

# WHAKAPAPA

## Short Story by Tama Wereta

Our short story for this issue was written by Tama Wereta, a South Auckland schoolteacher. He has published fiction in the *Listener* and in *Education* magazine. This story first appeared in *Education*, but we liked it so much we thought it deserved another airing.

"You want to be a big-head or something?" my grandfather says to me. "You're a little girl at school yet." He won't speak Maori to me ever — even though I ask him to so I can practice and learn. Maybe he thinks I'll never understand him. Right now I want to say, "Hey, I'm in the sixth form, Grandad." But I don't dare, he makes me feel so small saying all this, and my aunty's at the back of the room there hearing it.

"To know the whakapapa is not your job. If you want to know it, wait. Then your turn will come. It's not like I'm an old man," he says, smoothing his white-sprinkled hair with his hand, "ready to die at any minute. There is time." I can see he's searching round in his mind for something he thinks I'll understand. "You can't run the flag up till the pole is ready! You go good and strong and get your education — that's your job now."

It is always the same. I come back here home from the city where we live, and I want — yes I really want — to learn from him about our family and hapu that he can tell me. Because who can teach me these things in the city? But he seems to think I'm just another Pakeha-Maori and he's not going to trust sacred things to me. I don't want to be like that, though. I want to know. I want to have my feet on sure ground, I want to know who I am, what paths I can follow. But maybe it's this, too — that he really does think I'm just too immature. He's still carrying on as if I'm twelve.

And I have to hold my tongue against my teeth not to say what I'm dying to say, like, "But even my father too, he doesn't know much yet either," or, "How can anyone be sure that you've got so many years left to teach us so much in?" or even, "I want to know where I come from — is that so bad?" And I don't ask, as I'd done once, if I could write down some of the stories, and the genealogy down, at his dictation. It's not that I'm crazy over the family tree — it's more like I know that if he'll give me *that*, he'll be ready to share with me some of the other things — you know, like customs, beliefs, ceremonies, the stories of our people's history, our proverbs and so. "I know some families have a family book," I had told him. "They've got it all down so it can't get lost." He got really mad at me. "That's a Pakeha notion," he said, "write it down and forget it. Put it in a book and that's it! How can you get the real things down in black squiggles? Are you so clever you can find the words to write all the feelings, all the thoughts that are as delicate yet as strong as a spider's web? All the things your face and your eyes show as you speak, all the tapu essences? Books! They are cemeteries!" His face got so flushed that my aunty came and shooed me away. Other times when I've asked about these sorts of things (you can tell I'm persistent, eh!), he'd just tap my knuckles and say, "Pretty girl." Yeah, that's what I was first and foremost to grandad — a female. Good for the kitchen! A handy young hui helper! And that would make me mad. It's tough I can tell you being wild with someone you love and respect so much!

Well, this is my grandfather's place. So I obediently go back to helping in the kitchen. And I don't say anything to my mother either, she can't seem to understand how strongly I feel, how frustrated and miserable my grandfather's "No" makes me whenever we come back here — and that's not so often, either, because it's so far to come.

We just could not believe it at first for a long time, the news of their deaths. A whole carload on the way to a hui, off the road, down the steep bank to the river. My grandfather dead, my uncle, my aunty, old Sammy, my step-uncle. Old Mrs Heta in the car with them. All gone. Lying there dead for hours, maybe, till they were found. I couldn't think about that. And so soon after we'd been to visit with them.

But it isn't just them being gone, these people so precious to me, that cuts me. The idea just sticks in my mind, and won't move, that it is also like the history of my family, the roots of my people, all the most precious things that are gone with them, part of them. Just as dead and gone and lost as those old Egyptians and Romans that the teachers used to tell us about. No, more than them. It was like a family's whole savings



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