



**Renovations by Marion Jones, Wellington: Steele Roberts (2011) 72 pp. RRP NZ \$19.99 (pb). ISBN: 9781877577352. Reviewed by Mary Meyerhoff Cresswell.**

Once upon a time, in this language of ours, ‘renovations’ meant considerably more than a new coat of paint. Marion

Jones’ elegant collection of fine and careful poems recalls us to the word’s original meaning of spiritual renewal and our attempts to reach it.

The first of five parts opens at night in that cold white space where we lie awake between east and west. This world is distant and isolated, a place where only the cleaners – the cat – finally the roosters – are also awake. The speaker crosses the suspension bridge into a domestic life in Dunedin – here she quilts and here she describes Grandmother’s steamed pudding – the first of Grandmother’s four end-of-chapter appearances with her various bright collections of choices? contingencies? hopes? which shape much of the book. Here we also see:

Beyond her window,  
skirts of woven steel  
sweep the hill line,  
where strong-shouldered  
women carry power  
to Dunedin.

“At five forks”

Dawn, breakfast, spring come next. We have survived the winter solstice, but there are still burials under the moon as the old and the new start to settle down together.

Along the path, she arrives  
at black earth to bury a bird’s  
layered feathers, her father’s  
lamp, his photo, her mother’s  
necklace, its fine gold chain.

“Renovations”

Seven poems reflecting against paintings by Andrew Wyeth are the centre of the book. These poems are formal – sonnets accentual but not rhymed, pantoums, wonderful slant rhymes – and reinforce the fine melancholy of Wyeth’s paintings and their hemmed-in world. But then:

Past the house and orchard, wind lifts a phantom  
craft sailing on. I ask, ‘Why must I write?’  
If not to order chaos, to name the unnamed,  
then to set wrongs right, to bring the dead alive.  
Between the Alpha and the Omega, no diagram  
guides; the ship weighs anchor, as the word arises.  
“Anchor”

In the fourth part, change has become a real possibility, though we travel with an odd, varied cast – cat, bird, wolves, pigeons – and though it must take place within alien geographic and domestic landscapes. The part closes with Grandfather looming over his wife’s grave in rigid misery.

By the end, the speaker asks questions and has pulled back a bit – on my first reading, I thought more ‘she’ than ‘I’, but that’s an impression, not a word count, and may have come from the strong concrete poem that begins the final section. The speaker is surrounded by disappearances, confusions which may be temporary, or may not. She opens into the outdoors; the words ‘choice’ and ‘hope’ appear. The book ends with a beginning: a splendid dream sequence of Grandmother at the vegetable truck beneath the eucalyptus – the shape of other times, other places, other choices – melting into the supermarket queue as the narrator moves into her own place at the checkout.

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.

“Short talk on balance”