

The Laundress Catches Her Breath by Paola Corso. Fort Lee, New Jersey: CavanKerry Press Ltd., 2012. 70pp.

This charming, poignant collection, winner of the 2012 Tillie Olsen Award for Creative Writing from the Working Class Studies Association, paints a haunting portrait of working-class Pittsburgh as experienced by Corso's protagonist known only as the laundress. A pugnacious, chain-smoking daughter of a mill worker, she longs to free herself from that which holds her back, namely an exploitive boss at the Eatn'Park who regularly cuts her hours and calls her in to work at whim, and a tyrannical father with whom she lives. Overworked and underpaid, she has no choice but to stay with Mister Twenty Horns, the epithet she's given him, where she divides her time between laundry duty and caring for her uncle who is dying of cancer. Despite her grim reality, the laundress never succumbs to playing the victim, nor does Corso's verse fall to sentimentality.

Stylistically varied in form, *The Laundress Catches Her Breath* is separated into three sections each depicting a part in the process of a deep, meditative breath, or a long drag from a cigarette. As the narrator in the poem "Heiress to Air" recounts, "she can / breathe in heaven or hell" (40). The first section, "Inhale," sets up the tension permeating the collection akin to the contraction of muscles beginning the process of taking a breath. As the section progresses, we see how combative her relationship with her father is. One gets a sense that the only reason she smokes so heavily is to prove that she can withstand the same punishing conditions her father is subjected to at the factory. In "Cigarettes and Coffee" the laundress declares "I smoke three packs a day so nothing that goes up his nose is news to me. I'll put it on my application papers. Make me qualified. Buy me a house bigger than his" (8).

"Hold for Ten Seconds" features a sequence of ten linked prose poems similar to a crown of sonnets. This section marks a shift from the laundress' unremarkable, workaday world when a wooden statue of the Black Madonna of Tindari emerges from the washing machine and speaks to her. Instead of astonishment, the laundress carries on in her typical way, grabbing the mother like she's one of her father's soot-filled work outfits and throwing her back into the washing machine. The mother replies, "'The blacker I am, the whiter you become' / 'Yunz are black alright,' the laundress agrees as she tips a bottle of bleach over the mother's head" (22).

Corso's magic realism extends to the third section of the book, "And Exhale," with "Heiress to Air," a thirty-page odyssey through the factory towns of Pittsburgh that she takes with O. They start at her father's mill where he is the personification of the factory with "nuggets of coal for eyes, steal beams for legs / arms the length of a smokestack" (44). After seeing the horrific conditions of the other factory towns she cries out, "'That's it! / I quit cigarettes. / Quit cursing / my old man. I don't want his

factory job.” (57). Once she stops fighting her father, she is released from her own bondage. As she leaves him, “she flashes a charge card and her middle finger...to move into her own apartment.” She can finally breathe again.

CHRIS CANNELLA
Florida International University