ForeWord Reviews

Voice-Over
Elaine Equi
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Elaine Equi's fine four-part collection, *Voice-Over*, is marked by a freshness of view that has always been characteristic of her work. It is not that her subjects are so unusual—in fact, they tend toward ordinary experience; the task of fennel, the moon, a woman preparing for karaoke—but the detail which surfaces in these short-lined, bright pieces is so vivid that the reader is forced to see differently. Couple her sparkling detail with concern for larger questions—the role of pop culture and media on our language and consciousness—and you have a collection that is accessible yet reflective, whimsical yet savvy.

In addition, dark irony laces many of her well-crafted shorter poems. For example, "Class Reunion," describes a childhood schoolroom located near a slaughterhouse. Of this place she says, "Next door is everything we cherish/ enough death to make a person drunk." Though this kind of biting insight scored many of the shorter works, her longer poems are even more arresting. In "The Heroine," "Beauty Secret," and "Second Thoughts," we find Equi at her best and most versatile. Her satirical title poem, "Voice-Over," incorporates quotes from various ad copy and through these she explores our culture's need for purchased beauty, romance and self-esteem. She follows the process of being lulled and lured into overlooking reality by listening to the hypnotic voice-over. By replaying what happens as we are persuaded, she captures our human need for illusion with wry empathy, including even the poet in the trap: "In poetry too/we like our lyricism/ minus the garlic/ on the poet's breath."

Through her startling urban work, she balances sharpness with compassion, showing her narrators caught in the commercial textures of our times, but also revealing their capacity for imagination. For this reason, despite the complexity of these poems, we never feel alienated, but always drawn in close to the experience of her work.