Ossuaries
Dionne Brand

Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

I link Ossuaries by Dionne Brand with Stephen Collis’s The Commons, not only because I read them side by side, but because their sense is so similar. While Collis is “trying on the poetry of revolution,” Brand poetizes the revolutionary. She follows the activist Yasmine through the underground life she is compelled to live for her convictions. An Icelandic friend of mine talked about having bones as playthings while growing up. Instead of Barbie dolls, Yasmine had animal bones polished to a sheen by her fingering them, arranging them, dressing them up and creating stories about them. Brand might be less lighthearted with her ossuaries, but they are polished and equally full of stories in this book-length poem.

Yasmine’s world is a desolate and frightening place.

some damage I had expected, but no one
expects the violence of glances, of offices,
of walkways and train stations, of bathroom mirrors

especially, the vicious telephones, the coarseness of
daylight, the brusque decisions of air,
the casual homicides of dresses (10)

This is the perspective of a black woman being looked at and looking back. Because of her very identity—black and a woman—she is a revolutionary. She cannot escape her skin, and over time simply inhabits it. Her footfalls through the world are defined perfectly in the way Brand writes: moving on, and on, repetitiously noting her landscape, her escapes, gathering momentum, or simply gathering, leaning into the wind of an age so full of itself. There are no full stops on the page, only commas, and the large division of 15 separate ossuaries, reflecting the cessation-less life on the run.

I’d like to know how my assassination took place

how to say I wish for permanence,
then I cast it off as dullness, stupidity,
then wish again for certainty, to be

in life, sitting at a bar (106, 107)

Brand is a master of craft, and possesses a pitch-perfect ear: “piled truck dross, old bus carcasses,
ripped plastic with sonar senses passed, / then the ice-sweet grapevines greeted her” (115). Her lines fill with rhythms, spike with quick turns and arcing leaps from here to totally not-from-here.
I read in the acknowledgements that the writings of Ulrike Meinhof were instrumental in the writing of Ossuaries. Depending on your perspective, Meinhof was a hero or a horror in an age of confrontation. Almost, I dare say, a modern-day Robin Hood. I would argue (Collis might too) that she was a more humane figure than someone like Margaret Thatcher or Brian Mulroney, who persistently held lucre as the highest value.

And Brand knows there is no escaping what we have wrought, and no sugar coating the rot—only time to reflect as we polish up the bones. ⌘

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