

KRISTEN E. NELSON

What Our Hands Can't Manage Our Mouths Try: On Kristin Maxwell's *Re-*

Re-, by Kristi Maxwell. Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2011.

The cover of Kristi Maxwell's *Re-* depicts a woman's torso whose skeleton is reflected in dark water. We've stumbled upon a private moment with this woman who could be the book's *she* character. *She* is waist deep in water in a serene image, except for the skeleton. Is this what *she* sees? Is the truth of her a starving woman, a dying woman, a buried woman? The title of the book is the prefix "re" meaning *again* or *back* (e.g. revert, regenerate, repair, rebuild). Inherent in all "re" words is the process of returning to something to try again, to begin again, to address something that didn't work and do it better this time. The book is organized into four sections referred to as cycles. What is recycled in a relationship? What is revisited, recoated, reconfirmed, retouched? Maxwell documents this exploration in love relationships.

In *Re-* Maxwell charts the positions of a *he* and a *she* with their hands and their mouths, with the help of arrows and sandwiches, with what I first want to describe as Falstaffian language—comic but wise. Her language is full, fat, and playful. She writes lines like:

Sheesh, she unavoidably said. An expression
that contains her twice.

These lines allow us to look closer at a common expression of exasperation. There are two she's cuddled up in one almost anagram.

The *he* and *she* are lovers, which we know by their understanding, frustration, and familiarity with one another's habits and quirky daily rituals. Maxwell's lovers turn mundane chores (cooking, laundry, cleaning, etc.) into the romantic. The lovers' interactions throughout the book are as playful as the language that describes them:

All his pants she's needled shut
at the knee and placed on various beds
sandwich fashion as per his request
after her request he make one.

Maxwell takes the ordinary request of making a sandwich, and morphs it into a domestic game—a mischievous prank with pants sewed shut. She also takes mundane homonyms like *wear* and *where* and gives them new shapes and forms.

should they wear
the body to where bawdy bought all ballrooms where any body
can rouge up the cheekbone of a chair by lounging just so.

We are invited to wear the cloak of the crossroads—the metaphorical representation of an intersection; a place where we make decisions about where we've been and what comes next; where the ordinary meets the extraordinary. We are offered a chaise at the crossroads in which to lounge and rouge up our cheeks with bawdy bodies. Playfulness becomes the form, and it is as familiar to us as a haiku's 5-7-5 syllables.

There is sensuality between the lovers in *Re-*, but not exchanges of endearments. Love is in the actions of the lovers:

Build a tree with me was all the note said,
an arrow pointed toward her head.
With the note down the arrow led elsewhere.
So much depends
upon the way in which
the substance the arrow
is etched upon is pointed.
She depended on what she knew of him
and headed toward the garage
which was only near her head
when her head was near it.
She held the note up again
and narrowed her eyes to the width
of the arrow that plagued her
then placated this displeasure through
gesture: as plaque a gum line, she followed it.

She can find her way because of "what she knew of him." *She* has the intimate grace of knowing he well enough to track him. *She* hunts him.

Maxwell references the Williams Carlos Williams poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" (so much depends/ upon/ a red wheel/ barrow . . .). Her use of the word "etched" in the next line after this reference brings to mind the poem etched into the hectic walls of Penn Station where tourists and other infrequent visitors long for arrows to point them in the right direction. Where is the bus to Atlantic City? How do I catch the shuttle to Grand Central Station? Have you seen the one I've lost? We can all use a compass from time to time, and Maxwell's *she* has an inconstant arrow on paper.

There is at times darkness in the writing that isn't as buoyant as Shakespeare's Falstaff. Maxwell's tone in *Re-* can be compared to Pan, the playful half-goat, half-human flautist sometimes used in modern tarot decks to replace the Devil card. In Greek mythology, Pan is connected to fertility and is a nature God. Traditionally, in the Rider-Waite tarot deck, the Devil card was used to represent the wildness and shadow sides of us. The connotation of the Devil or Pan card is not *evil*; it is the unavoidable dusk in all of us. The parts of us we don't bring into polite company. Pan is mischievous, not necessarily trustworthy, but you trust him anyway. You cannot help it because you are drawn to the primal inside of you. Sometimes Pan shows up as a lover's card in my readings, and most often represents a hot, playful love affair—a love affair that can be dark, but nourishing to your rebellious anti-heteronormative side. If I pulled a card for *Re-* it would be the Pan card, because Maxwell's book is not polite. Her lovers are not polite:

When he is an ox, she alternates
between onyx and field to be tediously
plowed

Here *she* is being tediously plowed by her *he* turned into a hairy uncaring beast. We can imagine *she* unfeeling and unseen beneath a *he* driving into her. *She* turns into onyx or a field—two passive images. However, the etymology of the word onyx is from the Latin word with the same spelling meaning "claw" or "fingernail," which seems to contradict passivity. Perhaps the clawing is internal, hidden by her stone-faced exterior. Regardless of Maxwell's intended meaning of the word onyx, the described relationship has darkness and weight.

Re- ends on a note of sensuality and the acknowledgement that sometimes we have better luck connecting in an absence of words. The last line of the last poem is: "What their hands can't manage their mouths try." Once I fought with a lover, and after a fumbled apology, we lay together in bed not touching. I tried to reach my feet out to her under the sheets, but she shoved me away. It wasn't until I asked her to let my body show her the sincerity of my apology, the apology that my words had failed, that she shifted back into my arms. It was in that embrace without language that we found understanding—this understanding that *he* and *she* find in *Re-*.