



Coming to Rest

Kathryn Stripling Byer

Louisiana State University Press (April 2006)

Unknown \$16.95 (76pp)

978-0-8071-3135-0

In this volume, the author races between arriving and departing; her poems run with compulsion, to see the next place, hear a last voice, find a lost daughter or aunt, notice a new change. Though the poems take their leave of home and then make their return, they return with the full Heraclitean realization that home can never be what it was. It becomes a new destination forcing the poet to re-engage what she thought she knew.

Perhaps this accounts for the poet's interest in forms, old and new, from the ancient Persian ghazal to the Billy Collins gag form, the paradelle. Byer manipulates the form, anticipating that even a known form will forever yield new discoveries, as in her blues paradelle, "Nobody's Baby Tonight," or her sestina, "Halloween." Indeed, Byer is so committed to the act of discovery that she writes several poems on the same topics—her daughter's move to college, Halloween, a dead aunt—and in each, the change in perspective brings fresh realization to the subject matter.

Byer, author of four previous books of poetry, served as poet-in-residence at Lenoir-Rhyne College, UNC-G and Western Carolina University. She has also earned a number of awards, including an NEA fellowship. Her second book, *Wildwood Flower*, won the Lamont Prize. In her poems, Byer often follows the lives of women, particularly women of Appalachia, imagining what their lives might have been like. This desire to connect with other women, both living and dead, creates a strong and strange tension in this current collection. In "Pneumonia," a chilling poem about seeing her daughter through a childhood fever, she writes, "All Sunday night I rocked her, / stunned by fear and wondering / how women once got through / such nights without a doctor near, / no balm but cherry bark or boneset / steeped to bitter tea, or mustard / laced with lard and cornmeal / laid upon a poultice sheet."

This poem typifies the volume in a couple of important ways. First, when Byer imagines the lives of other women, her vision focuses on details—the odds and ends of shelves, the daily work, the habitual gesture that makes both the emotional lives and the images rich. Second, women appear on nearly every page, the mysterious Alice Mathews, a grandmother, a namesake (an aunt who died at twelve), a daughter who leaves for college, Eudora Welty, a mother in Fallujah. Byer attempts to know them, and great tension arises from the unknowable experience and the imagined, bringing with it crisp description and emotional resonance.

For readers eager for journeying, Byers offers rich narrative, an ever-changing landscape, and a text that weaves stories of the past into the present.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (August 18, 2009)

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