The *waiata tangi* ‘song of mourning’ presented here is taken from the private manuscript writings of my great-grandfather Te Kāhui Kararehe of Rahotu, central Taranaki. It does not appear to have been recorded anywhere else, certainly not in any of the published sources I have consulted.

The Taranaki origins of the song are evident in the addition of the sounded aspirate /h/ before definitives beginning with a vowel, thus: hāna, haua, hētehi (for āna, aua, ētehi), and its disappearance from the word wakatauki (line 7). This was a notable feature in the writings of Te Kāhui himself, although less pronounced, if not entirely lacking, in those of his younger brother Taurua Minarapa and others of their immediate family, who also contributed to the manuscript collection. A further feature of Te Kāhui’s writings, evident in line 8 of the *waiata*, is the tendency to incorporate a *whakataukī* ‘proverbial saying’ and attribute it to “the ancestors”. It is an open question, of course, how much these were the actual ancestral words or how much was the ancestors’ wisdom that had come down to him and allowed him to attribute these sayings to them. But if Te Kāhui was not the composer, the identity of that composer is not known, nor can it be determined from the notes or references accompanying the *waiata* text, nor from any other indications within the *waiata* itself.

At first glance this song appears to be one of whimsy, but as *waiata tangi* were not written without good cause, a closer investigation is needed to determine the reason for its composition. Certainly there are several other *waiata* in Te Kāhui’s collection that betray an engaging sense of humour or an originality of thought and expression, not commonly found in this type of song at the time this particular *waiata* was recorded in the last decade of the 19th century or the early years of the 20th century (see Smith 2001). As a composition, however, this *waiata* must be judged on its merits according to the genre of which it is representative. Any undercurrents must be reserved for a more in-depth examination of those few other songs that are suspected of having their origin in the same fertile imagination to which I refer above.

The introductory remarks tell us that the *waiata* is about a *kaumātua* ‘elder’ who went looking for some cats to rid his land of rats. On his way home by sea, his precious charges, wrapped in a blanket and tucked into a kit, fell into the water and were drowned. Regrettable as this incident was to him, what additional significance did it have in terms of his concern for his land, and how unique was his composition in memorialising that seemingly minor though tragic event?
A waiata composed by Peehi Turoa of Whanganui (Ngata and Te Hurinui 1990:271) laments the raiding of his garden by pūkeko ‘swamp hens’. In that case as in this, the significance lay in the very real prospect of starvation faced by those whose crops failed them. In this waiata, then, we have the musings of an old man who knows the damage that rats do to staple crops such as corn and potatoes, and who has formed the habit of using cats to prowl his cultivations and protect his food supplies. In this, he shows the early adaptability of the Māori people in using Pākehā imports, here the cats, to their own distinctive advantage.

Although two cats are mentioned in the introductory comments the composer addresses them collectively in the waiata by using the singular koe ‘you’. The names given here—Poti in line 1 and Puihi in line 11—are both transliterated words for “Puss” or its diminutive “Pussy”. To avoid the risk of introducing a note of banality into the translation that is unworthy of the original, I have not used the diminutive here but have differentiated between the two forms of the word by leaving “Puihi” untranslated.

One meaning of tāwaka (line 2) is a possibly large specimen of grey duck. The name is also associated with a large species of shark, and with several other kinds of birds (Williams 1971:406). It could be the name of a sailing vessel, although it does not appear as such in Fletcher (1982) nor in Duval (1995). A further possibility was suggested to me by my colleague, Sally McKeain, of Ngāti Ranginui, Tauranga Moana, who says the phrase ‘he tā waka’ is used there to refer to an unstable boat. Because it helps to explain why the two cats fell overboard I have accepted this as the intended meaning, and express my gratitude to Sally for her insight.

The translation of the text that follows is my own. I have added line numbers for ease of reference.

The waiata:

Tēnei waiata mō ngā ngeru i taka ki te moana. Kāore taua kaumātua i rongo ake ki te takanga [a] hāna ngeru. Haua ngeru he ngeru kimi hoki nāna ki hētehi tāngata, he nui o te kiore i tōna whenua. Koia taua kaumātua i haere ai ki te kimi ngeru māna. E rua haua ngeru, e rua taka atu ki te moana. Koia nei taua kaumātua i mahi ai i tāna waiata mō hāna ngeru. Koia nei te waiata:

Ārohirohi noa, e Poti, ki a koe.  
Nāku iana koe i uta atu ki runga te tā waka,  
Takaia anō koe te motu paraikete,  
Whaohia anō koe ki roto te kete iti.  
5   Hurihia ake koe ki muri ki tuku tā ‘–  
Tē ata rangona ake tōu makeretanga ki te wai.  
Tēnei anō rā ngā w’akatauki a ngā kahika:  
‘He moana huanga korekore hoki ake ki te ao’, na-ai.  
Whakawhititau atu ai ki Ruakopihā rā,  
10   Ko ‘e rua tāpue kei tō tu[α]hine,
Kei tō tungāne – ko Puihi te whaea –
Ki waenga te tahora kotahi.
‘Ra pea, e Pōti, i matea atu ai
Hei takitaki mate mō ngā rā e tū noa mai rā,
15 Ka riro ngā pata i a Porerarua, i a Pākura,
Mā ērā tāngata miti kai o hērā whenua, e Pōti, ē.

The translation:

This song is about some cats that fell into the sea. This kaumātua wasn’t aware that his cats had fallen in. These cats were some he had gone to get from some people because there were so many rats on his land. This is why that kaumātua went to get himself some cats. There were two cats, and both fell into the sea. This is why that kaumātua made up his song about his cats. This is the song:

I’m in a total spin, Puss, over you.
I brought you on board this ramshackle boat,
Wrapped in a scrap of blanket
And stuffed into a little kit.
5 You overbalanced behind my back,
And fell unnoticed in the water.
There’s this saying of the ancestors:
‘A sea of no benefit whatever to the world’, alas!
I’ll go across to Ruakopiha,
10 To the burial pit of your sister
And your brother – their mother was Puihi –
In the same spot of open ground.
It may be, Puss, that you were needed
As requital for the days that loom ahead,
15 When the stores are taken by Porerarua and Pākura,
For the ‘food-licking’ people of those places, Puss.

The place name Ruakopiha (line 9) combines the two words rua ‘pit, and kōpiha ‘a storage pit for root vegetables such as potatoes or taro’. In 1922 George Graham visited a site near Kaipara, where he saw a number of beehive-shaped constructions on free-draining land which faced the sun. As explained by the local people these were kōpiha or rua-kōpiha, used for storing kūmara (Graham 1922). A similar usage occurs in kōpiha kiore ‘pit for taking rats’ (Williams 1971:137). It is tempting to read into the name Ruakopiha, then, a subtle link between the place where our kaumātua buried his cats and the possible use of that burial pit in the past as a site where food was stored, and where rats were no doubt caught as they raided those stores. The ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ referred to in lines 10 and 11 need not have come from the same litter as the two cats lamented in the waiata, but could have come from the same family, with a wide-spread reputation of being good hunters.
Three references in line 15 require amplification. The first, *pata*, refers amongst other things to foods such as maize and potatoes (Williams 1971:269). I have translated it here, for the sake of some kind of metric observance, as ‘stores’. The second reference, *Porarurua*, is identified in Williams (1971:293) as the plant *Erigeron canadensis*, Canadian flea-bane, and further listed in Beever (1991) as *Erigeron floribundus*, or *Coryza albida* and *C. bilbaoana*. Beever also gives three Māori synonyms for *porarurua*: *haaka*, *kaingarua* and *pouhawaiki*, of which the two latter refer to the Norwegian rat, the first to be introduced by Europeans (Williams 1971:88, 298). What we have here, then, is a personified reference to the rats that were creating havoc in our *kaumātua’s* garden. This is coupled with a reference to *Pākura*, the *pūkeko* ‘swamp hen’ (*Porphyrio melanotus*), that caused so much damage to Peehi Turoa’s garden in Wanganui. The last line refers to the people of other places who, because food is in short supply through the depredations of these pests, will ‘lick up’ the scraps that remain.

REFERENCES