

peri poietikes / about poetry

Michele Leggott



1
cretan bee persons soar
above the white magnolia flower
how much can you see they ask
less than I could a year ago I say
and more than a year ago too you were
attending to the white flowers with just this
hum summery confident and I
was walking into shadows afraid to put one foot
where the other would have to follow

It is January 2008, high summer. The bees are working the grandiflora magnolias with their lemon soap hearts all over Northland as we drive to Te Kotahitanga for the third and final funeral service for Hone Tuwhare, 85, grand old man of New Zealand letters and pre-eminent Māori poet. Hone was also one of five laureates the country has had since 1996. As the sixth laureate, just appointed and yet to receive the talking stick that goes with the job, I am a listener in the house as others speak for and with Hone. When the casket is closed and carried out to the van that will take him to the family burial ground on a nearby hill, we add the magnolia I have brought from home to the flowers heaped on the polished wood. On top of the hill in sun and wind we watch as he is lowered into the earth, and his own words of farewell to poet colleague Ron Mason are echoing in my head: *A red libation to your good memory, friend. There's work yet, for the living.* Indeed. You look back. You look forward. There is work to do.

When the talking stick is presented with grand ceremony a few weeks later at Matahiwi in Hawke's Bay, Hone is still very much in the air. It comes as no surprise to learn that the carver of the stick, Jacob Manu Scott, has embedded a poem of Tuwhare's deep in its heartwood. Every laureate who picks up this finely carved treasure with its gleaming insets of paua and mother of pearl has Hone to answer to, a smile and a challenge. This is the big stick, the matua tokotoko, and everybody present is impressed by its beauty and gravitas.

But there is another stick waiting under the covers for its formal blessing by the elders at Matahiwi. When the covers come off, I see that it is blue with a pattern of reversed-out magnolias in white, topped by a circlet of silver. This is the tokotoko Jacob has made after an afternoon spent talking on our back deck where the trees lean in close and invisible doves call from the branches. It comes up to the middle of my chest. The matua tokotoko, the big stick, will pass from laureate to laureate, but each laureate keeps the stick made specifically for him or her by the ingenious Jacob. Mine is a converted pool cue, now a sky-blue stick of poetry. We had considered making it white because I have been losing my sight for years and will soon have to use a cane. But at this moment I am glad Jacob has settled on blue and silver and the practicality of a staff that unscrews into four pieces to go travelling.

2

bee persons

**airy ascenders your weightlessness
is an inspiration even as I slow to be sure
of the edge of the dug up crossing the overhanging
branch or the children sitting in the middle
of the path bees your thunders and lightnings**

**terrify me even as they assert the way
forward we were there you say and now we are
here a black baldachin folded up in the fizz
of our wings heartbreak exaltation
what will it be this bright morning walking into
shadow walking into the bleached possibilities
of inhabiting only the moment**

Work for the living. I continue the writing that began after the trip north for Hone's burial, unsure of where it is leading but certain that it holds the clues to its own evolution. Summer is folding itself into autumn, the magnolias begin dropping bright red seedheads and flocks of noisy rosellas arrive to strip out the seeds. One morning we climb the university clocktower and go looking for an elephant skull from the lost biology museum. We follow directions to the oldest rose in the country, a sweet briar planted by missionaries when Napoleon was still knocking around Europe. I take both sticks to the autumn Arts graduation where we entertain with a blues guitar and a poem for the graduands. Pacific Island students hang lei of flowers and gold-foiled chocolates about the chancellor's neck as they cross the stage and when some of the garlands come my way I know the poem has received its ultimate accolade.

At mid-year we pack up and take a digital bridge of New Zealand poems to a conference in Italy. We are first-timers in the land of too much art and too many marvels. It is of course also good for poetry. I fill notebooks with furious black scribble that is barely legible, interleaving it with a profusion of boat, bus and train tickets, museum passes, cards, receipts, the bits and pieces that say here and now and remember this.

3

cretan bees

**you are kinder than the vespas that chased us
over the curve of the Trinita bridge but your questions
are just as relentless where are we going
how much can you see don't you remember
the wind off the river ruffling the little girl's
hair**

In Assisi I am taken aback when Giotto's frescos are nothing but darkness under high windows letting light into a stone nave. In Florence I think I might do better with the wall-sized Botticellis closer to ground level, but no. And in Venice Peggy Guggenheim's treasures are dark holes on white walls. It is crushing to think I have left it too late, that my eyes can't do this job any more.

But there are gardens and fountains, concerts and sculpture and the great good fortune of being able to walk arm in arm through these cities. It isn't so bad. And the poems see what I can't.

Back home in winter cold that is turning slowly towards spring, I learn how to use a white cane and teach myself the basics of touch typing. Not a moment too soon. As I exchange the initial awkwardness of handling the cane for the sheer relief of being able to walk confidently again, I realise that my blue stick has quietly prepared the way for my white stick. And that Jacob has anticipated this progression by making the blue stick chest height which is the recommended length of a white cane, so that you have a good long reach into the world. I could, if I want to, use the sky-blue stick to find my way.

4

**cretan bee persons you seem
to have done it again the deep breath
that is my first stick the blue cue that is
my second the third that reads the world
at my feet and this the fourth corner of wind
holding up the sky unsayable limitless
a pool on the edge of a cliff where people
come and go some of them sit on the parapet
some look for lemons on the trees
lining the water in tubs and some dip
their toes companionably watching the ripples
and the beginning of writing across
cool air on a hot day we were there and now
we are here I see more than I did
and the bees in their beautiful skirts
dip and lift above the white flowers saying
yes there is more and that is our job now go
and bury the possum washed up on the beach
before someone steps on it unawares**

It is January 2009, high summer again. I am pushing to finish the poems which have almost the shape of a book that will trace a path through the year of writing that is my work for the living. The poems are noisy with the presence of others, poets living and dead, named and unnamed, stories that come and go (elephants, roses, doves, parrots), appearances and disappearances. Along the way I have tried to inset reflexive points, places where the poems carry their own reading instructions or enact a *modus operandi*. The four corners of wind holding up the sky are the four

winds of Māori tradition. But they are also the four spaces (breaths) that punctuate the lines on my page. My love of conjunctions (*come and go; dip and lift*) is part of a longstanding interest in equitable making and joining.

January turns into February. I am busy recapitulating early business with the bees and magnolias when they suddenly deliver a dead possum into the mix. Why? Because it is there on the beach, not the kind of thing anyone wants to stumble on, eyes or no eyes. I try taking it out of the poem. It won't budge.

5

**how did that get in I ask the wind
brings a terrible stink the poem is suddenly
smelly and unclean and nobody
will come back for the poisoned bones
anytime soon the bees are silent the cicadas
take over in their massed chorus that begins
in the grey light before dawn around poetics
you must walk without fear they chant all measure
is with us in the trees and the undersides of leaves
dropping cool messages on bare skin**

Okay. The bees have handed over to the wall of sound that is cicadas. But is that going to solve the possum problem?

6

**cicadas I say you roar and you shirr how is that
what I am learning apo koinu
they reply enigmatically jump from the join
that is a possum in the corner
and one hundred percent humidity cicadas I say
you are not very clear is there another way
of hearing what you have to say silence
then off they go again louder than ever
about measure you swim in the blue water
making and remaking the shapes of air**

The cicadas remind me that this is a poem about poetics and there is something to say about the spring and twist of the line that likes to look back even as it looks forward. Line-break is what the

ancient Greeks knew as apo koinu, literally *away from the join*. Koinu is almost corner, apo as in apohelion *away from the sun* or apocalypse *breaking from cover, revelation*. Not that the possum, now very smelly indeed, is apocalyptic but it does give me the chance to align apo koinu with the almost-translation *a possum in the corner*. There are other bad jokes in the poems which are not fussy about where they scavenge for content.

But seriously. The poem has found its title, **peri poietikes**, and the cicadas bend it this way and that listening out for the best transfers between world and language.

7

**about poetry we fly in a cloud of noise
sometimes it is a white flower sometimes
a carcass hung under the wharf when the bones
are clean they will be brought into the house
around the heart we fly and sing
surely this is something you can understand**

Yes, this is a translation I understand. The book will be called MIRABILE DICTU, coming as it does from a funeral at its outset to a wedding at its close, where *wonderful to relate* the work of living will go forward again, not that any of us will be able to second-guess its particulars. There is always another line, another poem, another year.

Script for BBC Radio 3 series 'A Laureate's Life' broadcast 28 April 2009. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00k107t>. Photo credit: Mark Fryer.

A Note on the New Zealand Poet Laureateship

The New Zealand Poet Laureateship was established in late 2007 and supercedes the Te Mata Estate Poet Laureateship. The new award carries over Te Mata's generous stipend of wine and the tradition of presenting each laureate with a personal tokotoko (carved stick). The two-year post is administered by the National Library of New Zealand / Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa and has a government-funded salary of NZD50,000 per annum. In 2008 the Library commissioned the carving of a national stick to embody its custodianship of the position. Laureate obligations include active promotion of poetry through events and a blog, and the production of a publishable collection of poems. See <http://nzpoetlaureate.natlib.govt.nz/>