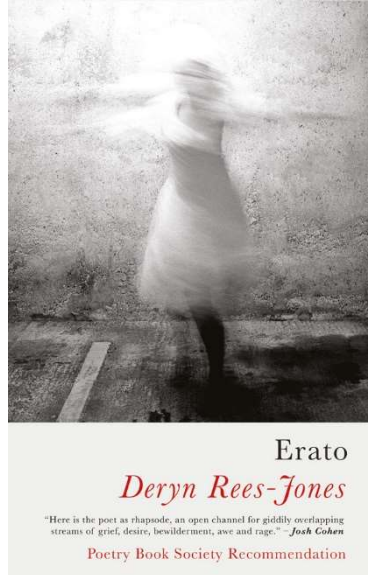


Erato

by Deryn Rees-Jones



Deryn Rees-Jones was born in Liverpool with family links to North Wales. Her poetry collections (all Seren) are *The Memory Tray* (1995), *Signs Round a Dead Body* (1998), *Quiver* (2004) and *Burying the Wren* (2012), which was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. *Consorting with Angels*, on 20th century women's poetry, was published alongside *Modern Women Poets* (both Bloodaxe, 2005). In 2004 Deryn was chosen as one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation poets. She is Professor of Poetry at the University of Liverpool, and is the editor of the new Pavilion Poetry series for Liverpool University Press.

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Reviews

Q: The poems often juxtapose beautiful images with sombre ones of loss. Can dark moments contain their own moments of inner beauty?

A: "How do we make the privacy of the lyric engage with, be ethical, and encompass the world? Terrible things are happening, and every day on the news or on my twitter feed, I, all of us, become sometimes, for a moment, aware of them. Uprootedness, war, climate emergency... There is always a chance for empathy, for action. But often, we do nothing. One small way I have attempted to deal with all this knowledge of pain and difficulty has been to experiment with the formal 'beauty' of poetic structures. So there are a lot of prose-like pieces which I have tried to structure like a sonnet. They carry something of the sonnet's 'little song' but also need to find a new way of carrying them. So form and 'beauty' become thrown into question as they are pulled to a point of impossibility and transform into something else."

(Interview with Deryn Rees Jones, Seren website)

“This fifth collection by Deryn Rees-Jones is an invocation to Erato, classical Muse of lyric poetry and songs, whose name means ‘lovely’ or ‘beloved’. Yet in the poet’s hands, Erato’s lovely face is pixelated, blurred, transformed into her shadow guise: goddess of error, errancy and erasure. The collection’s narrative arc explores how ‘the scribble mess’ of self is constituted ‘by what we love’ and thus, inevitably, through slippage, failure and loss. It also offers a precise, darkly funny exploration of ‘middle age’ with its divagations, its difficult movements: ‘What stepping in / and back and on / is this, this middle age?’, cries the voice of ‘Firebird’.

“The theme of error is registered through traumatic repetition: the ‘face blackened to a shroud of bees’, the ghostly ‘nucleus of / shadow’ that the speaker seeks to ‘run my hands / across’ are images that recur in surreal, painterly fashion (Rees-Jones acknowledges her indebtedness to artist Paula Rego). But bereavement and ‘heartbreak’ are seen, not just as terrifyingly empty spaces, but as passionate states in their own right, electric in their disordering/reordering of time and self – and thus, potentially generative.”

(Siriol McAvoy, www.gwales.com)

‘Bowerbirds’

Start now with the smallest things,
a pile of blackened acorns, glinting beetle wings,

the green fruit and purple flowers of the potato bush.
He trails a path of halts and hesitations

like stations of the cross,
turns colour in his mind, perspective.

Snail shells or the blue of berries?
(is that a bud of jasmine in his beak?)

His bower, I see, is thatched with orchid stems,
moss laid like a lawn at the entrance to his bivouac,

orange leaves like a pool of restless koi.
This stuff he collects as a small boy might,

adrift on a prayer of football cards and dinosaurs.
All settles as he eyes her. And here now,

like a seal on his heart, a bed of blooms
pulled from a bush.

How carefully he’s considered her.
This pink, he thinks, of roses.

'Collared Doves'

An afternoon that hints of rain, and in the branches
of the back-yard conifer, a pair
of collared doves perform their springtime ritual.
Wingflap, bow. He nudges her, she nods
to his pursuit, a freeze-frame foolishness, kabuki dance,

their black-ringed necks and movements mirroring:
a preening and a fluttering; a nibble of the bill.
And then she lets him come to her, the sudden rise to flight, a
blush of feathers as he rests his weight on hers.
It will always be this way, she knows. The soft cry
of that *coo-coo-coo* as shadow presses shadow.
And how could she not have known to love it.
She who learnt meanings of not not, no, never.
They who have come so late to each other.

'Drone'

I am listening to an interview with a man whose job it is to programme drones. The interviewer asks him, How do you know, when you are sending such a weapon to its target, that civilians won't be killed?

We are lying naked in a small, badly-lit room. I do not know it yet, but a drone hovers in the blacked-out crepey sky above us.

Intelligence can be sensory or human, says the man. Someone often has their ear to the ground.

I am moving a finger now down the line of hair which runs from your chest down to your groin. I put my head on your chest, aware of the weight of my thoughts. You are half-asleep and making small sounds that equate with pleasure and its anticipations. But I cannot let this go. I sit up and ask the man, on the radio, Do you ever think about the people you've killed?

No, he answers. The interviewer steps back in and repeats my question. As I listen, the glass in the window shatters. In slow-motion you are reversed back into the evening, shaking time off your heels.

In a matter of seconds you have disappeared. I think about nectar and pollen and honey and my whole face bursts into flames. But I can still hear him, the man, the voice, even as the radio begins to click and buzz and your low moans fill the otherwise empty room. I can feel the glass under my feet.

Never, he says, again and again. No, no, never.

Discussion Ideas

- The 'stations of the cross', the 'prayer of football cards and dinosaurs' – is 'Bowerbirds' a religious poem? What might be the focus of its religion, to whom might the prayer be offered?
- What might David Attenborough make of 'Bowerbirds'? Is there a touch of his voice-over style in 'And here now'?
- In what sense are the collared doves performing for the speaker of the poem? Do they know they are performing? What happens to the idea of performance in the second stanza? Why the change?
- Line 3 of the second stanza – what do you think of that 'a' at the end of the line? Might you usually expect it as the first word on the next line? What does it do to the pacing of the poem as you read it?
- Is 'Drone' a poem or a short story?

Other books by Deryn Rees-Jones

Signs Round a Dead Body (Seren, 1998)

Quiver (Seren, 2004)

If you liked Deryn Rees-Jones, try ...

- Colette Bryce
- Elaine Feinstein
- Robin Robertson

Deryn Rees-Jones online

<http://derynrees-jones.co.uk/>