

UNUHANGA TANIWHA

When I was in primary school, my reading teacher told us that there once lived two taniwha in Wellington Harbour, which was then a lake. She said that their names were Ngake and Whātaimai. Although bound together by an ancient friendship, the two Taniwha could not have polarised one another more. While Ngake was zealous and energetic, chasing eels and fish through the water. Whātaimai was the opposite. He preferred to stretch out in the warm sun and dream. When the two taniwha discovered that on the other side of the southern cliffs, surrounding the lake, was a vast expansive ocean, the two could only dream of the beauty and treasures beheld by the sea. Time fed the Taniwha until they became much bigger and much stronger. Eventually, Ngake swam straight into the cliffside, breaking it apart and opening the lake into the ocean like a great wide mouth. Shocked and excited by Ngake's actions, Whātaimai attempted to swim out into the sea as well. But as the lake water spilt out into the vast ocean, the tides went out, leaving Whātaimai to be stranded in the shallow waters. Peacefully, Whātaimai remained stranded in the harbour until one day, a monstrous shaking of the earth pushed him high above the water. As the air dried his skin, the life flowing through Whātaimai left him and transformed into a bird, the spirit Te Keo. Te Keo flew to the top of the nearest mountain and cried to mourn for his previous life.

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When Kali rides her bike up my driveway, I know that there is a hurt she is hiding from me. I do not need to answer the door because it isn't locked. It took her five and a half seconds to climb the stairs to my room. She will not knock, only burst inside with excitement and flushed cheeks. This is how I know she is upset. Kali has been my friend for four years, but sometimes it feels as though I was born with her friendship tucked under my tongue, and it only took enough lunchtimes trading yoghurt cups for me to swallow it. I think a lot of people never have a best friend in the way that Kali is my best friend, and I think that's sad. It does not surprise me when Kali begs me to go to the stream with her. I don't know if she knows it's her hiding place, but I do. Sometimes I think I see things in Kali that not even a mirror could tell her about. Of course, I agree.

There is a slither of murky stream that separates the residential estate where Kali lives and the wide square where my house is nestled. The stream is murky and thin, more of a very long puddle in a sense. While I'm sure it used to behold beautiful greens and blues, its elemental veneer has long since faded.

We peel around the corner on our bikes because even though it is still technically summer, the cold wisps of Autumn still chase us across white dotted lines. Yet despite the waning warmth, Kali is fast and light. Fluid like a taniwha as she curves across quiet streets. The sky is clear and deep blue as the evening sneaks up on us. My mum wants me home at 5:30 so that I can eat dinner with the rest of the family. As we speed past open kitchen windows, the aromas of family dinners fill up my brain. I chase Kali's bike, which is much faster than mine, the flash of her golden hair brings me the same feeling. Like there is a glowing pit in my stomach. Something akin to excitement and hope, like a person I have never met but have known for my whole life. Exhilaration. Her golden taniwha hair snaps at my nose as we come to a stop next to the leaning white bridge which connects Kali's street to the main road across the stream.

"When do you have to be home?" I ask, because between the fast approaching evening and the hunger in my belly, one of us had to remember to be home for dinner.

"Oh! My mum doesn't care. She told me to get out." Her response is cheerful and rosy, the way her temperament always is. In a way that seemed to reassure other people, Kali's resilience always seems to awaken within me a sort of concern which bends my stomach. Yet when she climbs down the river bank, with no words to express this discernment, I climb down after her.

The stream, while sort of creepy, holds a sort of contradictory beauty. There is a gathering of trees and foliage where Kali likes to sit by the trickling water, which was by no means dense, but curved around the stream in such a way that it kept the spot concealed from road view. The trees which protect us now have small leaves and thin branches. They are called evergreen because they stay green all the time. My mum taught me about evergreen trees, and she also taught me that the trees that turn orange are called con-if-her-house, which I think is quite silly. In the grey stream, there is a makeshift bridge which Kali and I made from rocks which help us get across the stream without getting our shoes wet. Far down the stream there is a huge metal pipe which goes across the top of the bank and into the sides of the earth. Sometimes we climb across the pipe to look around the army complex on the other side of the stream when we get bored during school holidays. Usually I'm too scared to cross it because I lose my balance, but Kali crawls across it and never falls. She digs her long taniwha claws into the metal so that she cannot fall and uses her long tail to push herself to the other side. When she gets there, she laughs at me like a roar and makes chicken noises until I finally cross. But she isn't roaring at me right now. She sits under the evergreen leaves and digs into the dirt by her feet with a

twig. In this moment her long scaly body curls around itself like a spring. She is not the mighty taniwha who makes me get a stitch in my chest from chasing after her bike or flies over streams with her long tail. She is just my best friend who, at times, is no more taniwha than she is an eel.

While she busies herself with her stick and I stumble across our self-made stepping stones. I stumble from bank to bank, head down and eyes dizzy, as she talks to me. I hear about her Kapa Haka performance on Wednesday, about the Milo she had for breakfast and about how Rihanna is her new favourite artist, her third new favourite that week.

“When I get older, I’m going to go to every country. And then, when I’m done, I’m going to pick my favourite and live there.”

“Won’t that cost a lot of money?” This change of topic surprises me because even when Kali wants to run away, we always said that we would run away together.

“Not that much.” she says, “It costs like nothing to fly to Auckland, and I’ll have heaps of money when I’m older too.”

It's impossible for me to tell her if she's right or not. Her strong, long taniwha teeth click against each other as she plans her escape. I don't know if I could live so far away from my family. How could she withstand such a change. Kali and I are both little taniwha. The bigger we get, the more inflated our scaly bodies become, until the stream and evergreens and the army complex becomes so small that it scrapes our sides. As the almost-Autumn air turns crisp and the cars on the main road whisk by our hiding spot with a whistle tone, I still my dizzy feet on the wet stones. One day, we will have to break down the cliffs surrounding our little lake and navigate through a vast and dangerous ocean. I realise that there are strong waves and a great unknown in front of us. For the first time, I see the impermanence of my infancy.

When we bike home, the watery blue of the night makes me feel like I'm swimming in a great, wide lake. For a moment, we are two taniwha playing in the tides, too small to understand the tightening bounds of our home. For a moment, Kali's glimmering tail is just a golden ponytail and her long fangs are just a crooked smile. This lake cannot be our home forever, but she will always be mine.