

MELINDA BUFTON

Autumn Royal, *She Woke & Rose*

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A recent article in *The Guardian* profiled contemporary British artist Tracey Emin re-assembling her most famous and award-winning work “My Bed” (1998) for an upcoming exhibition at the Tate Liverpool. The journalist observes her installation of the twenty-year old component parts and comments that Emin appears to be slightly squeamish about some of the ziplock-bagged items; the condoms, used tissues, the ’90s cigarette butts.

Autumn Royal’s debut collection *She Woke & Rose* is poetry, not visual art. It’s a 2016 work, not 1998. And yet it seems to occupy a similar space to artwork like this—toughness, female histories, punkish intent. However, in the case of these poems, any squeamishness (real or imagined) regarding its own content has been replaced by curiosity and a deep longing to show things from the inside seams outward.

She uses the “tissues”—both literal and metaphoric—to good poetic purpose. Here in the opening to “Mirror Stage”:

It’s happening again, me picking up the ash
With tissues softer than my skin, sipping
out of the glass when it’s been poured
too full. Nothing will be wasted

And further, in “Estrangement”:

What was mundane is now hurtful and demented,
like the super-glued willow pattern vase
she still uses as a mantle centrepiece.

There are many instances of cleaning up, or heightening our awareness of what could be deemed dishevelled, seemingly deliberately flagging a history that has been in play longer than these poems. This could be referencing women’s inheritances of gendered roles; given

that Royal frequently quotes known female poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there is an authorial intent that we understand her lineage as a poet.

It could also be read as a kind of in-poem device of signalling a broader, psychological landscape being prepped as a fresh canvas. Perhaps for a new kind of feminist poetry, or a new kind of confessional form that “confronts rather than confesses” (to quote Royal’s preface to the collection). A poem like “Strained” (given here in full) appears to light the way to this:

I saw my heart on the airport terminal floor,
& gasped at how my misunderstanding bled
into fibres scuffed by shoes and suitcase wheels.
My organ’s meatiness was too raw to keep in mind,
So I bought a *New Idea* predicting my horoscope for 20__.
I rolled up the magazine and squeezed,
hoping for meaning to drip from its gloss.

The collection as a whole contains a lot of longing, and there is also water, in all of its forms throughout; it is steam against faces and hands (“Boiling Water”), coming out of taps, dripping on hands, leaking and being licked as ice, by a child forbidden to do so (“Estrangement”). I read a tautness set up by the presence of these two thematic ingredients; the longing, which is laced in and around the water makes me think there is an indefatigable thirst embedded here. Or perhaps it loops back to the impossibility of and delicious tensions between “being clean” and showing messiness (or discarded items) as a kind of neutral, artistic artefact. There is a denouement, at times. Satisfaction is hard-won, but claimed with a proud tilt. The cleaning and clearing that is being invoked on nearly every page, is vindicated by brief moments of satiation, or getting to keep the spoils of hard work.

Not all lives are created equal, and Royal executes this knowledge with precision and a wisdom that, again, gives the book an eerie sense of historic sentience (a kind of poetic version of a newborn baby being pronounced as having “an old soul”). One of the most poignant poems of the collection is “Don’t be silly”, a devastating, concise portrait of a mother and her two daughters in the home of their ex-husband/father. The use of the child’s voice—a potentially tricky device that could collapse into sentimentality—restricts point-of-view to a sharpened point, so that five brief paragraphs provide a glimpse on a world of pain:

Always, always on
our visits you would pat,
pat my Mother, Mother
On the bottom, bottom.

“Not allowed to spin
In those chairs.”
Leather swivel chairs.

“There are no biscuits
In that tin.” No biscuits.

Time, time you’d had it
& your vanity memoirs
lie, lie between cook books.

Your once-wife sits
in a leather swivel chair,
she is spinning, spinning.

At times in the collection there’s a more direct, sassy tone at play. This second voice that pops through is a welcome incursion, as it both sharpens up the dreamier evocations (of water, the imagery of damage, and longing) by providing poetic texture, and reminds us that this collection is redolent with contemporary wit:

1999

Who gives a fuck? You think I know what the words
are? Did.....say “questions are portable, answers
are sedentary?” Did I say?

2014

I don’t believe in avant-garde,
it was a period that existed and it’s been framed.

(“in the elevator, heading for the 23rd floor”)

This kind of acuity is also seen in the opening lines of “To the Edge”:

As requested, I altered the line
breaks of your revolution

There is inherent risk for any poet working from traditions like this; that is, setting up thematic spaces that have water, womanhood, pain, embodiment as some of their central concerns. The work risks being conflated with the kind of poetics most commonly associated with feminist awakening, 1970s-style, which in this case would be a mistake.

In *She Woke and Rose*, the poems surpass this potential problem by displaying a variety of subjective voices, alongside each other, and underlining their smarts at every turn. They give us some lip, while they drape themselves languidly, while they swim in the emotional pool of past injustice. There is also the possibility that the work suggests an emerging position; that, in 2016, any number of roses, tears, lips and torn hearts can be included without diluting feminist sentiment. And if this is the case—as I hope it is—then poetically speaking, bring it on.

Work Cited

Jones, Jonathan. "Tracey Emin makes her own crumpled bed and lies in it, on merseyside", *The Guardian*, 16 September 2016.