



Renovations by
Marion Jones.
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Reviewed by Patricia
Prime.

Marion Jones' collection of poems, *Renovations*, is divided into five sections. Jones not only has something to say but she has really thought about her words beforehand.

Jones' collection is a journey that embraces the reader and shows that the loss she has experienced is surmountable. These poems extend her experiences to anyone willing to share them. In *Renovations* the lives of the characters are caught in a time-frame; the poet allows for a world of loss and hope, of sorrow and redemption. Jones' work gives the reader faith in humanity and in the future.

The poems frequently sound as though written at white heat, direct from the moment to the event. Directness, indeed, is one of her salient features, both in her confrontation of experience and the language she brings to description. As the following quote from "Degrees of whiteness" attest, she is a very visual poet, and the book is full of arresting images.

At nightfall, she sleeps to dream
of boulders bleaching white,
of the last slope, of her soles
gripping gritted snow. An ice door

opens. She steps left, she steps
right. Waste-tinted ice seals floor
to walls. Higher, canvas glistens;
celestials leave their tent unfolded.

Many poems bear witness to Jones' life in Dunedin where she now lives, as we see from some of the poems in this section. "Her hearts", "Towards Lake Wanaka" and "At five forks" exemplify the pleasure she finds in this landscape. From "At five forks" comes this lovely stanza:

On the Taieri Plain,
where five roads meet,
a macrocarpa
frames the blue,

It strikes me that while this poetry is full of joie de vivre, of pleasurable immersion in the world,

body and senses; it is also edgy, as though the vigour which drives its observations, its experiences, is partly a diversion from underlying anxiety, such as we see in the poems in section two: "August sky": "Sponging sweetness from jars, she dared not turn, / as he said, 'Mother's gone', and she left the room"; "As darkness falls, she counts ' the stones from Blackhead Quarry / along her gravestone border" ("She follows the shade") and "The sexton might dig one bone / to sear with flame" ("Return"). The poems are at once celebratory and alienated. In their attention to the things of the world, to minute detail, their mediation of thought through physicality, the poems convey both the joyous and the anxious. These two elements result in a tension between exhilaration and sadness, as we see in "Grandmother's table":

Her folded hands: devotion fills a crack,
rim to centre, the new moon's curve –
Grandmother's lifeline.

Granddaughter had dusted arches, ledges,
turns she would follow down under toward
Grandmother's smile, a glow of marble.

Section three reflects on seven paintings by Andrew Wyeth. The concept is an intriguing one. The poems have an apparent simplicity, relying as much on subtleties of rhythm as on verbal dexterity or imagery. The long poem "West window" is typical, taking six tight, rhymed, four-line stanzas to convey its message. Here is the first stanza:

For three days, where might she keep the dead?
He climbed her wall, shoved a sack through her
skylight.
'Crown Milling Limited', the muslin's selvage
read.
She pulled the drawstring of the body bag tight.

Similarly "Wind from the sea", written in eleven, three-line stanzas which form the frame for strong visual images:

pathways and gates
of the township,
down to the sand,

over rocks and waves,
beyond the breakwater,
as if a lighthouse

beacon searches
darkened depths

again and again.

Many of the poems in section four contain, even depend for their impact on references to everyday life, as, for example, “On arrival from the airport” (“Choice”); “Upstairs at Arthur Barnett’s” (“Infantwear department”) and “At the Suzy board / she presses wrinkles / from trousers, shirts, / frocks and skirts” (“Ironing”). The poem “At St Clair” is one such, beginning simply with the phrase “Along the beach” and ending, more dramatically with the lines

not one child looks
out to see the dark
along the horizon.

The final section of the collection is a reflection on life through the presentation of a series of poems that raise questions about love and death, nature and human nature. One of the most important poems in the section is “Field notes”. Here the experience of nature is traced through a series of fragmented reflections and images that are built on each other, set against each other, often using uncertainty in the construction of line breaks to invite more than the immediate reading:

Blooms of black flax
blaze lighting the way
beneath storm shingle.

A bush track, a black hill;
one bright window.
‘Grouse-house, dear.’

Whilst there are many strong and moving poems in this section, I found the prose poem “Short talk on balance” one of the most compelling, the one that powerfully confirms Jones’ significance as a remarkable poet. Jones’ connection to the truth of the immediate, the primacy of the natural world, of self and tenderness, finds a strong voice in these lines:

In her eyes, I see she knew beforehand the deficit in my name, all I would have to pay. Inexplicably, her presence carries over: a credit, my balance, as I stand in line.

Renovations is an ample and varied collection of poems. Their freshness, their delight in being, captures well the remarkable energy, the musical fullness and courage of Jones’ work.