

Arcadia and Other Poems

Robert Brooks

Felix Fu, Illustrator

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Each gentle poem of the artful collection Arcadia and Other Poems resembles an intimate, personal missive.

More than a poetry collection, Robert Brooks's *Arcadia and Other Poems* is an artifact. Bound in hardcover, hand-lettered, and printed on stationery-quality paper, it contains twenty-two poems with original artwork that reflects each poem's setting and tone. Its subjects include meditations on unrequited love and suggestions for living a good life.

The overarching tone of the book is gentle and tinged with melancholy. This tone is expressed in lines like "I am in the Alcatraz of my room / where loneliness is endless," a metaphor that communicates a sense of isolation though leaving deeper questions unanswered. But the soft focus of the work makes it sometimes too general, evading the interrogation of external forces to discover uncomfortable truths.

Figurative language abounds: in "Strength," the image of the opening line—"When I put myself together again"—extends throughout the entire poem. In putting themselves back together, the speaker vows to eschew building materials like rocks and clay in favor of a more durable iron, because even though an iron self will turn to "an ugly brown," it "won't fall down." And sounds resonate with each other in many of the poems, which tend toward the use of internal rhyme. The repetition of short phrases is also used for sonic emphasis.

Short lyric poems alternate with longer narrative poems. The longest of these makes literary allusions to the ghost ship the *Flying Dutchman* and to Captain Ahab of the novel *Moby Dick*. These allusions combine to create a sense of doom, though the speaker's good sense prevails and they escape the nightmarish vision. Elsewhere, personification is accomplished with subtlety and respect in poems like "Wind," wherein the speaker imagines a tree trying to save its last autumn leaf "to watch the falling snow," reminiscent of a parent who wants a child to have a chance to experience the world.

The watercolor illustrations, which flow around and support the language, and hand lettering by Felix Fu, which makes each poem resemble an intimate, personal missive, enhance the soft-focus gentleness of the poems. But the layout also includes some distracting oddities—for example, the titles are placed at the end of each poem, leading to muddling when the poems run more than one page. Otherwise, the book's design and packaging are exceptional.

The illustrated poetry collection *Arcadia and Other Poems* covers subjects like the immortality of memory and social justice; it invites genial perusal.

MICHELE SHARPE (September 30, 2023)

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