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Pale Bird Spouting Fire

Susan Yuzna
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Yuzna's poems create quirky cultural connections and historical meanderings that will please readers with their literary depth.

Her poems are peppered with references to the famous voices of civilization. The Saints—Jerome, Francis, and Joan of Arc particularly—show up with such worldly figures as Zelda Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, or with such literary figures as Edgar Allen Poe and William Blake. Like many contemporary poets, Yuzna connects her present world of the poem to history with a rich conglomeration of allusions. In so doing, she draws readers into a broader sense of the poem as a fulcrum in a large and more important story of the world.

Do not assume, however, that because of this rich backdrop, her poems are unapproachable. They appeal because she fuses these characters and their voices into the ordinary situations of life and work. For example, one of her most solid poems, "The Telephonist," involves the narrative of a telephone operator in the sixties, working the nightshift. Here Yuzna builds into the literal connections to the world—rude callers trying to make overseas calls on the night one operator has had enough and pulls all the connections—a figurative level where the craziness of the world is, for a moment, stilled. The watcher, however, like Dante in his hell, does not fully comprehend. Her words are direct, "I'm telling you / now, it was a brand new circle of hell, / but how could we know that then? We had jobs, // the market was tight, and the union / won us cab rides home when we worked at night."

In contrast, she also writes personal poems about women, the body, and dreams. Her poem, "Women at Fifty" explores the tender part of aging by comparing it to a walk in a snowy winter. "we merge, / most of us, with the one we love. We step / lightly into landscape: horse, figure, sky, / all white, a morning in January. / We don't rage. We turn ever so quiet." These moments of quietness, combined with her diverse subject matter and rich cultural landscape bring immediacy and universal relevance to these fine poems.
ANNE-MARIE OOMEN (August 16, 2000)

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