

## The Circle Inside Our Hearts: Remembering Zoe Anglesey

*The clouds travel like white handkerchiefs of goodbye,  
the wind, traveling, waving them in its hands.*

*-Pablo Neruda*

A writer without friends is a writer without words. I can't remember when I first met Zoe Anglesey. I can't remember when I first met my mother or father either. We live in the presence of sun and moon. We live under stars. Sometimes we live with our heads in the clouds. I recall a heavenly moment sitting on a bench with Zoe and staring at Lake Washington in Seattle. How we came to that moment is what I now will call the origin of our friendship. The place where our letters were born out of conversations. There is friendship during life and then there is the friendship beyond death. What is the scent and touch of memory? How do we hold a smile in our hands that once belonged to the departed? Why do their photographs attract tears? There is always a looking, a searching every day near the shore as if the next wave might cleanse us of sorrow. Memories are fragments, they are the shells we collect for their beauty. What beginning might I now press against my ear?

It was Anna Johnson, the founder of Open Hand Publishing Company, who told me Zoe lived not far from her in Seattle. I had first come to know Anna through our separate relationships and work with civil rights leader James Forman. Anna published my book *Where Are The Love Poems for Dictators?* in 1986. She had moved to Seattle in the nineties and was friends with Zoe. I remember leaving Anna's house to meet Zoe. A bench by the lake was waiting for us.

Zoe Anglesey, poet, editor, translator, and jazz critic, was born June 5, 1941 in Forest Grove, Oregon. She picked fruit as an unpaid child laborer in Oregon. I didn't learn how old Zoe was until she died. We often joked about the age difference between us. She wanted it to remain a mystery and a point of departure for our laughter.

As we sat on the bench near Lake Washington, we talked about the writing life. Zoe was then living at 720 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue East. She had edited her groundbreaking bilingual poetry anthology *IXOK AMAR-GO: Central American Women's Poetry for Peace* while in Seattle. The anthology was published in 1987 by Granite Press in Maine. On March 20, 1988, Zoe autographed my copy. She wrote inside:

*For Ethelbert with hopes you find a few more "crushes" for real. Love Zoe.*

Six years later those crushes would blossom into regular correspondence and last until the final days of her life. During this time she resided at 113 South Oxford Street, Apt.2 in Brooklyn, New

York. I have saved her letters, articles, and essays. They are housed in my archives at The George Washington University's Gelman Library, in Washington, D.C.

In a letter dated September 17, 2002, she wrote:

*While we both feel our mortality in a way that is different from years before, I think we put what we can into living. I want to live, which is to say, I desire with all my heart that I outlive this cancer. In the event that I fail, I want to emphasize that should you choose to publish our letters, you have my enthusiastic support. I want you to make use of your life, and if I've been part of it, and you want to share this by also publishing my letters or excerpts from them, even of the intimacies we've known with each other, it's fine with me.*

So, this morning I find myself in a studio at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA) in Amherst, Virginia. It is a beautiful day with light coming through the large glass window. I'm listening to the music of Brandee Younger. There is no way I could begin to write about Zoe without jazz in my ear. Before I write this next sentence I search for the link to the Ravi Coltrane Quartet playing "Zoe."

On my desk along with *IXOK AMAR.GO* are Zoe's other anthologies *Stone on Stone/Piedra sobre Piedra*, *Word UP*, and *Listen UP!* The only work of Zoe's that I'm missing is a copy of her poetry collection *Something More Than Force: Poems for Guatemala 1971-1982*.

Zoe's commitment to translation grew out of her belief that borders between nations, like obsolete and pejorative words, are socially constructed boundaries that deserve destruction.

It's been over thirty years since Zoe collected the work of poetry by Central American women writers. These poems can shed light on the darkness of today's American immigration policies. The poetry of these women once watered the roots of history. Today they read like the seeds of memory.

Zoe's first visits to Guatemala and El Salvador were in 1968 and the early seventies. She took trips to other countries in Central America in 1983, 1985, and 1986. In 1986 she received an invitation to attend the Ruben Dario Poetry Festival in Nicaragua. It provided her with the opportunity to meet many women poets from various parts of Central America. Between 1968 and 1988 she made ten trips to Central America.

The work of Caly Domitila Cane'k, an indigenous Guatemalan poet, appears at the beginning of *IXOK AMAR.GO*. Her work is translated from Maya Cakchikel by Zoe.

*In the midst of atrocities*

*we continue to pray,*

*continue in our faiths,*

*we simply thirst for peace,*

*for understanding*

*and a friendly hand from the entire world*

*from those who have eyes, ears*

*compassion and spirit.*

It's sad that today these words slow dance with deafness. Caravans of people from Central America continue to flee the atrocities in the region while the President of the United States wants to build a wall. There is no compassion or hands to help. We have wrapped ourselves tightly inside a flag of ugliness. The thirst for peace grows and no one is willing to share even bottled water. Many of the poems compiled by Zoe and published in 1987 spoke to the loud urgency of now. And perhaps this is why I miss Zoe Anglesey. Gone is her voice and vision. The woman who could hear the new music of jazz musicians also heard the sounds flowing from Central America even before Carolyn Forché would write her poem "The Colonel." Zoe opposed the Vietnam War and U.S. intervention in Central and South America. She was committed to bringing women voices to North America so they could speak for themselves.

The journeys undertaken by political writers need to be documented. By the 1990s Zoe Anglesey would be in New York working as an adjunct instructor, reading ninety student essays per week without any benefits. How much are the conditions of women separated by borders or time? What can we learn from Zoe's life? I remember a conversation in which she spoke of the various non-profit workplaces she found herself in. How unhealthy was the environment? The air we too often breathe is not for the living.

Zoe's life was about creating new spaces. She turned a Brooklyn apartment into an art gallery. While in Seattle (1991-1992), she conducted poetry workshops at El Centro de la Raza with the Hope For Youth program. It was defined as liberated territory. A space where young people could express themselves without fear and negative criticism.

While in Seattle she would also edit *Stone on Stone/Piedra sobre Piedra*, a bilingual collection of work by women of diverse heritages published in 1994. She dedicated this book to the memory of the writer Walter Lowenfels and the visual artist Simon Gourverneur. I would recall many wonderful intellectual conversations with Gourverneur when he lived in Washington and we both worked at Howard University. We met in the main library. Gourverneur was in the stacks looking for books on structuralism. I remember a phone conversation with Zoe during which I happen to mention Simon's name; she chuckled and casually mentioned they had once lived together. Zoe touched many lives and was loved by many. Her love for poetry was defined by the poets she admired. In *Stone on Stone*, she included many of the poets she respected: Meimei Berssenbrugge, Olga Broumas, Jayne Cortez, Sharon Doubiago, Rita Dove, Sandra Maria Esteves, Carolyn Forché, Tess Gallagher, Linda Gregg, Joy Harjo, Ntozake Shange, Anne Waldman, and C.D. Wright.

Is this not a dream team of American poets? Are they not the “daughters” of Whitman? The purpose for Zoe compiling the works of these woman was to make available a book that would include the diverse voices of American women poets to an international audience. It was important to translate their work from English into Spanish. In the preface of the anthology she looked to the future:

*Approaching the next century, the poetry within Stone on Stone aspires to add to the discourse among women and others who will continue to assume responsibility in validating the history we claim.*

She included two of her own poems, “Holding Him” and “Revelation.” The poem “Holding Him” was written for Allen Ginsberg.

*Do his lovers not see the thinned hair his face*

*How serene the transparent skin when times suspends*

*The mounded chest rising alive full of swelling tide.*

In the poem “Revelation” she describes a joy and love so intense it could become contagious and continental. In “The Shower,” an unpublished poem she sent to me, the love becomes baptismal.

*They stood there in the warm water knowing nothing would stop*

*except the spray of water once one of them made a move to turn it off. The*

*water fell heavier off all the tips and points of them.*

It is love that is missing in today’s world. If there are more poets writing these days, it’s because they want to know – where is the love? How long must we continue to “workshop” despair? Prior to Zoe Anglesey’s death in 2003, a new generation of poets began to emerge. If one wanted to know if America was still singing, it was time to listen up. In Berkeley, California, June Jordan had formed her Poetry for the People workshop for poets.

Four years later Zoe Anglesey on the east coast would edit *Listen Up!* This was a collection of spoken word poetry by nine poets: Tish Benson, Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie, Suheir Hammad, Jessica Care Moore, Saul Williams, Ava Chin, Willie Perdomo, Tracie Morris, and Carl Hancock Rux.

Reading Zoe’s introduction to this anthology, it’s as if she was the first person to hear John Coltrane play “A Love Supreme.” How she writes about Jessica Care Moore and Saul Williams is how Larry Neal once wrote about the Black Arts Movement. What if black poets could produce work as forceful and as moving as James Brown? What would Maceo say? Listen Up!

Zoe Anglesey speaks from the past to our present now:

*Even after seeing the documentary film Slam Nation, or Slam, or any of the other recent films showing a version of the current urban poetry scene, it's still difficult to define what spoken word poetry is. It might be helpful to think of this genre as the fulcrum between opposite points. On one end, traditional, mainstream poetry tends to fit nicely on either the page or the stage, often with a great deal of decorum. When read before the public, contemporary poetry needs few props other than an expressive voice. On the opposite end, the performance arts may combine many elements, including voices, dance, music, and visual and media arts, as well as poems or texts that transmute into monologues or fully developed scripts. Hip-hop, or rap, as a predominantly African-American popular and commercial art form, stands between spoken word and the performance arts. Both spoken word and hip-hop derive from the oral tradition, and both forms appeal to overlapping demographics.*

Zoe Anglesey, like Amiri Baraka, was also a jazz critic. I believe her understanding of black music enhanced her understanding of spoken word poetry. She was the jazz editor for *Ace* magazine (in Brooklyn). She wrote for *Riffs*, a monthly magazine published by the Washington Jazz Society in Seattle. In February 1992, she would interview Roy Hargrove for that publication.

I had forgotten how much Zoe had written about jazz until I went through the material I had donated to The George Washington University's Gelman Library. How many other women have been jazz critics writing for small journals and newspapers? How many are keeping blogs and documenting what Baraka once called the "changing same" and the motion of history?

In March 1988, Zoe sent me an excerpt from a memoir she was working on. It included a comment about history.

*If history provides the means by which to understand the root causes of phenomena of the present, then it influences the poems we write. History, as it is being revised by its participants, provides the context by which to untangle the web of causes linking conflicts that have raged from the time of my birth to the present.*

Zoe ended her personal essay with a quote by Albert Einstein:

*A human being is a part of the whole, called by us 'Universe'; a part limited in time and space. [People] experience [themselves], [their] thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of [their] consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is, in itself, a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security.*

Zoe Anglesey created a circle inside her heart and mine. Inside those circles she is wearing one of her symbolic hats. Underneath, one might look for a flower in her hair; a reminder that friendship and love is eternal.

Zoe, I continue to live searching for beauty. Poetry and music never dies. Your words continue to be spoken. Once again I remember, once again we must believe in love.

E. Ethelbert Miller

VCCA

Amherst, Virginia

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