Earthy and Exalted

Ruth Roach Pierson on Karen Solie's Modern and Normal

What is not to like about Karen's Solie's poems whose personae inhabit an often-tawdry, down-at-the-heel, hard-scrabble world, whose tough girl down-on-their-luck narrators are often into guns and booze, sleazy hotels, and one-night stands? The rich language of the poems' varying voices mesmerizes with a mixed diction that ranges from the earthy, lusty, and profane to the exaltedly philosophical. That diction is never accidental. Every word, every phrase, every juxtaposition of words has been chiseled and honed or, as Solie allowed discussing her work in a Question and Answer session, "ratcheted up."

As influences Solie named such American poets as Elizabeth Bishop (surely partly Canadian), Marianne Moore, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery. I would have thought Gerard Manley Hopkins belonged on the list, for her poems abound in Anglo-Saxon-sounding words: "crang of men" (75), "skinking" (76); in assonance and consonance, "Cranes gurgle/ in the stubble" (76); with abruptly altered rhythms shifting from the clipped and staccato one- and two-word phrases that rat-a-tat like bursts of gunfire to whole flowing clauses. Any excessive verbiage has been trimmed away. Solie's lapidary linguistic concision and compression of complex thought are breathtaking, as in "The clap and recoil/ of continuity cracked" (78). In another example of a world of thought distilled into a single deceptively simple phrase, she writes: "Your empathy, in the absence/ of neighbours, astounding" (32).

One of her poetic strategies is to give a poem a title that the entire poem explores, as in "Emergency Response," with repeating images of things that break down, wear out, need repair—all resonant with resignation and transience. Entire poems build on metaphor, and Solie is a wizard in the creation of stunning, fiercely original similes. I'll limit myself to just two examples:

> …then a sound
> like a sack of historical novels whumping
> down the lurid documentary of the garbage chute. (81)

> …as leaves let go
> along the North Saskatchewan in a failure of nerve
> at the early frost. (81)

The second quotation testifies also to the emotional range in Solie's poems, a capacity for tenderness alongside the tough stance.

Her poems rarely reach for an epiphanic resolution. "Thanksgiving" may be one exception, ending as it does: "we took into ourselves/ its longing to be home" (65). More characteristic is her unflinching look at the world as it is, not a romanticized version: "On the south side are bluffs, and cows meant/ for beef" (69). In her anything but bucolic poem "Pastoral," she writes:

> I'm here to relax

> even as noxious weeds overrun the parkland:
> mugwort, foxtail, stinkweed, goatsbeard, dropped
> from hindquarters of foreign Airstreams jackknifing
> in the townsite. (77)

But in that same poem:

> I look for beauty and find it,
> floored by lichen's radial grace and the incisive liquor
> of juniper. (77)

If "language is a con" (40), as she writes in one of her found poems, then Solie plays this "con game" masterfully.

Works Cited

Source URL: http://influencysalon.ca/tastes/earthy-and-exalted

Links:
[1] http://influencysalon.ca/users/ruthroachpierson
[2] http://influencysalon.ca/sites/default/files/Taste_bookcover_ModernAndNormal_FINAL-20100503.jpg
[3] http://www.brickbooks.ca/;amp;bookid=86