



Book Review

Paola Corso, *Once I Was Told the Air Was Not for Breathing*, Parallel Press, 2012

by Margaret Rozga

My mother loved history. I inherited that love. As a poet, I want to bring the power of poetry to significant stories from the past. As a reader of poetry, I look for poetry that engages with history in order to learn both the content and the strategies for making that content come alive. In her recent book, Paola Corso offers a wonderful array of strategies and insights into the ways that poetry and history can work together to the benefit of both. History provides rich content for poetry; poetry keeps the history alive.

In *Once I Was Told the Air Was Not for Breathing*, Paola Corso writes deeply moving poems about working-class men and women who once faced and still face hazardous conditions in their work places, including the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, site of the infamous 1911 fire that killed 146 workers. She draws on historic documents and provides both footnotes and endnotes to connect the poems to actual events. This meticulous academic framework contrasts the gritty details of the workers' lives as the poems give voice to stories mostly forgotten.

Well-chosen details about the effects of work in steel mills and garment factories relentlessly convey a sense of each person's struggle to survive. The poems put us in specific work places with specific workers facing specific physical dangers and losses. The worker whose story is told in "Barely One Hundred Fifty Pounds Man" loses his hair (19), watches "men younger than him sicken with cancer" and finally after twenty years quits to read the Bible and become a minister because "he already knows everything there is to know about hell" (20).

In "Diary of a Furnace Worker Cleaning Number Seven" the speaker describes his job. The generally plain-spoken language gains a crisp and direct emotional power as it builds toward the metaphor of lungs burning like paper.

I unscrew the trap on top of the stove,
drop the ladder and climb down
with teapot lamp and rod to poke out
flue-dust clogged in the checkerwork.

Some of the dust is wet and caked, some is light
and settles on my shoulders or flies in my nose.
I blow through my nostrils to keep it out.
Flames seem to go in with my breath.

My lungs are paper on fire. I poke fast. (18)

More abstract, and clichéd, language is found in official circles like the Coke Oven Advisory Committee whose meeting is recorded in “Above Zero.” Any coke oven emissions above zero will mean shorter life spans for workers. Unwilling to set the standard at zero, the chairwoman says “Society has to come up with levels that// we are willing to live with” (22). The line spacing signifies her long breath pause and suggests distance and a terrible irony: her “we” is not the same as the workers’ “we.”

There are a few glimpses of personal and family life like quick gulps of air. There are mothers “bleaching curtains” and a father telling a son “he better learn/to use his head and not his hands” (25). Most of these are memories of children who as adults escaped factory work, but for the workers themselves, many of them immigrants, the world of work dominates and threatens to obliterate personal and family life.

These poems insist we recognize that what was true in the early twentieth century remains true in the present. In the ironically titled “Girl Talk,” arguably the book’s most compelling poem, the girl talk is not of dates, movies, friends, and fashion. It is of ongoing oppressive work conditions, and it takes place imaginatively between the women of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and “the Chinese girls, the Indonesian girls,/the Vietnamese girls, the Taiwanese girls” making Nikes. It builds through a refrain of gluing their work conditions to a part “of the shoe” and ends with a call to resistance:

take the vertigo, headaches, vomiting,
memory loss, shortness of breath, the cancer
and glue it to the glue of the shoe

take the glue glue toxic glue
And put it under his nose, a Nike nose
An anything-goes nose and make him sniff (35)

In poem after poem here, the workplace conditions are such that they literally and metaphorically cut short the workers’ ability to breathe. The alliteration and quick rhyme in this poem might in another context sound playful; here those sound effects contrast the dire factory conditions. By virtue of such contrasts, Corso gives voice to stories that need to be remembered if working people are ever to find work that allows them a fullness of breath and life.