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Rattle Young Poets Anthology 2014
Timothy Green, editor
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reviewed by David P. Miller

Reading anthologies of poetry by children can be a delight: I often find it so. But attempting a review is a different matter. If you consider this at all, you find that the evaluative goals brought to poetry written by adults are largely irrelevant – the less relevant the younger the children. That sort of assessment might be appropriate for the older classroom, if done with insight and compassion. You also want to avoid the almost opposite approach: sentimentalizing children and their writings, reading it all through a shimmer of words like freshness, innocence, originality. Even though those words are valid enough, there are people behind these writings, not generic “children.” Even the youngest children represented here have individual voices.

The Rattle Foundation, which publishes a quarterly journal in print and online and maintains a web site rich in resources, has published its first annual collection of poems by children. The poems are by people fifteen years old or younger at the time of writing; this collection includes works by children as young as three (most likely spoken?). Three-year-old Frank Colasacco contributes a poem about a bear. Well, of course, cute, you might think, but you might be wrong:

Bob the Bear

*bob the bear breaks himself
and some balls come out
and that lamp comes out
and a daddy comes out
and a hammer comes out
and a nail
and bob the bear
hammered the nail
and fixed himself*

I sense a dissertation on Surrealism and the Imagination of the Child lurking in the wings. And that might be an interesting dissertation, but I don't plan to write it. I am simply brought up short by what this toddler saw and said. I don't understand it. Likewise, I can only ponder this briefest poem in the volume, “Untitled” by Mikey Kelsey (6):

*the moon behind the clouds –
all these little old ladies*

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More concise than a haiku. If you appreciate lacunae in poetry, the electric charge sparking across the empty places, here is one for you. What was Mikey thinking? I have no idea, but I want to compose lacunae like that. Which might take us toward words like spontaneity.

As the writers enter adolescence, the poems almost inevitably become more self-conscious, often more deliberately artful. The sentimentalizer wants to say, "No: don't try to imitate what you think adult poets do!" But of course, that's just another way of not-seeing the person behind the writing. You have to let adolescents grow into the writers they become, and follow their focus as they try out adult-like voices. If you give yourself interest in their interests, and push back the impulse to judge as you might the poems of people just a few years older, any of these may be satisfying. One of my favorites by older children is "Grandpa Bob" by Sophia Dienstag (13), which concludes:

*Once little children in the park thought he was wearing a disguise.
He told them he wasn't.
They didn't believe him.
But he wasn't exasperated.
He just told the children to try
And take off his nose.*

More sobering is "Twine: A Prayer" by Chloe Ortiz (14). Its extended metaphor almost self-destructs:

*God is a rope.
Long and thick,
it pulls us out of the water.
The roughness burns our skin.
We continue to climb, the waves
are still splashing. Our hands are red
and we shout to God.
We feel his leniency, strong and continuous.
Then, with a flick of his wrist,
we are flung back into the sea.*

Most of the children are represented by "Contributor Notes", but instead of having bios ("Frank was born just over three years ago and has already been nominated for a Pushcart Prize"), there are answers to the question, "Why do you like writing poetry?" I find that many of these are also reminders to myself:

When I write poetry, I feel like I empty myself and then I can start myself anew. (Elliot L. Armitage, 11)

My favorite part is when the piece of paper is blank because then I get to think. (Raya Gottesfeld, 6)

Poetry allows me to write whatever I want unless I am in school. (James Dailey, 10)

Poetry uses a certain kind of language where you switch words around, not like speaking. It makes it more like a riddle. (Melody Goldiner, 9)

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To conclude, from a series of "Haiku" by sisters Bree, Liya, and Anya Miksovsky – a sequence that allows us to think about children's perceptions and expressions, changing as they get older:

*Water gurgling, water splashing
rushing towards me and flowing away
as if it can't stand to sit still
– Liya (9)*

*You know it's true
because I said it.
Write that down.
– Bree (5)*

*Grandma meditates
while Liya and Bree screech
in their falling tent.
– Anya (11)*

I am looking forward to the stimulation and pleasures of the next Rattle Young Poets Anthology.

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