

**VANISHING
POINTS**
MICHELE LEGGOTT



It's an optical amusement, a punctured surface letting light pour through holes cut out of the picture. Moon, army tents and the windows of houses and St Mary's church glow or flicker with luminance. Between them move women and children as well as soldiers. Steamers, a brig and a schooner ride on the moonlit sea. Part and not part of the scene is the artist's son, who lies three days buried in the churchyard at the foot of the hill where his father sits sketching the arrival of imperial troops. Now walk away from the painting when it is lit up and see how light falls into the world on this side of the picture surface. Is this what the artist meant by his cut outs? Is this the meaning of every magic lantern slide?

Michele Leggott's new collection is full of history and family, lights and mirrors, the real and the surreal, now articulated through a powerful amalgam of prose poems and verse.

Vanishing Points concerns itself with appearance and disappearance as modes of memory, familial until we lose sight of that horizon line and must settle instead for a series of intersecting arcs. It is full of stories caught from the air and pictures made of words. It stands *here* and goes *there*, a real or an imagined place. If we can work out the navigation the rest will follow.

Michele Leggott was the inaugural New Zealand Poet Laureate 2007–09 and received the Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement in Poetry in 2013. Her collections include *Heartland* (2014) and *Mirabile Dictu* (2009), both from Auckland University Press. She coordinates the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre (nzepc) with Brian Flaherty at the University of Auckland.

carina / the keel

Macoute slips off the wall and rests
a moment on one of the leather chairs below
the flag he's got swallows on the wire
KERERŪ AEROBATICS above the cliff
and his own white noise to insert
between the London planes he is the tree
in the view he holds up one arm
against the falling sun he is the child
you caught on the print the plan scribbled
once on the back of an envelope TŪĪ WINGBEAT
over the house where Macoute sits thinking
in a leather chair and above him
a white space sand in the footbath
whisky under the stars
Macoute has long ears but he cannot
always see where he is going and tonight
will bring the Geminids overhead
in a dark sky without a trace of light
twenty-two steps to the door six between
door and throughway nine from the bed
to the back door count them and be sure
use your hands and your feet Macoute
down from the wall and moving silently
among the sleepers in the house

robin doing his drawing

On the table in front of him stand three jars of plum and apple jelly. *Transparent, weightless, luminous.* They glow like rubies, their cellophane tops curved and immaculate. Around him flows the conversation that has brought them from the top of the fridge to the old wooden table, but he is not listening. *Marbles, japonicas, pearls.* Winter light pours into the small room with large windows on all sides, making it a ship's cabin complete with ladder, sleeping loft and a kitchen hatch. He cannot draw the hot sweetness of the scones coming out of the oven or how they warm the teatowel they are wrapped in. But he has the palm-tree mugs on the hatch, their handles to the left, waiting to be picked up and brought over with the teapot, the milk, the butter and the knives. Then they will ask him to choose a jar and he will pick the first one, uncurling its stuck down frill and pinging off the soft rubber band. Who will bring the plates from the cupboard over the bench? Who has left the back door open, letting in the cold, though perhaps it isn't very cold yet. One key swings from the other in the new brass lock. Two black cats swirl through the house. The girl on the fridge throws herself into the sea of magnetic letters one more time. She is the word slinger, the one who might tell, the one who went into the sea.

The jelly makers, almost all women, were given a recipe and the seasonal fruit they would need to fill the 623 jars. Plum. Guava. Crabapple. Pomegranate. Red currant. Quince. They dated and named their jars, giving them back to the artist whose grandmother had written down the recipe they were using. Then each jar was inscribed with a single word. Each red word illuminated its neighbour. On purpose-built shelves they made lines of words and none were dispensable or even interchangeable. They were locked into a grid called Spectacular Blossom to register the imprint of a red-flowering tree, *Metrosideros excelsa*, on its human co-dependants. They were on show. Each human eye found its saturation point, a line, a phrase or a single word. Each human hand indicated the red words it might reasonably expect to acquire and take away once looking was done. People paid for their selections and the blossom was dispersed, leaving a text full of holes on the gallery wall. We hummed. *lucent ruins? scarlet spray? Can anyone choose?* Then a cartel of six, intent on an interrogative project, swooped in and scooped the pool. They chose their words carefully, making up one line apiece in the manner of a composing stick, and the words went out the door to sit on other shelves. The artist was left with a sprezzatura of articles, definite and indefinite, and a few stray pronouns. She took them around to her grandmother, whose name was Mary Pohutukawa Redmond.

THE FASCICLES

I

In darkness, redcoats marching out to the Pekapeka block. It cannot be true. But imagine for a moment it is. Two women stand almost in the same place which is the rim of an old volcano. One is remembering her father stepping out of the blockhouse when she was a little girl going down an Irish road wherever they were just then. The other is stunned by a memory of fruit falling in a dark garden, soft sounds in long lines or sweet juice over stops and starts. An orchard? A volcano?

Neither can be sure because the ground is shifting. They pick themselves up and go on, unaware of the jolt that has put them on the same page and will now tie them to this place, whatever it is. One watches the shadow of a long skirt ripple ahead of her in the afternoon wind. The other has almost reached home with her quire of clean white paper, walking uphill from the shops around the quay. There is dinner to get, the washing to be folded, but no children so there is time for everything connected or unconnected with the red jackets of the soldiers moving along the Devon road in darkness or in daylight.

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I love him, she thinks. I vocate, says the other, haptic with risk. Each sits with her head in a pool of lamplight, mind and fingers flying over the mending of works and days, now and then, yes and no. They have torn up the pegs, they dispute the sale, they build a fighting pā on the ridge to the south west, Te Kohia, and draw fire from the valley running down to the bony sea. This is the beginning, a transfer of words for deeds with tails

as long as kite strings in a clear blue sky. She folds the creamy sheets of paper and pulls red silk after the needle that pierces and pierces the fold, binding, stitching, tying together the new pages of a little book, a booklet really, pliable, plausible, something to fold down and begin writing. The valley in the dark, the ridge abandoned. The lamplight, the flashing needle, the words I will write from the orchard that is a volcano. For you have shown me the valley in the north and its river running down to the sea where redcoats, militia and volunteer rifles are landing to begin the work of destruction. One moment I am in a dark orchard. The next I feel the ground shake under my feet. I am a soldier's daughter, fled away from my father over the sea and finding him again here in the new land.

What shall I write? Where should I bury my flashing needle with its red silk tail as long as kite strings in a clear sky?

I found it
in a dictionary
and look
it comes true

these days
with peaches
with intricacies
of step

and step

afternoon tea
with dancing

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