

REVIEW

Judith Beveridge, *The Domesticity of Giraffes* N.S.W.: Black Lightning Press, 1987. (Paper) 80pp.

Judith Beveridge offers an honest and refreshing appraisal of one poet's environment in *The Domesticity of Giraffes*. Her poems have been widely published, but no collections by this author are listed and I assume this to be a first, an impression sustained by a reading of the work: the author also acknowledges, with thanks, a New Writer's Grant (1986) from the Literature Board. The poet does not yet have sure control of her medium. However, observation of future development will be most rewarding for the reader. This collection provides a valuable milestone.

Underlining Beveridge's approach is the celebration of domesticity. This poet has the courage of her convictions, which gives a deft touch to her perceptions. Domesticity is of the world seen and recorded now, one element operating in the marketplace and valid as the stuff of poetry. This the poet has observed with a professional eye during, as she says in parenthesis, "the sistine hours of the workday where we sit not working but imagining" (p. 77). Such asides contribute to the overall feeling of immediacy generated by the poems. This vitality compensates for some unevenness in the quality of writing.

The referents range over a wide cultural area, oriented for the reader by domestic objects. The voice of the poet Rilke, for example, is "pure as a tuning fork / independent / of what it's struck off;" (p. 13) when contrasted with the self-critical "severe grating, unbearable / dissonance" of:

Our hearts — they're like utensils
taken from their original uses
and put into the world's jug-band.
Listen to us: we are like bottles
filled to different levels and then struck
for our various resonances:

"For Rilke" (p. 13)

The poem is well balanced, realistic rather than critical of the way things are. The poet maintains this tone by fixing details with wry humour. The

Opera House is “a cluster / of starched serviettes” (p. 51), and the harbour with Opera House becomes (again in parenthesis) “that rack / of draining dishes” (p. 80); the home-sick child, fishing, watches “a wave turn along precise pleats” (p. 29); jelly-fish, on the sand, are “clear as surgical gloves” (p. 37).

The poet is at her best with the combination of humour and insight. Read together “Dining Out” and “Invitation”:

You kiss me, drug my taste buds
and the room swirls like the hundred dishes
in a revolving restaurant and we’re not here
we’re there, at the Summit! . . .

and, darling, I think I’m getting drunk.

“Dining Out” (p. 58)

the kitchen is the compass sending us onwards
and it’s nearly seven exactly.
tonight, let’s savour the placenames of food;
let’s travel through time like a panel of tasters,
...

a breeze gently rocks
and water murmurs like a slow sentence
lifted from the phrase-book.

“Invitation” (p. 80)

Free-verse forms are used to good effect, but verses with very long lines, such as “The Two Brothers” (p. 57), are closer to prose, and some verses also lose appeal because of an obvious reliance on the use of similes even though the pictures suggested, as in the above quotes, are succinct.

Humour and insight enliven the three prose pieces clustered to the end of the collection, and in the parody “The Book of Birds” (p. 78) humour expands to satire, concluding with a well-sketched scene:

A few days later, a package arrives. To my bewilderment I find no page references, no explanations. Instead, enclosed is a small incubator with a note wishing me luck, obviously

scratched from the claw of a Prince Albert lyrebird from our
wet, sclerophyll coastal region.

These pieces have much more impact than “The Blue Bulb” (p. 64) and
“Address from the Curved City” (p. 65) which, unsuccessfully, present
a surrealistic view.

Part of the poet’s personal philosophy reflects consciousness of
other [English] origins and building the composite heritage which is
Australian, again competently employing the domestic motif. The mood
of childhood is sombre — called “out of the house” the poet remembers:

I was a child with so much of my world
snatched up in a mending, as life unspooled
from my fingers though I could not feel
those long strands trailing to the South.

“Catching Webs” (p. 16)

Adjustment to a new environment is a personal experience — Australia
is:

this country of old holes, graves, tree-stumps,
of tribal animals double-mothering their young;
seed gatherers of equal work, free but naturally domestic,

not bondservants to the taste of blood or work of seasons;

. . .

Beside them, I feel like a new animal unlicked at birth
scratching for fosterage in a place
transplanted like top-soil from Europe full
of service animals. Ground can shift

and leave species to start up again.

“Marsupial” (pp. 22-23)

Appreciation of an Aboriginal heritage in this evolution is a well-
developed strand, neatly woven into the domestic setting:

Whoever owns the language owns the food
though once dreaming paths may have linked
our sites.

“Invitation” (p. 80)

In “The Lyre Birds”, pioneering Australia, the aborigines, and the author have much in common with the skilful birds:

Now, scavengers of sound, like migrants
they’ve learned to live off foreign sounds in a new
country,
to repeat another country’s parrot culture,
to keep anonymous, alive.

“The Lyre Birds” (pp. 20-21)

The poem is descriptive, concluding with the evocation of the corroboree; the Australian bush has taken over as the author’s domestic domain, and generated one of the strongest poems in the collection.

There are editing faults evident which detract from the presentation of this collection. For example, in the above poem I find the descriptive phrase “Dubbo-voiced galahs,” read with the Macquarie Dictionary meaning of “dubbo” as “stupid” or “imbicile,” to be most apt, but the capital D printed here is confusing; there appears to be a printing error or omission in the final verse of “On Polling Day” (pp. 44-45) which mars a good poem; on the contents page poems are listed in groups of five, but I can find no apparent reason for such divisions — “Eye Piece” (p. 38) and “Japanese Cranes” (p. 39) could have been grouped most effectively with “The Herons” (p. 50) placed two divisions away.

These last poems are interesting not only because of the obvious Asian influence, but also because the domestic theme has yielded ground to a more subtle mentor. The change is evident in the shorter-line, economical form, and in the imagery. The herons “drifted off like camp smoke,” one of them called “blue Gotama”:

They were
beautiful as blue veins in the wrists of monks
fasting for perfection.

“The Herons” (p. 50)

The art of origami, “an architecture of paper,” establishes an image of Japanese cranes (p. 39), and the idea of a fine line painting emerges from the conclusion of “Eyepiece”:

And on the lake

the moon grows oblong
as a cell ready to divide.
The reflector tilts.
Night clouds the lens.

“Eyepiece” (p. 38)

There is much to reward the reader in this first collection: Judith Beveridge is a developing and competent Australian poet.

HAGIWARA SAKUTARO (1886-1942)

SCENE OF THE CRIME

Inside that house a wounded man is lying.

Of aluminium was the building built:
Its window-frames were made triangular
To counterbalance an intrinsic tilt.

A thin snow flutters down. A cherry-tree
Blooms white as blue. In pitiful small bits
The smashed glass scattered on the floorboards fits
Its patient role of waiting to be proof.

In the first floor’s *Room To Let* there’s a metal chair;
And a black cat’s curled, like conscience, on the roof.

Translated by Graeme Wilson