and wine, and a little band tucked in a corner with an acoustic guitar and some brushes and some voices. Rosamund bobbing away with her little golden curls, flirting with the musicians, and me sitting happily in her shade, watching her joy and petulance, and the others at our table trying to cheat a smile or a wave from her. It was a happy night with old friends.

I wished you were there Matt.

We all did.

* * *

The second day of the history conference started with a speech by Justice Joe Williams. Justice Williams was once a

lawyer working on the Waitangi Tribunal helping members of different iwi to present their grievances to the Crown in order to receive redress.

He began by speaking in Māori and then translated. He said that he had begun, as most speakers on marae begin, by paying respects to his ancestors who had passed beyond the horizon and live on in memory. He then used a wonderful phrase which he believes describes the role of the historian. Historians, he said, were ‘kaitiaki o te pō’. This translates to mean the caretakers of the night.

It was a phrase that resonated inside me. Suddenly I felt honoured to be a teacher of history; honoured and charged with a great responsibility.

One of the other great speeches I have heard in the last six years was also delivered by a Māori man, Moana Jackson, and was also connected to history. He was speaking about the Māori perspective on the Treaty of Waitangi. Both Justice Williams and Moana Jackson made their points by telling inter-related stories, and then pulling the threads of those stories together at the end.

It’s funny how often I forget the power of stories.

Probably the lesson that most of my students will remember from my history class this year was about the impacts of war. We had spent the lesson before looking at casualty lists in World War One and World War Two, but it pays to remember Stalin when you look at casualty lists: one death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic. With this in mind I wanted my students to understand that death is only one impact of war, and that on top of that terrible price are other costs.

We turned to YouTube and looked at films taken in hospitals in 1918 of people with shellshock. Young men whose minds

had gone, whose minds were so gone they couldn’t walk, whose bodies convulsed and twitched in a continuous flinch against horror. I told them the story of my great-uncle Robert who led an isolated life after World War One and lost his belief in God, and I showed them a letter that another great-uncle, this one on my mother’s side, had received from his wife. This great uncle – called Frank (or Bunt) – was serving on British bombers in England during World War Two, and he married a British girl while he was over there.

We have quite a few of the letters he sent to his parents during the war, and just the one from his wife. Her letter to him, of 1943, ends:

You made me terribly happy this weekend my dearest, needless to say there seemed something even more deeper than the last. Something that grows deeper, greater, stronger and more beautiful every time. To say that I love you more each time seems almost an impossibility, but there is always something added, something that binds me closer and closer to you making our love more and more beautiful. And now I can’t sort of go back on life and picture what it was without you because I know I never really lived before. Gosh Bunt, I do love you so, and miss you terribly, but I keep thinking how wonderful it all is.

Oh darling I do love you so, love you, love, love you, with all my heart and soul. Don’t ever forget how much.

On 22 May 1944 Frank’s plane went missing over Europe and never returned.

Which is an impact of war. The grief of widows. And fathers and mothers. All the people the dead leave behind.

The class was silent afterward, and charged.

As I get older I return to the stories of my ancestors more often. I draw a lot from them. Now I begin to think about what

Frank contributed to World War Two – aerial bombardment of Germany – and how I feel about that. His contribution to perhaps 300,000 civilian deaths in Germany. But the New Zealand boy in the plane, and the girl in Britain writing to him, and his parents across the world, and the German families hearing the sound of the sirens and the bombers, are all trapped in something vast, and evil, in which right and wrong quickly unravels.

We must remember that life is not concerned with justice; it is human beings who are bothered by this notion. It is one of the great, continual hurts for humanity, this indifference of life to justice. The bomb falling blindly in the night from the plane in wartime; the slight weakness in the heart of a friend.

* * *

On the way back to the car at the end of the second day at the history conference I noticed a small plaque on the ground. I had never seen it before, and walked over to read it, intrigued:

IN MEMORIAL
THIS PLAQUE COMMEMORATES AN
OAK TREE
THAT GRACED THIS SITE FOR FORTY YEARS
IT WAS FELLED BY THE BUREAUCRACY
IN DECEMBER 1990
TO MAKE SPACE FOR ONE MORE CAR

Which made me smile; that someone wanted this tree to be remembered.

I came to Victoria University in 1991, and must have walked past this little plaque dozens of times without noticing it, or knowing of the graceful oak. It doesn't matter how long we live in the midst of it, history and the life of our ancestors lives on waiting to be discovered again.

And my heart has stories to sing for you Matt. As I walk through Victoria University I sense that you walk beside me. We could still lie down on the Hunter Lawn, in the sun, and listen to the hum of cars, misquoting poetry. Or perhaps we should share a smoke in the cemetery again, and I will tell you what Justice Williams told me Tāwhiao said to Te Whiti after he, Tāwhiao, had lost the Waikato War:

I will return to the valley of my birth, and sit, and eat tears of bitterness from sunrise to sunrise.

Tears of bitterness my friend. Tears of bitterness.

I will do my best to take care of you.

Kaitiaki o te pō.