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Autobiography of So-And-So: Poems in Prose
Maurice Kilwein Guevara
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There's something called dramatic verisimilitude which might be regarded as a combination of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" and Aristotle's maxim in his Poetics that "the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities." Given that such-and-such an event never happened, or such-and-such a world never existed, will never exist, if someone were to imagine that it did anyway, how would it be described; what would be the verbal "furniture" of the description?

Answers to these questions are patently demonstrated by the selections in Guevara's new book, Autobiography of So-and-so. A multicultural transplant, Guevara chronicles being uprooted from his native Colombia as a young child and dropped into a smoky and cacophonous Pittsburgh. The pieces are short and pithy, less than a page in length, but manage to twist themselves into convoluted transmutations. The average person can accomplish a first reading in an afternoon; but won't finish digesting it without returning over and over again, discovering new meanings, new possibilities in each paragraph.

Sometimes it's difficult to decide why "prose" poems are called poetry. Without cadence, rhythm, meter, or rhyme, what is left to fulfill the needs of poetry? Image, of course. Leafing through Guevara's small and jewel-like dramatized pieces of skewed personal history, one comes upon "the backyard where fireflies pushed through the heat like slow aircraft and tomato plants hung bandaged to iron poles." Such fresh and inventive images bind the reader more and more deeply with every vignette. The serio-comic plot proceeds from a section of family history, offered by a friendly cockroach behind the kitchen stove, to the Siamese-twin brothers whose anatomical dilemma was resolved, since the medical world wasn't interested, by Papa and his razor-sharp knife.

One has the sense of being blown into this wacky and engaging world by a giant metaphorical whirlwind and dropped like the young Guevara into an evolving universe of strange but somehow tenderly rewarding adventures. As the book develops, the reader is treated

to returns to the native land, a gallery of improbable but strangely credible friends and relations, and an emotional range that, even more than the remarkable images, warms and delights.

Guevara, a professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, is the recipient of numerous awards; he also serves on the Board of Directors of the Associated Writing Programs. This, his third book, Autobiography of So-and-so is certain not only to please what must be a large readership of his previous works, but to generate a whole new gallery of appreciative fans.

Sandy McKinney