

mirabile dictu, Michele Leggott. AUP. RRP \$27.99 ISBN: 978-1-86940-440-6.

Liz Breslin

one thing leads to another
though the trail is not always
obvious

So begins 'the liberty of parrots', one of the fifty six poems that make up *mirabile dictu*. Relating wonders. And it's an apt hook into this book, which is pack with pluralities of images, sounds, smells, stories. There are poems about family, about journeys, about Italy, about poets, about poetry. For us as readers, the trail, indeed, is not always obvious. And it's rewarding to stick with it, read closely and revisit.

No pun intended with stick in the last sentence. Though two sorts of sticks figure prominently in the collection. The first, a set of tokotoko, talking sticks, presented to Leggott as the inaugural New Zealand Poet Laureate. The second, the white cane with which "she's walking/ the road to implementation". In a city walk in 'smoke tree',

the steps

chuckle not difficult

to read that one a whiff

of jasmine in front of

a fence a flat white

in Exchange Lane a sugar

cone from Valentino's

are you ok they ask we weren't

sure you knew where you

were the water smiles

The 'chichichichi' of the stick walks the light/ dark line, as Leggott, through this collection, journeys on with her failing sight. Still, daily wonders are strongly re-visioned. Here are just two of the swathes of examples that leap out:

dark Siena gold and purple sockettes

on the feet of the Child

(fr. 'passagiata')

and

cheekbones

focussing an old charm

(fr. 'tessuti')

Looking at the poems on the page, the gaps between the words also play an interesting part in the reading experience. Although these are mostly long, wordy works, the line breaths make them work both horizontally and vertically and really pace the poems. There's a beautiful bit of spacing in 'tessuti', where they "take t r a v e l a t o r s" - the word looks so perfect stretched out that way, it was natural and new all at once. And that's the kind of dense, intelligent detail that can be noticed on every page of this collection. There are too many gems to do justice to here.

Another visual pleasure is in 'gulielmus igitur', where three identical ship pictures are placed between each stanza. And then there's 'winter 1928', letters from daddy, punctuated by stickmen.

Although there's deep, demanding reading in the 154 pages here, there's also lots of light relief. Take 'Te Kikorangi'. In 'tell your mama', we learn that it's

the sky-blue stick

whose stories have just begun

Te Kikorangi, we could call it

almost as good as the blue from Kapiti

we eat when the good times roll.

Te Kikorangi appears again in conversation with Leggott in 'taking it seriously'. They talk about:

working till midnight

three thousand words forty percent out of coffee

out of smokes out of time the computer ate it

and that one doesn't give extensions

even for dead grandmothers my tenth

this semester heartless just heartless

how will my grandmothers cope

with the news of my expiry from Intellectual

Over-Utilisation Syndrome IOUs

and youse and youse I am the future

sitting here in academic drag flat broke

about to get an arts degree

how do you come back from that?

... ..

uh huh comes the reply
why don't you help me get this hapuka
into the smoker and tell Walt (Whitman) to bring
his grandma as well as a good red
and whatever poems he's written lately
we'll have a session there's always room
in the world for poems grandmothers
and arts degrees looking for a good time

Indeed. The stick rears its head again a few times, and many of the poems refer backwards and forwards to each other in strong or subtle ways. 'Nice feijoas' talks about "poet philosophers" and traces the finding of a poem with the minutia of a day. 'shore space' imagines a cacophony of who's who NZ poets turning up to help one of their own head offshore. There's something so touching about

a sausage sizzle to do a fundraiser
for a poet who has run out of cornflakes
on the other side of the world.

Those be poetic realities. And there are so many realities in this collection. Familiar and foreign journeys. TradeMe. Histories. Families. Sweet fruit. Lost sight. Lost babies. A kid in an alleyway tuning up his violin and "belting out/My Heart Will Go On with full/ orchestral backing from a box".

Leggott absolutely achieves the effect of the "poetic emporium" that she outlines on the front fly. There are so many wonders related in *mirabile dictu*. It's a really, really, really rewarding journey of a read. Last words go to the stick:

bring on your poems dance with your grannies
we feast with the gods tonight.