

Conor O'Callaghan, *Seatown*. Gallery Press, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1999. IRE12.95 (hardback); IRE6.95 (paperback).

Vona Groarke, *Other People's Houses*, Gallery Press, Oldcastle, Co. Meath, 1999. IRE12.95 (hardback); IRE6.95 (paperback).

Both these collections are constructed around ideas of place and space. *Seatown* is Conor O'Callaghan's second collection, following *The History of Rain* at a decent interval of six years. *Seatown* is a name for the medieval community which preceded the modern town of Dundalk, where O'Callaghan lived during the time these poems were written. In recent decades Dundalk has acquired an ambivalent reputation as a frontier

town, sited as it is just south of the border crossing on the Dublin to Belfast road. The original Seatown itself had a second Irish name, *Tráigh Baile* or Ballytra (Baltray). The duality suggested by the names and the overwriting of history is complemented by the liminality of a border town which is, additionally, a coastal town held between land and sea and subject to the diurnal revisions of the tides. All these factors serve to provide the locale and to set the temper of the poems in this collection. It seems appropriate, therefore, that there should be two poems named 'Seatown', one at the beginning and the other mid-way through. Or perhaps they are parts of the same poem. Certainly, the form and tone of the two are continuous; each poem is a series of self-contained tercets picking at features of the seascape and landscape:

Point of no return for the cattle Feed on the wharves  
 And the old shoreline and the windmill without sails  
 And time that keeps for no one, least of all ourselves.

May its name be said for as long as it could matter.  
 Or, failing that, for as long as it takes the pilot  
 To negotiate the eight kilometres from this to open water.

O'Callaghan writes as transient visitor, and the poems are marked by a knowingness, a sort of condescension to the environment as it serves the poet's purpose. In itself, this is a refreshing break from the often automatic pieties that characterize attitudes about the native county, town or townland in Irish discourse. This knowingness extends to the writing itself. A sestina, 'In the Neighbourhood', contains an embedded autotelic reproach against the proliferation of the form — and yet the sestina is a good one. 'The Oral Tradition' is built around a sexual witticism, and seems uncertain whether to take itself seriously or not. A rather better poem, because more assured in its levity of tone, is 'Green Baize Couplets' which uses metaphorical snooker to describe sexual nooky.

The antepenultimate poem in the collection imagines going to Ravenna, but the final two poems lock us back into Baltray and the foreshore of north County Louth, 'where the names for home and here are nothing more/ than different tributaries of the same river'. Of course, the scope of poems is not to be judged by the reach of the subject matter and the extent of the locale (Thoreau travelled a good deal in Concord) but by the compass of the imagination.

These are sure-footed poems, technically achieved. However, O'Callaghan is still in search of the big theme. His writing is not of the Muldoonish invention that attracts all attention to itself so that the world and experiences it imagines and creates are secondary to the form and language. If there is an overriding theme to these poems, it is that of rootlessness, of being in a place as a transient. But this is not the ontological rootlessness of Mahon, rather the pause en route of a traveller

left with time to kill due to a gap between connections.

Vona Groarke's second collection, *Other People's Houses*, has as its unifying theme the fact that all the poems are about houses in some way or another. In this she is picking up a thread from her first well-received book, *Shale*. Six poems in that collection had titles with the word 'house' or 'home' in them, and another significant poem there was 'Patronage', about the Edgeworths' house in Longford and its eventual history. As a result, her second collection has the appearance of not so much a step forward in her poetry, but simply a stretching of material dealt with in the first book. The houses can accommodate a variety of approach and subject matter, but do not constitute a compelling motif. At times the theme risks becoming a little factitious. The recurrent variations on 'house' throughout the poems risk taking on the showy display character of rhyme words in a sestina. The central piece in the collection is 'The Lighthouse', which is not at all about a marine lighthouse but about a rural interior transformed by the arrival of the electric power scheme and the new light. The poetic power of the poem comes from its telling the story 'another way', adopting the perspective of a woman who lived through the times before and after the coming of the light; this opens up a sensitivity which sees the brash new electric light as a damaging exposure rather than a new enablement. The poem works because it does not rely on an appeal to nostalgia, as it so easily could have, but on a complex of gentle reversals which question progress and the way we respond to our particular worlds.

Other poems interrogate contemporary Ireland through the new housing estates spawned by the building boom; then there are poems about a play house, a slaughterhouse, a courthouse, a sandcastle, and so on. The longest piece in the book is 'Domestic Arrangements', a series of double quatrains touring the various rooms of a (notional?) house from hall to attic. Of course, 'stanza' is Italian for 'room', a reminder of the architectonic features of both houses and poetry. The poems in *Other People's Houses* are well constructed, but not all of them have that lived-in air about them. While the book seems to represent the competent completion of a project that reached its natural culmination some time along the way, it is a measure of Vona Groarke's undoubted skills as a poet that the poems hold the attention even after the central conceit has become a little threadbare. She is one of the most effective voices of her generation; her own poetic house is very much in order, and will always be worth visiting.

PETER DENMAN