

Garry Gay on Rengay

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So let's start from the beginning. Rengay was introduced at the first major North American renku-writing session on August 9, 1992 in Foster City, California. The morning before the event took place I had showed my friend Michael Welch the out line of what the form looked like. He was eager to try one. So in a small coffee shop we wrote the first rengay "Deep Winter." I had been exploring alternatives to the longer renku. I was seeking a more intimate and thematic form. I knew I wanted a form that was able to stay in the moment much like a haiku does yet have more depth than a haiku does because of the perspective of two (or three) writers on the same theme. After playing around with different lengths and different combinations on two and three verse patterns, I felt the current pattern to be the most workable in my mind. I purposefully had the poets trade places midway through the over all poem as to give each writer a position of power.

One opens the poem, one closes the poem. Six verses seemed just right. Often the journals of the day would give a single writer a full page, either of their own work or of a haiku sequence. It stood to reason they would give a full page to two poets.

Obviously the name rengay was a word play on renga and my last name. All I did was hang a "y" on the end. But rengay are not renga or renku. And they are not meant to be.

They are two completely different forms. You could even say one is an Eastern linking form and one is a Western linking form. But the rengay is very dependent on one's ability to understand and write haiku. To write a good rengay you are probably a good haiku writer as well. The rengay like the haiku rely on your ability at suggestive writing.

Let's look at the rengay's structure. Two (or three) writers participate in producing a six-stanza linked poem. The first writer (to be decided between them) starts off with a three-line verse. I suppose this could also be called the hokku. Then this is followed by the second writer with a two-line verse. Again the first writer contributes a three-line stanza. Then the second writer writes a three-line stanza, followed by the first writer's two-line verse, and again by the second writer with the final three-line stanza. Thus for two writers the progression is as follows, with the letters representing the poets and the numbers indicating the number of lines in the given verses:

A-3, B-2, A-3, B-3, A-2, B-3.

The pattern for three poets is as follows:

A-3, B-2, C-3, A-2, B-3, C-2.

So a rengay is a collaborative six-verse linked thematic poem written by two or three poets alternating three-line and two-line haiku or haiku-like stanzas in a regular pattern or form. It is really important to keep in mind that each verse is really a stand-alone haiku in either three or two lines. Many haiku writers don't write two-line haiku very often, so these can be the most challenging. Sometimes they are also the glue that hold the rengay together.

The rengay let's you explore a topic or theme or to stay in one place or season. They are very effective in celebrating a special occasion like a wedding or event like the 50th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge. I find that many people are writing them while working with a larger group on a renku. As there is often a lot of time while waiting for others to offer renku verses. There are a number of ways to approach the theme or central topic of a rengay. You and your writing partner can each suggest a theme your interested in, like writing on a certain kind of bird or a color like blue or things that are blue. Or you can take a walk or hike and write about some shared experience or simply offer each other starting verses until one is acceptable by the both of you. You can also write on a shared experience but maybe one not experienced together at the same time. Like the topic of lakes, but in different areas.

Keep in mind that your verses don't always have to link back to the last verse as long as it links to the central theme.

This lends me to linking and shifting. Linking and shifting can be quite fun in rengay. Remember that you are looking at the same subject but from a variety of angles. You can link back to the previous verse or link to the thematic topic. It is possible for all six verses to link to the topic and not link back to each other. Shifting is were you need to take the most care. While you can easily shift away from the previous link, if you shift to far away, the over all poem will not make sense. Some shifting will add natural tension to the poem. Some shifting will keep your writing partner guessing on where you are going. Sometimes shifting away can be playful but again if you go to far you will loose your reader (and maybe your writing partner too). While you may shift away, your partner may link back. Sometimes you want a blend of both linking back and shifting away. Your verse may be suggestive of the one before while still exploring new ground or ideas.

The fun part is talking over your verse or link. Does it communicate the mood of the poem? Did you use a similar word earlier? Advance the idea or concept of the poem?

The whole process of writing together is where the real joy and satisfaction comes from.

The communication between the poets sharing their views and discussing their craft and ideas and viewpoints is very rewarding. Often each poet offers the other several verses and, between you, you agree on the verse that best carries the poem forward. Remember that this is a collaboration.

The last link, is a very important verse. It often in some subtle way links back to the first verse, but it does not always do so. Sometimes in rengay, just as in haiku the ending is purposely left with that open-ended feeling.

Let me speak to the topic of the theme in rengay. This is the whole point of the poem.

Theme development. I write with some poets that need to have an established theme before we start writing. Others have no idea where we might start but offer poems they have recently written from their journals. I know one poet who writes solo rengay yet the starting verse is taken from a haiku master's famous poems. Sometimes I'll meet with someone for a hike and as we write we offer possible starting verses. Something I think that you need to be aware of is a second theme or sub-level theme running through the poem. This is where I want you to take a look at the rengay "Snapshot."

<http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/ggayweb/ggay52.html>

Do you see two themes here? Yes? In fact there are two themes here. The first subject is on photography with the second subject is a developing relationship (no pun intended). Unlike many rengay both these topics are very strong. But often the second theme is much more subtle. I have even been in several rengay that have three themes going on, and once been in one with four themes. Four was way to many but fun to try. In most cases two is enough. If the second theme is so subtle that no one sees it, I would have to call it unsuccessful.

So try developing out a second sub-theme. Again of course you need not do this, but it can add depth to your rengay.

Titles. These can be quite fun. They can be used in some clever ways. Sometimes they just name the place where the poem took place like "Hammerhorn Lake."

<http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/ggayweb/ggay54.html>

Or they can be suggestive of something going on in the poem without giving away the topic or theme. Sometimes the title is just taken from a line in the poem. Also the title can be useful to point out that there is a very low key second theme.

The title can almost be the punch line for bringing the poem back to the beginning. It's not until you have read the whole poem that you now understand what the title meant.

Unlike renku, there are no devices in the poem like flowers or moon positions. And there is no hard and fast rule about repeating the same word. Although I do try to avoid this, I have also purposefully repeated the same word in each verse. For the most part, if you are sticking to the theme and staying within the verse pattern you're doing fine.

The rengay's acceptance world wide shows that there was a need for such a thematic form of poetry. I think the energy and rush that comes from working intimately with another writer on developing the poem through a shared vision is what has gelled it into a successful form. There is a wonderful chemistry that goes on between the poets as they share their possible verses and subtle changes and suggestions, that lead to a deeper friendship between them.

I hope I have not over looked anything important here. Feel free to ask questions. I'll try my best to answer them.

Best regards,

Garry Gay