

Death by Renaissance: Poems and Photos" by Paola Corso

Poet re-creates bygone era of local river towns

ANN CURRAN /

DEC 5, 2004

12:00 AM

The cliché holds true: You can take the poet out of Tarentum or any of "the Pittsburgh river towns," but you can't take the town out of the poet.

It could be Tarentum or Homestead or even one of the Italian neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. Paola Corso re-creates it for readers through its people and places.

Some ordinary tasks, such as cleaning in "Saturday Mornings," will resonate with those who grew up with such domestic rituals. The poet epitomizes her mother, and "Italian American women ... who kept/ a broom/ beside the front door as if it were/ a sign that read, 'We work hard, we clean hard/ so wipe/ your damn feet on the welcome mat before/ you step inside.'"

Or Grandmother's advice to choose the Italian option if you're in trouble, ranging from LaGuardia Airport through Joe DiMaggio's bar to Mario Cuomo if you're looking for a job.

The poet, now a resident of Brooklyn, longs for Iron City beer, Terrible Towels and bagpipes. Bagpipes? Despite her three degrees, she can be seen "as a working-class woman/ who does a white-collar job with blue-collar hands." The past is present.

She takes you for a ride up Route 28 to stop for Glen's Custard, then in Cheswick, now in Springdale Borough. She takes you to her old house beside the river where "The smokestack was our church steeple, / the haze rising in the sky our ascending angel."

You meet the family who "worked themselves black / in the steel mill or glass plant or salt works."

You take a "Stroller Ride" with Corso past empty houses and storefronts and the wonderful people of her hometown.

Ruth Kuhn is "commissioned to do silkscreen blouses for Kaufmann's." The pride is still there, living beyond Kuhn herself.

In "A Proper Burial," you follow the life and death of DiGi's green grocery. Old-time Shadyside readers will recall the strikingly similar one-time Indovina's on Walnut Street.

Irony lies thick in Corso's "21st Century Architects," in which a firm dismantles an Isaly's counters, Formica tables, tin ceiling to make a modern high-tech office, where they'll design "a '50s-style diner" for the local mall.

"Call Girls" -- not what you think -- is a compendium of delightful telephone conversation excerpts, incorporating some regional pronunciations: "dahnstreet," "aht" and the inevitable "yunz."

"End Pieces" and "The River Inside Her" are both stunning poems.

"End Pieces" takes place in the kitchen of a depressed town, where a wife apologizes for what she has eaten, shocking her husband. "Jesus Priest," he says, "she usedta grow her own cucumbers and can 'em. Put Heinz / to shame."

"The River Inside Her," a complex poem, works through time -- perhaps even a lifetime -- with riveting specifics and an interesting combination of tragic and comic elements.

The title poem, "Death by Renaissance" combines the name "Corso," which means course, with thoughts of what saves a nice town that "needs to eat again a seven-course meal."

A few suggestions sound familiar: "river gambling"; "a playing field"; "a strip mall"; and, of course, "tourism."

Corso's book includes two sets of photos. The first set, scanning almost a century, shows aspects of Tarentum as well as Corso's extended family. The second includes the richly evocative photos of George Thomas Mendel -- little touches of worn worlds that complement Corso's poems.

They capture a time that is no more except for those dedicated bingo players.

First Published December 5, 2004, 12:00am