

'Starlight Starbright Bountiful_Bodicea's Breasts', a review of Maree Dawes' "brb: be right back"

brb: be right back is Maree Dawes' verse novel and second book of poetry. Her edgy debut *Women of the Minotaur*, which explored the unspoken lives and voices of Picasso's mistresses, is an equally edgy, punchy, and contemporaneous foray into the mysterious and foreign world of chat rooms and chat room erotica.

BRB expands on some of the themes from her earlier collection, such as the difficulties for women in navigating labyrinthine male dominated spaces and feminine discourses of the roles of women in contemporary (this time technological) society. Dawes writes in a developing experimental style reflecting digital poetic trends like those of Mez Breez integrated with punchy colloquial lyricism reminiscent of Pi O and Dorothy Porter.

In a world in which communication is becoming more and more disembodied, conducted in hyper-realities and hyper text, and in which Spike Jonze's film *Her*, about disembodied human and computer erotic relations has just been released, Dawes' verse novel is highly relevant and in sync with contemporary times and trends. Dawes speaks of the isolation and difficulty which older generations, especially the baby-boomer generation, can have in this new quick-moving and complex labyrinthine digital world.

In one of the more sharper, comedic and ironic images of the book she wittingly points to the 'lol' symbol's pictorial similarity to a drowning and burning figure, arms flailing for rescue. "It is a body, arms over head/sinking/beneath/the waves." Here we see a complex symbolic relation of water and fire, standing in for traditional mind-body and intellect-carnality dualisms concurrent since Ancient Greek and Romantic poetry.

This ancient conflict of love is brought into contemporary contexts by Dawes' anchoring of it in a hyper-text world, which is a world of mind devoid of but in constant desire for the body. The chat-room can become a place for the playing out of erotica which is usually reserved for inner world fantasy. The chat-room space, like Sapphic poetry, becomes a space for erotic melding of minds. A stranger can give up their body to another's inner fantasy while themselves partaking of that fantasy. "[B]ut I need to watch his words/to see what Starbright/and my fingers/will to do next."

Dawes charts a space where gender stereotypes and roles break down and become meaningless and in which a whole new language of signification must be learnt in order to participate in free floating erotic play. "[Me: what is lol?//s/he: a gesture//me: what gesture?//s/he: gesture like smiling." It isn't all fun however as the playground can be overshadowed when women are forced into roles of objectification. But Dawes shows us that the chat-room's free-discursive field can provide a way for women to have equal standing by having the choice to participate and being socially empowered to fight back. Women here can be empowered by a sexuality which can overpower and undermine stereotyped roles in a hyper-erotic and hyper-sexual setting. "Boadicea has to/change her name what about Brazen_Boadicea/Bountiful_Bodicea Bodicea's Breasts."

Through Dawes' rhythmic and lyrical rendering of these abstract and charged spaces, we are given access to images with tinges of the surreal and carnivalesque: "In a public room if it

gets rough/Jolly green-giant or/Squashedpumpkinhead/will say lighten up back off.” This interplay gives these online realisations of erotic fantasy a quirky and mythological feel, which represents the eccentricities of human sexual relations. Mirroring her flights in the mythological hyper-real world of chat-room erotica, Dawes also returns us to the real world and the difficult roles that women face.

The chat-room fantasy is juxtaposed with the often harsh reality of the role the mother must take and the difficulty of maintaining a personal independent creative and fantastical life balanced with the roles of motherhood. “[I]t’s the mumsiness/and no-one who knew me/before my home filled up/with mismatched Lego bits.” Dawes ends with poised and expressive lyricism, experimentally and deftly self- and society- questioning, with a female voice which brings to mind Denise Levertov.

Dawes, using word compounding to sophisticated effect, describes a bodily non-verbal existence. It is an existence she argues needs to be fostered and appreciated to balance a society which is often shock-waved out of bodily harmony by a disembodied sensation hungry and language overdriven reality - a reality which is perhaps too readily accessible and communication - dependent for all of us. “[T]hink of it then, think of nowords/a breath of nowords/refreshing, undemanding/can you find it there/between the break of one wave/and the next?”

By Joel Ephraims, winner of the 2011 *Overland* Judith Wright Poetry Prize for New and Emerging Writers

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