

The Imaginative Bloodstream

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Fleur Adcock, *Dragon Talk*, Bloodaxe, £7.95, ISBN 9781852248789;
Elaine Feinstein, *Cities*, Carcanet, £9.95, ISBN 9781847770615

Fleur Adcock's experience of emigration is complex. She was born in New Zealand in 1934, came with her family to England five years later, and, having successfully accomplished a cultural transition not made any easier by the war, reluctantly returned to New Zealand in 1947. A fascination with origins may signal a search for identity, but Adcock's poetry is cool-headed and outward-looking. Far from being self-obsessed, it's thronged with characters. In *The Scenic Route* (1974) we meet her Irish kin, in sympathetic portraits of a great-grandfather from Moneymore ('Richey') and a grandmother, Martha, with her five children, one in utero, braving 'The Voyage Out'. Then in *Looking Back* (1997) a wider array of ancestors, including assorted villains and traitors from the sixteenth century, accosts the poet's indefatigable imagination. Her latest collection, *Dragon Talk*, marks a shift of attention – this time, to her own past selves.

Much of the collection's central sequence, 'My First Twenty Years,' is focused on childhood, the diction trimmed to an appropriate spare brightness: "This is the school-house at Kuaotunu, / on the hill, with Daddy's school next door [...]" ('Kuaotuno'). The pre-schooler's self-important little voice is beautifully realised here, but such capable ventriloquism ultimately poses a challenge: how does the poem-monologue attain fuller, adult-size perspective? In 'Kuaotunu', the narrative moves on in time ("I'm the big sister now") and we see the child chalking a face on a fireguard "made of blackboard". This detail is one of those precise novelistic touches at which the poet excels. But the concluding observation, that the scribbly chalked face "looks more like the world", seems a little less interesting, a clever after-thought intended to prefigure future voyages rather than a child's sharp comment. There are many similar punch-lines, knowing and slightly arch in tone: "Life's mysterious, but I'm used to that", "Teeth were quite interesting, too." In a characteristically dry anecdote, an "auntie" of dubious morals presents the eleven-year old future poet with a copy of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, but even here the final remark, "I found it totally seductive," while it would certainly raise a smile in performance, lies slangily flat on the page.

This habit might reflect the fact that the poet composes her poems orally, using Voice Recognition Technology: audible niceties of vocal inflection may be lost in transcription. The title poem elucidates other frustrations:

I wait for you to lash your tail
each time I swear at you.
But you listen meekly,
and print 'fucking moron'. ('Dragon Talk').

'Dragon', the brand-name for the equipment, is not an obviously appropriate metaphor. After all, the dragon is a beast already rattling heavy mythological chains. But Adcock manages to set it free and, with grace and brave good humour, to create her own allegorical monster, fallible, sometimes stupid, yet also a rebelliously charming, strangely erotic pet:

Fly to me;
 Let me nuzzle your snout,
 Whisper orders, trust you
 To carry them out.

The book's final section, 'Next,' concludes with 'Fast Forward.' A deservedly popular poem from her previous collection, 'The Video' depicted a grandchild rewinding the film of her sister's birth so that the baby would "go back in". 'Fast Forward' is not a comic poem but, surfing the rhythms of an assured continuum between past and present, it is an optimistic one, reminding us how deftly Adcock can evade literary convention when she wants to – in this case, the valedictory note. The same tough unselfishness which previously welcomed the ancestral family-party into her poetry enables her to relish the thought of her unborn relatives-to-be: "Face after face, all with our imprint, / humming forwards. We can do anything."

Elaine Feinstein also tackles emigration and alienation in her new collection *Cities*, her first since *Talking to the Dead* and one that hums with recuperative energies. For her, the themes have starker resonance. Four grandparents were Russian Jews from Odessa and, had they settled in Germany rather than England, there would be no poet to tell the story. Thus, now and again, "a shiver of unease as if / encountering the dead" ('A Weekend in Berlin, 2008'). Asking why she wants to "make common cause" with London's new immigrants, the speaker answers sombrely: "Only because I remember / how easily the civil world turns brutal. / If it does, we shall have the same enemies" ('Migrations'). There are poems concerned with ecological extinction ('Butterflies Lost') and others that dwell on a special friendship, the deterioration of which is haunting because inexplicable: "there was no / quarrel, just something that I failed to understand, / your letter said." ('Loss').

But *Cities* is a large-hearted, often joyful, book. Its scope is invigorating, both overall and within the individual poems, where Feinstein's unfussy diction, and the 'breath' rhythms she learned from the Black Mountain poets, carry the reader off on an effortlessly pleasurable sight-seeing trip. It encompasses architecture and anecdote, and introduces us to some (genuinely) iconic literary figures. Here, our poetic tour-guide commemorates Miroslav Holub:

In Prague, then, with casual euphoria,
 – President now of the very
 Writers Union which once banned your poetry –
 you led us to applaud
 Jiri Menzel, the impudent director of

Closely Observed Trains,
wearing canvas sneakers in the Hotel Adria.
We ate in an Art Deco café,
green marble and mosaic restored. ('A Dream of Prague')

Particularly rewarding are the clusters or sequences of poems that re-visit and re-learn a single city: Budapest, Cambridge, Lisbon, Jerusalem. Once tenderly personified ("When I saw you first, / barbed wire threaded your heart // and the clarity of your stars pierced me"), Jerusalem, with reluctant dismay, is later recognised as "no longer a secular city, // but part of the fanatic Middle East." The skill of these poems lies in the fact that they convey both the bigger and ever-shifting historical picture and the intense moments of personal connection. They are not tourist's poems, nor even Visiting Writer's poems, but poems about places where Feinstein has felt the pulse of her own imaginative blood-stream.

