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Brenda Coultas, *The Marvelous Bones of Time*

The Marvelous Bones of Time: Excavations and Explanations, by Brenda Coultas (Coffee House Press, 2007)

When I first turn the pages of the *The Marvelous Bones of Time* I take a breath—the beauty of the space and the fractured lines. I love unevenness. In Book 1—The Abolition Journal—I find myself following Brenda—I'm sure it's Brenda and not a narrator—as she explores and maps out the place where she grew up. She wonders who am I, where do I come from, what is this place, what is this language: "I was a Midway Panther", "I (am a color)", "I knew the names". We are following her on a poetic research project, through memory, observation, digging through texts and talking to people. And the past is always there in the present, the language transformed over time, but still when you set it side by side, piece by piece, Hoozier, Yankee, and those lyrical wonderings and speculations, Whitman-like repetitions, one poetic moment beside another moment, Brenda maps out a life and the uneven traces left behind. How do we define ourselves? Who are we? Here the emancipation proclamation comes back again and again as the border between then and now, between him and her, between them and us. between Kentucky and Indiana. At one point we get on a train with Brenda and she's talking to "the only African American passenger on board" and he tells her "Owensboro [is] Heaven". The next thing you know, in the next poem, we're in Owensboro, Kentucky, walking down the street as she reports on her project.

The second half of the book is a collection of short ghost stories. The three stories I like the best are "A True Account of When We lived in a Haunted House", "Where You'll Be" and "The Shed". The first one is a story of a welder and fashion model (Brenda did work as a welder) who is stalked by an unknown man who eventually forces her to relocate. A haunting? The fear of the unknown stalking you. "Where You'll be" is a story about a father who dies; it's an anti-ghost story, an ordinary quirky story about living with death.

"My sister placed a brand new set of socket wrenches in my father's coffin. The coffin was not very plush: in fact, it was bottom of the line; my mother wanted to spend a thousand dollars more for a plumped-up one, but we talked her out of it because he had always said not to worry about the dead, it is the living who suffer. The burial policy and veteran's benefits give us about five thousand to spend, just enough to cover the cost, including something for my uncle Harry who worked part time for the funeral home. My father said he didn't want any flowers, just a rose in a Coke bottle. But

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My father said he didn't want any flowers, just a rose in a coke bottle. But he did get flowers, some with angels that played music; he got basket and plants, most still living. My father didn't have a suit, so we buried him in Uncle Jim's old clothes and thought we better call Little Jimmy and warn him, so he wouldn't be shocked to see my dad laid out in his father's suit. We sent my father out into the cold darkness, wearing another man's clothes.

"When I think of death, I tell myself that I'm going to where my father is, and if he's there, that's a good place to be. I'm going to the place where all have gone before me, and that's what makes me human."

Great advice for living. I love the simplicity of this story growing out of ordinary daily life. But finally the story I like the best is "The Shed," a continuation of Brenda's earlier film project. First there are stage directions to make a film in our mind of a pig shed and life around the pig shed, but the pig shed doesn't exist anymore. It's there in the film and it's also gone. And the story is about that process of being and not-being. There are directions for us to create this film in our minds: "Dig a wallow and fill with water." Then there are children throwing their dinner scraps into the "hog slop" and a reference I think to the ghost child in *The Scarlet Letter*, Pearl: "Can you film the ghost of Pearl? Pan out to the humans, on bicycles and foot, rooting in junkyards on the old Moore place, rooting in ravines full of abandoned cars." Then a close up to perhaps the center of the memory, inside the consciousness of a little girl in the pig shed: "I am a small human, so small that my underpants come up to my armpits". And then we move back in time with the narrator for an overview: "I dreamed of so many treasures buried in the earth or of just bones, all the bones buried by time, nature, or natives. Given eternity, we could find marvelous bones." Coultas is a collector, a collagist, a materialist, an objectivist, placing bits of language and narrative side by side, or at angles, and the white space around them gives the impression: yes we were here, yes all is lost, but yes with a little digging around, we'll discover again the past in the present—quirky, deep, ridiculous, outrageous, frightening and sometimes reassuring. In this collection, with this investigative project, Brenda excavates the marvelous human and pig bones in time and place. Thanks, Brenda.

Labels: **Brenda Coultas, Coffee House Press, Conceptual Poetry, The Marvelous Bones of Time**

posted by Barbara Henning @ 4:08 PM



1 COMMENTS:

 At 2:15 PM,  Dale said...

Yeah, I love this book. I've been carrying it around the last month or so and reading through it closely. Thanks for this review.... Dale

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