

“Life Amid the Bones:” A Review of Dionne Brand’s *Ossuaries*

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75 Sherbourne Street, 5th Floor

Toronto, Ontario M5A 2P9

<http://www.mcclelland.com/index.html>

mail@mcclelland.com

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REVIEW BY E MARTIN NOLAN

William Carlos Williams famously wrote that “it is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably everyday/ for lack/ of what is found there.” The news, it is assumed here, is only fit for the straight edges of multiple columns, while poems need to be able to amble, to waste abundant white space, allowing the reader to find in that space and the words that bridge it what it is in poems that the news lacks. From one angle, this is hard to argue against. The newspaper’s ability to provide information would certainly suffer from an increased concentration on rhythm and rhyme and a more abundant use of white space. But is the reverse true? Is the poem an improper location for the news?

There is a tempting argument to support that position: poems should focus on timeless, universal truths, like beauty and the human condition, and avoid the timely messiness the newspapers fitfully arrange and mistake; poems should focus on what there is a “lack of” in the newspaper: timelessness. The difficulty with this argument is that while it is flawed, it does contain a valid point; it not only suggests an approach that ties the hands of the poet by limiting subject matter to whatever is considered timeless, but it also identifies a significant obstacle for the poet who would engage the timely (or the news, politics, topical subjects, etc.) in poems: not only is it difficult to get the news from poems, but it is also difficult to relate the news through poems without weakening a poem’s value as an aesthetic object. Engagement with the world of timeliness necessarily threatens the timeless qualities that a poet *must* achieve in order to be ranked amongst the best; it is not hard to imagine how a polemic strand on a topical issue like, say, the evils of the oil industry might ruin a poem. Nor would it be hard to come up with examples of such failure (rap is rife with it).

But while it is risky, engagement does not always lead to failure. In fact, it can do quite the opposite if one can successfully navigate those treacherous waters. The key for the poet who engages the timely is to achieve a simultaneous timelessness. Such is the challenge faced by Dionne Brand. Brand's work has always been deeply concerned with world events, from the failed Communist revolution in Granada—in which she took part—to the current Iraq War and beyond. Brand's latest collection is no different, leaving the reader with little doubt as to the political and philosophical stance of the author while managing to create supreme art at the same time.

In many ways, *Ossuaries* picks up where Brand's last collection, *Inventory*, left off. The connection between the two books is not overt, but there is a significant carryover in both style and content. In *Inventory*, the speaker proclaims her wish “to understand the whole language,/ the whole immaculate language of the ravaged world.” Aside from the crisp and effective use of repetition and cadence so typical of Brand's style (notice the rs in the second line), these lines provide an excellent introduction to Brand's work. The world in her poems is indeed “ravaged.” Of course, so is the world outside of her poems, but Brand has a way of making the degradation hit home, and hard. This is serious poetry, not for the faint of heart, and Brand is well aware of that. Near the end of [*Inventory*](#), she writes, “I have nothing soothing to tell you,/ that's not my job.”

But, yet, yet, there *is* something soothing about this work, or at least pleasing; there must be, or why read it? If one is simply looking for the ugly truth, there is no shortage of excellent prose exposing just that. So why read Brand? Because the world may be ravaged, but the language remains “immaculate.” For all her seriousness, for all her cold-eyed witnessing, Brand is a top-notch wordsmith, obviously in love with the sounds words make. In addition, she is adept at handling the prosody at the micro level as well as across a sequence and entire book. [*No Language is Neutral*](#), [*Land to Light On*](#), [*Thirsty*](#) and *Inventory* are all dense at the level of the line, are of wide and ambitious scope and still manage to be unified as a whole.

Like this latest collection, *Inventory* pulls the reader through it at a break-neck pace by creating an irresistible momentum. But *Ossuaries* takes the pace to a different level. Brand credits John Coltrane's “Venus,” amongst other songs, as a major inspiration to the collection, which makes sense. Many poets take jazz as a subject, or a metaphor, but few works embody the ferocity of which jazz is capable to the extent that *Ossuaries* does. Right from the start—especially at the start—Brand gives us vital lines that are packed to bursting with energy and freedom but are, at the same time, expertly controlled. As is the case with “Venus,” there are repetitions and cadences here that act as hinges to the words and lines surrounding them. There is an organization to the sections, called

“Ossuaries,” but that is mostly a matter of page layout, not prosody. Even the consistent use of tercets does little to reign in the poems (the three-line stanzas seem incidental, only a container for the language they contain). Instead, it is only the poet who provides these poems with direction, but provide she does. Take these lines from “Ossuary I:”

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

what brutal hours, what brutal days,
do not say, oh find the good in it, do not say,
there was virtue; there was no virtue, not even in me

Notice how certain words and phrases in these lines swing the surrounding words around them, and rarely in the same way twice. Brand varies the length of the phrases connected to these hinges (“of” in the first stanza, “the” in the second, “virtue” in the third, etc.), effectively combining the reassurance of repetition with the thrill of variation. Now, this section goes on for ten pages (that’s fifty-six stanzas of equal density and pace), and the book rarely takes its foot off the pedal (the only punctuation used is the comma), so you can imagine the trance it all adds up to. It can be difficult to follow the logical thread in these poems, but that is partly because that thread can be very complex and is, at times, purposely broken to allow an unfettered flow of images and associations, as in the second stanza quoted above. One need not necessarily *understand* what a line like “the casual homicides of dresses” means as much as one should *feel* the line and take in its tone. There are many such moments in the collection, in which the reader is assaulted with powerful associations that cannot be pinned down with finality but are quite evocative and enjoyable.

That said, *Ossuaries* holds together well, both in terms of style and content. One learns quite quickly how to handle Brand’s wild flairs (which themselves serve as a kind of unifying device) and how to identify the unifying aspects of the collection, the most prominent of which is narrative. *Ossuaries* follows the story of Yasmine, a world and time-traveling revolutionary-turned-underground woman. I say the “story of Yasmine,” but it is more a portrait of her story told through a kaleidoscope that mixes up both time and place. We get a pretty good idea of the facts of Yasmine’s

life—the places she’s lived, the things she’s done, what she believed and how and why that changed—but the details are scant. We know in a general sense that life has gone sour on Yasmine, or, to put it more accurately, that life, personal and otherwise, and the world always were sour and that Yasmine understands this now. She is not bitter necessarily, but she has grown cold, which is a necessity for her, and a help in her attempt to decipher the world for us.

“Lived and loved,” Yasmine tells us, “common oxymoron/ if I have lived, I have not loved/ and if I have loved, I cannot have lived.” She “tried love,” there was a man, a “comrade,” but he tells her that he “made you something by fucking you,” and this seems to sum up Yasmine’s experience of love. There were others, we’re told, but in the end love faltered. When faced with the task of living, she tells us, “bone would sprout/ on my heart like a lantern trapping a light.” Then there are Yasmine’s political activities, which led to her “sleeping in one courthouse or another defending/ charges of one thing and another.” Again, we do not get many details here, but we get the general idea and a strong sense of its impact: Yasmine, with and without her comrades, has been around the world, Algiers, Havana, Canada, New York, on the run, ideological, dangerous. She is a world citizen, the ebb of globalization, a fighter in a losing and maybe hopeless battle, never to stop moving, a boat “praying/ never to make shore.” It all culminates in a bank heist (typical post-revolutionary criminality or symbolic strike against an oppressive world order?) and her move underground. Underground is where we find her and is the perspective from which she tells us her side of the story (the rest is filled in by a narrator who alternates “Ossuaries” with Yasmine).

Yasmine’s move underground is the key to this collection. Like Dostoevsky and Ellison before her, Brand uses the isolated, hidden outsider as a conduit through which to gain new insight into the “real world.” Yasmine is there, in time, remembering her pre-underground life with often uncomfortable accuracy, but is at the same time detached, released from time. That release results in Yasmine’s disjunctive retelling of her story, in which “it could be any year then or now or in the future,” and “by any reckoning dates don’t count.” The same goes for place. But the release from time and space allows *Ossuaries* to do more than disrupt Yasmine’s story. In short, the move underground allows the collection one more opportunity to step back from its urgent subject, to touch the timeless while remaining engaged; it allows for Yasmine’s case to be taken to “several unknown galaxies and as yet/ unarmed moons;” and it allows for Yasmine’s small band of revolutionaries to part ways and head, each, to a different ancient city and its own ossuaries, while they are, at the same time, in the rusted car used for the getaway from the bank in Albany, New York.

And why not? Is ancient Utica, in ruins, so different than today's North America, which from Yasmine's point of view is but a ruin in waiting, or a ruin even in its apparent flourishing? To that last point, bone imagery proliferates in *Ossuaries*, which has it that "this big world" is "our ossuary." Like the sections of this book, these "Ossuaries," the world is but a collection of dead artifacts. Yasmine witnesses this and it trickles down to her, jaded personally and politically, reduced to "the crate of bones I've become."

It is this cold differentiation that makes Yasmine different than the underground witness in *Inventory*. That book concludes, in part, with the bold, [Whitman](#)-esq declaration—after an intensive tallying of Iraq War casualties—"there are atomic opening in my chest/ to hold the wounded." Yasmine, on the other hand, claims that "if I broke my chest open now,/ with a small hammer,/ I assure you, there would be nothing there." But these two books engage the same brutal world and the difference in their conclusions might only be the result of a difference in the personal experience of their central figures. One has retained the ability to feel hope and compassion, while the other has become incapable of believing in those abstracts.

The difference between Yasmine and the unnamed woman in *Inventory* highlights another strategy that allows Brand to evade the traps of topical writing while still addressing topical issues. That is, she grounds the political or historical in the character so that we view the issues at hand through the character. That way, Brand can humanize the issues instead of addressing them directly. This allows Brand to avoid coming off as polemical while still engaging those issues in a meaningful way. But it also allows the poetry to remain dynamic and slightly ambiguous. Because Yasmine is a person and not simply a mouth piece, her beliefs are based on her experiences and could potentially change. And, despite her cold exterior, one can sense some vibrancy in Yasmine, some spark, some contradiction that could possibly still love. It may be a bleak world Brand is describing, but there is still life amid the dry bones.

But the best evidence of that is never in what Brand writes, but in how she writes it. At its best, reading her work is like walking against a cold, stiff wind in a starkly beautiful valley. It is strange mix of harsh truth and vibrant colors and it is the latter that makes the former not only palatable, but also more real. To be sure, it is no easy task to take in this alchemy, as it must not be to create it. But that should be expected. Williams, in his wisdom, did not say it is impossible to get the news from (and into) poems, but that it is difficult to do so. Once again, Dionne Brand has proven that there are rich rewards for the poet who is able to surmount that difficulty.

Still, it is not the surpassed difficulty that matters; it is not the fact that we are impressed that matters. This is poetry. We learn from it, sure, it helps us cope, but what matters, in the end, is the experience of it, the state of pure language it allows us to enter. So let me finish in praise of a line. I'm not exactly sure what Yasmine's lover means when he says, "everything to me more everything than most," but I'm entirely sure that this line was stuck in my head for a couple days, like a snippet of song. Quite the accomplishment for the poet reaching me through the written word. Maybe I'll catch his full meaning one day, but for now I'm happy to be caught up in how the line establishes a rhythm with "everything to me" then pauses on "more" and then sings off the page, repeating the melody of "everything" then juxtaposing the "e" in "me" with the "o" in "most." I could say I can hear the line like it's out of a tenor sax, or, there she goes swinging those vowels around an elegant hinge again (Brand uses vowels superbly; I could go on about this ...). But, really, like the border between the timely and the timeless that Brand so expertly straddles, it's just a damn fine line.

E Martin Nolan is a writer living in Toronto. He received his MA in Creative Writing from the University of Toronto. His unpublished poetry manuscript is titled *Still* and his writing has appeared on Pucklife.com, [Broken Pencil Magazine](#) and [The Detroit Free Press](#).