

In Memoriam

Zoë Anglesey

June 5, 1941–February 12, 2003

By Gail Howard



Shopping for vacuum cleaners was not what I'd expected to be doing on this Sunday evening in August. Or for expresso machines. Zoë pointed out her daughters' favorite gadgets as we sauntered around J&R Appliance World in lower Manhattan. Earlier, after parking free on an ancient, lumpy side street, we'd photographed the Memorial Wall's rain-wilted origami cranes, photos, and farewells, then stepped into J&R Music World. Zoë wanted to quiz the clerks about what was coming out.

"I haven't seen you lately," one commented.

"I've been sick," she said. The clerk look puzzled and said he was sorry. Though she walked slowly, Zoë didn't look sick, and this misty evening might never end if we just kept cruising around. We'd spent the hot summer day before at Caramoor, the lush Westchester estate turned outdoor music venue, enveloped in the music of young jazz musicians that Zoë had promoted in her writing for *Downbeat*, *Jazziz*, and *Bomb*.

The tumor in her left lung, adenocarcinoma from "exposure to industrial substances"—Zoë was the rare writer who had never smoked—had shrunk, and she was stronger. She drank in every bit of life outside her Brooklyn brownstone, having spent nearly a year there propped against black silk pillows, writing steadily to push fear, pain, and cancer's thousand inconveniences to a corner of her mind. With this discipline she would finish translating Costa Rican poet Ana Istaru's new manuscript. Zoë's translations of Istaru's work appear widely, including in an anthology of poems on, of all things, boxing: *Perfect in Their Art*, forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.

The first time I truly felt the fire in Zoë's heart for Central America was in 1986 when she stayed at my house in

Amherst, Massachusetts. Zoë and I and bilingual educators Madelaine Marquez and Sonia Nieto were young mothers together in Amherst in the '70s. Zoë was already making things happen: the first UMass International Women's Day, a building occupation to protest South African investments. When Zoë's marriage ended, she moved to New York, completing a master's at NYU, teaching and for a while working as an editor at *The Voice Literary Supplement*. On this morning, she had just returned from El Salvador, Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. Zoë's wide eyes were wider, her high voice higher, as she spoke quickly of guns and death, orphans, torture, and enforced silence.

Zoë's twins, Catherine and Chryssa, were born in Guatemala in 1968, where her husband Mike Best was writing his doctoral dissertation. They joined sisters Melanie and Chavahn, but caring for four babies on a grad student's income did not keep Zoë from noticing the undeniable intertwining of North and Central American histories. She returned in the '80s to attend writers' conferences, gradually formulating one of her missions: to bring the poetry of Central America to a wider audience.

Zoë compiled and edited the work of 56 women poets into *Ixok Amar Go*. This 600-page bilingual volume includes major writers such as Gioconda Belli, whose memoir *The Country under My Skin* (Knopf, 2002) Zoë reviewed for *MultiCultural Review*. The Mayan word "Ixok" translates variously as "primordial woman," "a life force, indomitable and enduring," and "volcano of storm winds." "Amargo," the Spanish word for bitterness, comes apart into the Spanish for "love" and the English "go" to form "Women Going Forward with Love without Bitterness."

When Zoë changed her name back to Anglesey, it worked

that it began with “a-n-g-l-e” because her name certainly wasn’t “a-n-g-e-l.” “Volcano of storm winds” isn’t too strong a term for her propensity for getting into fights, some mysterious, some justified. When an overworked senior editor at Ballantine criticized Zoë’s writing, a book introduction okayed by at least one junior editor weeks before, I didn’t have to be in Brooklyn to see her eyes narrow with rage. She fumed into the phone. I listened. She fumed some more. I did what any friend would do, noting that publication would be her best revenge, then reading aloud from my copy those passages that were not her best writing. She made the changes, and *Listen Up!*, Ballantine’s 1999 collection of nine diverse, fresh, and forceful artists of the spoken word, including a foreword by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Yusef Komunyakaa, led poet Ethelbert Miller to dub Zoë “a literary abolitionist.” Coming after *Stone on Stone/Piedra Sobre Piedra: Poetry by Women of Diverse Heritages* (Open Hand Books, 1994); *Word Up! Hope for Youth Poetry* (El Centro de la Raza, 1992); *North American Women’s Poetry/Poesia de Mujeres de los Estados Unidos* (Ediciones Liberia Pardo, Honduras, 1989); and *Ixok Amar Go* (Granite Press, 1987), it was the fifth anthology that Zoë would envision, compile, and edit to break writers out of silence and reveal as only poetry can the commonalities among cultures.

Zoë found out she was sick not long after the World Trade Center fell. She’d been complaining of soreness—a doctor guessed she’d cracked a rib carting around her new twin grandchildren—but still managed to publish a letter in the Oct. 2 *New York Times* calling for survivor benefits for families of undocumented WTC workers. Three weeks later, I was staring into the post-Sept. 11 void when an e-mail arrived from our mutual friend, Madelaine.

“Zoë has cancer!”

I jumped up from my desk and walked fast down the hall. I couldn’t keep my heart from saying, “If Zoë dies, how will I know I’m a writer?” (I’ve talked to others with similar confessions.)

My first public reading was in one of Zoë’s earliest productions, “Voices of New Women,” at UMass in 1972. I was sure my poems were written in disappearing ink. For the next 29 years, Zoë produced readings for the baffled and the bold in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Seattle, Martha’s Vineyard, and all over Central America. Her translations appeared in over 30 literary magazines, including the December 2001 issue of *Harper’s*. Her own poetry appeared in countless journals and at least nine anthologies. Her book *Something More than Force: Poems for Guatemala* (Adastra Press, 1983) received an honorable mention from the Before Columbus Foundation. Her Yeats Society 2nd Prize-winning poem for 2001, “At the Merchant’s House” (about her mother, lost, and her daughter Melanie, very much with her), is, according to judge and Pulitzer Prize-winner Paul Muldoon, “at turns tough and tender.” Not unlike Zoë herself, who put all on hold to coax daughter Chavahn from a coma, through rehab, and back into a vibrant, creative life after a terrible accident.

Zoë’s work for *MultiCultural Review* deftly knitted together the strands of her life: teaching (sixth grade, high school, college, prisoners, the elderly), writing, breaking through barriers, promoting justice through art. Even her childhood dream of being a visual artist shines through her June 2002 cover photo. Her 1997 debut contribution to the magazine, “Moving from an Obsolete Lingo to a Vocabulary of Respect” reflects not only political conviction but life experience as well. Both her second husband Steve Cannon, editor of *A Gathering of the Tribes*, and my first husband are from across the color line. We often talked about learning to see what had been invisible.

Zoë survived 16 months as a stage four cancer patient, cared for by all of her daughters, especially her guardian angel Catherine. I helped some and cherish the memories: lost in the Bronx with Zoë lying in the back seat post-chemo, pointing Catherine and me toward the entrance ramp of a rickety elevated highway. Spending, one by one, the hours of an afternoon under shade trees at the city beach, comparing dreams for our daughters. Noodling through my books together looking for a poem she’d lost track of. Pouring champagne into the most fattening dish I could find in the Julia Child cookbook, and watching her actually eat.

Zoë was a fighter. Otherwise, she might have spent her life nursing wounds from her foster home childhood in the Pacific Northwest. Instead, she put her body on the line for justice, thrust Central American writers into the North American orbit, championed fledgling musicians, blessed a hundred artistic beginnings. In a review of drummer Roy Haynes’s album *Praise*, she said, “Haynes never coasts” (*Bomb*, 1999). Zoë knew about not coasting.

Every other person at her memorial said, “She told me exactly what path to take.” Zoë had artistic X-ray vision, an amazing knack for the practical and a loathing for injustice, but the core of her energy came from a profound zest for life. She could pull an event out of thin air because she most loved when things *happened*, when poetry bloomed and music carried us away.

Ten days before she died, at a birthday party for her twin grandchildren, Zoë’s daughters, old friends, and Zoe’s younger sister, Leila—who filled Zoë’s last winter with warmth and light—told our best stories. Unbearably thin, Zoë let her head rest on her chest and closed her eyes. We hoped that she was listening. When I walked her slowly back to bed, she turned to me and whispered, “I told all the jokes.”

Ixok Amar Go’s “life force, indomitable and enduring,” Zoë Anglesey never missed a good time if she could help it.



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