

Charlotte Clutterbuck

REVIEW

ESCAPING THE DRAGON

Rachel Bradley, *Dragonshadow*, Women's Redress Press 1989.

At its best, Rachel Bradley's poetry has moments of delicacy and a command of rhyme and assonance. She writes of summer in a Bondi coffee lounge where

... Paris
hangs captive on the walls —

Champs Elysee, sombre with November —

only memories
and red coats bright
in that sleety twilight, and the Seine
flows steely grey.

“Winter in Paris”

In “Margaret in a Photograph” she stares through the lens at her subject's staring eyes, “but you won't / let me / look / beyond / your eyes / I am waiting for the shutter to close... we are trapped in the circles of irises.” Here, as elsewhere in Bradley's poetry, the irony and observation are marred by the excessive and sometimes melodramatic use of the single-word line.

Occasionally she burdens an arresting image with too many words. “Gymnast” might have been better as a haiku:

Dancing on the four-inch beam
the girl takes air and
grasps it,
movement bending space
into poem.

And again, in “Sunday morning in Sydney”,

An early jacaranda stands fragile anchor
stops the haze-blue sky
from blowing away.

Several poems are self-conscious, with an intrusive first personal pronoun, especially at the beginning of lines:

The rocks have gone, where
I once lay,
cliffs crumbled in decay.

I thought them almost
immortal then — these ramparts
of my youth’s rage,
my widow-walk of sorrow
and desire,
paced with the impotent passion
of a younger day.

Yet it is I
who remains for this little while.
It is I

returned to the waves —
changed
and unchanging
the sea, and me.

“Who Remains”

Images of drowning, dismembering, and sharks dominate “Sunday Morning in Sydney” and in some other poems the “blood” and violence seems overdone: “Tears, like blood, were a welcome sacrifice” (“The Brittle Chrysalis”); “the bloody flow / of such gentle ravages” (“Such Gentle Ravages”); “each word a knife / twisting in her loins” (“Rainbow Street”); “I may singe my wings / and perish / soaring with dragon and dragon-fire” (“Dragonshadow”). In “Winter in Paris”, images of

hunting, predator, and damp fur threaten to tear the poem into two unmatching halves.

Her best poems handle the undercurrent of loss and loneliness with tact and simplicity:

The cup is cracked
and each year the crazing carries further...

and of all things, ends won't be evaded —
yet with what small choice is left
I will not
merely prolong the pause
in what-must-be-
we'll share just one more hour
of dreams, and tea.

“Shadows”

The last poem, “Home” returns to the high country which the poet longed for in “I Heard the Snow Falling in the Wilderness”. Here we have exact and gentle observation of the gnarled hands, the dam and the orchard, and only the barest sense of the poet standing at the gateway where a horse instead of a dragon calls her to a more hopeful future:

The horse lifts her head
to the figure waiting by
the gate — there is time.