

# Bridging the Crepuscular

By Dina Jezdić

***He mihi tēnei ki ngā taniwha,  
Ngā kaitiaki o ngā wai, o ngā whenua.  
Hei ārahi, hei manaaki, hei tiaki i a mātou.<sup>1</sup>***

Before Rangi (Sky Father) and Papa (Earth Mother) were separated, the sky father's embrace stretched across both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. But in their parting, his arms were severed—his reach no longer able to hold the entirety of the sky. This rupture set the world into motion, birthing movement, journeys, and the endless navigation between realms. Reuben Paterson's latest body of work bridges the crepuscular, the space between day and night, where light and darkness blur into one. This threshold—neither one thing nor the other—is a realm of transformation, a state of becoming. It is here, in this liminal glow, that the dragon of mythology—fire-breathing, ominous—meets its ancestral twin in the taniwha, the shapeshifter of Māori tradition.

To understand taniwha is to step into an Indigenous cosmology where the physical and spiritual, the seen and unseen, the mythic and the real are fluid. It resists the colonial impulse to define, categorize, and control. Instead, it reveals a world shaped by interconnectedness, movement, and histories that continue within our present. Between the known and the unknown, drawn by the pull of Southern stars and the restless surge of distant hemispheres, the taniwha emerges—a celestial map shimmering with memory, transformation, and the perpetual tension of navigation, both physical and metaphysical. These beings are not relics of legend but living forces, shifting between water and air, land and sky, slipping through whispered histories. They rise from darkness into light, taking the shape of dragons, serpents, and giant lizards—forces of water and shadow, guarding thresholds charged with ancient energy. Their presence is a reminder that magic is not of the past; it pulses beneath the surface of our world, sharpening into focus, pressing us to unlearn a dominant worldview built on rigid categories and binaries.

Some taniwha, coiled in deep waters or nestled in caves, demand offerings, their presence woven into the fabric of iwi stories. Others, luminous and watchful, stand as kaitiaki, guardians who guide and protect. For generations, Māori have envisioned rivers as taniwha—powerful entities embodying both the lifeblood of the land and the forces that shape it. The river's headwaters form the taniwha's head, the main channel its sinuous body, tributaries its limbs, and where the river leaves the hills and flows onto the plain, that is its flicking tail. Once seen as myth, *mātauranga Māori* is now recognized as a rigorous knowledge system, offering valuable insights into environmental change. Researchers in New Zealand<sup>2</sup> are integrating it with geomorphology, revealing how Indigenous narratives encode empirical observations of seismic activity, flood cycles, and land shifts. Stories of taniwha in specific river bends or flood-prone areas align with geological data, revealing

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<sup>1</sup> This is a tribute to the taniwha,  
The guardians of the waters, of the land.  
Guide us, protect us, shelter us.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Hikuroa, an Earth systems scientist and senior lecturer in Māori studies at the University of Auckland, is a leading researcher integrating mātauranga Māori with Western scientific disciplines.

these narratives as living maps—guiding water management, preserving long-term environmental knowledge, and bridging science with intergenerational wisdom. In this way, taniwha are more than mythical beings; they are a way of seeing—an understanding of movement, form, and the deep interconnection between land, water, and the unseen currents that guide us. Embedded in *pūrākau*—traditional Māori narratives passed down through generations—they are not relics of the past but living frameworks. Within them, mātauranga Māori informs the physical, the metaphysical, and the invisible, holding knowledge that extends far beyond what is seen.

From the depths they rise—taniwha, neither fully of this world nor entirely beyond it. They are guardians and omens, both protection and peril. Some are benevolent, guiding those who honour them; others are restless, unpredictable, warning of unseen dangers. Their lairs—*rua taniwha*—are etched into the land itself: deep pools where the water stills, caves that echo with unseen breath, currents that twist and churn with a knowing force. These are places to be revered, sometimes feared, always remembered.

Many taniwha arrived with the great Polynesian voyaging canoes, tracing ancestral lines that reach beyond human memory, beyond time itself. They did not merely inhabit the land; they shaped it. In Wellington, the taniwha Ngake tore through stone and water, carving a passage to Cook Strait, while Whātaimai, caught in his attempt to follow, remained—his spirit rising as Te Keo, a bird whose lament still lingers on the summit of Tangi te Keo (Mt Victoria). In the currents of Cook Strait (late 19th and early 20th centuries), Tuhirangi, once Kupe's guardian, found new form in the sleek body of Pelorus Jack, the dolphin who guided ships through treacherous waters. These taniwha exist not as distant myths, but as the living breath of the land itself; they ripple through the present, shaping the way we move through the world. They are presences to be acknowledged—forces that remind us that beneath the surface of every landscape, every body of water, something more is always at play.

At its core, Paterson's work is an act of reclamation, a luminous archaeology of remembrance to the imagined and unseen. Creation itself becomes a kind of technology—one that both documents and resurrects, revealing the fragments of worlds we occupy or once knew, or perhaps have only glimpsed in dreams. This is not just about navigating physical space but navigating time, unearthing histories, and reimagining them in new constellations. *Taniwha* is a meditation on thresholds: between the celestial and the terrestrial, between here and there, between what we know and what we have yet to imagine. It installs in us an idea that perhaps everything is ordained, that the paths we walk and the stars we follow have already been traced long before our arrival. The Greeks called it destiny<sup>3</sup>, the Māori understand it as *whakapapa*—our past, present, and future woven together in an unbroken line.

In this space of flux and renewal, Paterson pulls us into the Chinese zodiacal tide of the Year of the Snake—a cycle of shedding, release, and rebirth. His work affirms what has always been known: stars are not distant, dragons are not myths, and the unknown is not empty but full, waiting to be seen. Through his paintings, taniwha and dragon converge—interwoven forces that transcend landscapes and mindscapes, bridging hemispheres and carrying meaning to the cosmological edges of our cultures.

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<sup>3</sup> In Greek mythology, the **Moirai** (Μοῖραι), or Fates, were three deities who controlled the thread of life—Clotho spun it, Lachesis measured it, and Atropos cut it. The word *moira* itself means "portion" or "lot," reflecting the idea of an assigned fate or destiny.