

Book Review: Sunbury 9

(Sunbury 9, Sunbury Press, Zoe (Best) Anglesey, guest editor, Virginia Scott, publisher, Box 274, Jerome Avenue Station, Bronx, N.Y. 10468, \$5.00 plus mailing costs)

Sunbury 9 is a highly ambitious but ^{somewhat} uneven anthology of working class and multicultural literature. The introduction clearly states the intention of the editor, ^{Zoe (Best) Anglesey}: "The poetry, short fiction and documentary writing by theme, shifts, riffs and movement unrelentingly is 'connected underneath' whether or not 'The bathers think / Islands are separate like them.' ('Islands' Muriel Rukeyser)...What is included in this issue is meant to challenge certain concepts of 'working class' literature. Interviews and documentary writing which make use of oral histories, or allows people to speak for themselves without interference by interpreters, verify the focus of the issue."

In poems by Linda Hogan, Akua Lezli Hope, Andrew Salkey, Chris Gilbert and Anya Achtenberg (poems by the last two loving appreciations of women's lives), the poet's use of language is precise, economical and particular.

In Gilbert's "She," the poet describes the elegance of gesture: "her brown mind twisting into fingers / whose motion, next to the oak table, / is the slow fall flight of leaves thru. time."

In "Down Home," the voice of Andrew Salkey, a Jamaican poet who grew up in Panama, is both intimate and reflective: "I've been so far away, for so long, / that my calling voice is arcing thin / with whispers and bruising regrets, / with corner dust and stifled panic" and later, "Home's where I find

my thoughts stripped, / bone plain and graspable, clear as craft."

Akua Lezli Hope's "collect images like flowers" is poetic montage which blends a knowledge of the false distortions of history with colloquial Black speech: "harlem was not unclean / it was chalice without saviour / he had another kind of jones / and split leaving masses / without bread nevermind fish." Both Salkey and Hope make effective use of lyrical and surprising word choices.

Of the stories, the most notable are Mary Randle Tallmountain's "Little Old Woman," a spare, vivid story of rape set in the Yukon, Victor Hernandez Cruz's whimsical and fantastic tale, "Breezes," and Hettie Jones' deeply thoughtful story, "This Time It Was Different At The Airport."

Also worthy of note are non-fiction pieces such as Margaret Randall's informative and inspiring essay on "Mothers and Daughters" who fought together in the Nicaraguan Revolution; Virginia Scott's interview with Pietro Di Donato, the vigorous author of Christ in Concrete, which Scott considers the "greatest working class novel in American literature"; Madeleine Keller's excellent critique of Muriel Rukeyser's collected poems; and rousing excerpts from Phil Donahue's show, "The Unemployed of America," in which working people from the audience prove to be far more outspoken and conscious than any one-dimensional media stereotype of them.

Less successful are poems by Brenda Connor-Bey, Marcia M. Minarik-Tarasovic, Judith T. Henry, Renny Golden and others.

For instance, these opening lines from Minarik-Tarasovic's "Heritage (7 June 76)" are unintentionally funny: "i imagine you / walking home / lunch pail / tired, drawn." Connor-Bey sabotages her own poem, "Flowers," with this unfortunate metaphor: "Love cracks like an egg. / You spill into Mattapan's frying pan." With some poems, it seems the poets have not yet mastered a language adequate to articulate their rage against the true horror of situations or events like apartheid or the denial of abortion rights. Thus the tone of the poems becomes flat, turns shrill, or else the language descends into the prosaic when more stringent editing or unusual line breaks might have made the poems stronger.

One of the more interesting and encouraging aspects of this anthology is the degree of cross-cultural reference and exchange within, especially in the pieces by Hettie Jones and Jean Westbrook Leavitt. Hettie Jones' story deals with two different occasions in which a white mother and her Black daughter meet at the airport, and the subtle, complex changes surrounding those two meetings. In these pieces, we see the writers reaching across enforced social barriers between cultures and making new bridges, new "connections underneath," forged from their own compassion and awareness.

Of the sequence of work poems, Jean Verthelm's "My Neighbors: Triangles Today?" is perhaps the most accomplished. The poem speaks eloquently about the oppression of garment factory workers: "Forever the fiercest finest eyes have been

needling / the yardage. Once silk or cotton in shirtwaists. Now / synthetic transfixed in dresses in tiers for flick-dancing feet."

The oral histories and interviews also give forceful testimony about the lives of working people in their own voices, which place them squarely in the tradition of talking blues and talk stories, Stud Terkel's books and Longtime Californ', an anthology of oral histories by Chinese Americans. These oral histories enlarge our understanding of the brutal hardships working people have endured and struggled against in this country, the Third World and elsewhere, while finding whatever joy or fulfillment they can in spite of those conditions.

Zoe Anglesey,

^ The editor, remarks: "Because the majority of our conscious hours are spent at the workplace, a section of both fiction and poetry derives from what certain kinds of work are, how they feel. Corporate publishers do not favor writers filling these particular shoes." Much of the work in *Sunbury 9* does attempt to fill those "particular shoes" and is valuable in that respect. Pieces such as Margaret Randall's essay on Nicaraguan women and the Di Donato interview are not easily found in other publications and that is reason enough to buy this anthology.

Richard Oyama
May 30, 1981