

RENGA: 100 Poems

Launch speech, by Lisa Gorton, Melbourne December 2017

100 poems, a ten year conversation. The two poets met, over those ten years, only in these—

‘What is it that makes / a home?’ The question, from one of Paul Kane’s poems, is at the heart of this collection. Paul writes of his house, built on a volcano in Victoria, chained to bedrock—still not enough, perhaps, for it to survive the high winds there. Both poets live part of each year in different countries and these poems are full of arrivals and their seasons. Renga 50, the midpoint of the collection: ‘The restart of the fire season: a mushroom cloud on the first / horizon.’ Renga 51: ‘This morning, ice shards / glinting in the stream, the rocks / wearing lace collars: / hesitate and you will freeze / says the stream...’

The poems keep moving from one season to another, from one home to another, from one side of the world to the other. They switch between call and response; each response becomes a call. Each home is temporary. The collection perpetually upsets that way of thinking, which finds its expression in vanishing-point perspective. Each home is central, each home is elsewhere. ‘A day in the jet / stream, trailing clouds of / carbon, and we’re here, / the world flipped over again,’ writes Paul. That word, here, rings through this collection. John writes: ‘For years I’ve been split / three ways: a home here and here / and here.’

The world flips over. In the same way, throughout the collection, the categories keep switching: a description in one poem becomes an image in another; an image in one poem provokes a memory in another; the memory opens into new sequences. So, ‘Pentecostal flames / flare in petrochemical / fields. Refineries / speak to us the name, nature: / without them, no wilderness. / This is the true wild,’ writes Paul. In the next poem, John concentrates that description in an image:

All pollution concentrated
to the red cauldron upturned
on the red-capped parrot’s

head: a rare visitor here,
passing through the area
with companion shadowing

between stands of marri.
It’s unfair to place the weight
of Jersey, or memorably

the welter of refineries
bracing Philly, on its shoulders,
but memory and long-

distance conversation
yield their quarry. And soon,
here will feed refineries...

Through the pattern of call and response, the poets set parts of each other’s poems free in new relationships. It’s all in motion, all switching places: here, there, presence, absence, place, story, description, image, memory: manifold and proliferating.

Reading the collection, it is fascinating to trace how calls and responses work in that imaginative terrain, in which the centre and periphery keep changing places. Take the sequence of poems about mining: ‘Atop one ridge in central Pennsylvania, geologic waves roll steeply, starkly away,’ starts one of Paul’s poems. In response: ‘There’s a fair chance / that one of our neighbours / is furtively mining away the valley wall...’ In response: ‘It’s called MTR / in the Appalachian range, / a simple concept: / forget mining, just remove/ the tops of mountains instead...’ It seems to me possible that this whole memorable sequence arose out of a phrase in Kinsella’s previous poem: ‘Reaching a lookout / in uncleared bush...’ That lookout, which recalls the high ridge. The poems are everywhere lucid, the poets always in conversation, and yet the collection has this imaginative drift in it: local details, unfolding their associations through the poets’ work of delaying, forgetting and remembering.

In this record of a conversation, over ten years, you feel the passage of time—returns, repetitions, changes. Over the years, each poet is corresponding not only with the other poet, but with the work itself, with that other self who wrote the poems before this present one—they stand sometimes behind each other’s mirrors. The collection is from time to time lit up with a revelatory intimacy—as though, in writing to each other, or to their past selves, they seek sometimes to answer some doubt, or define their differences more precisely. ‘Feed me, feed me, sings/ the magpie at the glass door. / I’m the same, insatiable / for whatever empties me...’ writes Paul. ‘The data I feed on,’ writes John in the next poem: ‘the nitty-gritty / of names and locations, is no / more nor less than hallucination. / A condition I have. Residue...’

Taken separately, these poems are a genuine contribution to the work of these two major poets: at once central to their interests, and intriguingly different. Taken together, they are a model of conversation: patient, alert, attentive, generous, self-renewing—salutary.