

Poetry and Children

By Kathy Evans

I don't think enough has been written about children's poetry. You can say all you want about the adult mentality and all the poetry books we adults write and publish, well-crafted and layered with metaphor and meaning, but the children are where it's at for me. Picasso said, "I spent my entire life trying to paint like a child."

Children's art and poetry bring us a rare view at an unfiltered world. Point to a caterpillar and child might say, "It's a very tiny dragon." Fingers tapping on computer keys-- a child looks and makes a leap, "I see ten woodpeckers." We, the so-called grown-ups, labor for meaning, try with language to make sense (or nonsense) successfully out of our complexity, our emotional, imaginative lives and our acquired intelligence. But the children just go to some floaty part of the mind quite easily. They take a direct route and most of the time by-pass the intellect. There are these spaces in their thoughts. Their poems sometimes appear like small clouds on the page. I keep children's poems on my laptop for inspiration. Maybe Whitman came close to seeing much of the world as a child sees it in that open, unedited way. (Well, the first editions anyway. He labored over the same poems in later editions.) All those long lose lovely lines about how a child goes forth everyday to become the object that it sees.

There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain
part of the day,
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories and
white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,
and the third-month lambs and the sow's pink-faint litter . . .
and the fish suspending themselves so curiously below . . .
and the apple trees cover'd with blossoms and the fruit afterward,
and the wood-berries and the commonest weeds by the road . . .

--Walt Whitman

Mary Oliver's poems have a quality of receptivity. Maybe it is because Oliver walks through the same woods everyday with her poetry antennae up and sees the same things in startling new ways. We can thank Emily Dickinson, for seeing the snake as a "whiplash unbraiding in the sun." Many of our poets have moments of transcending into the pure ether of image and thought. Intellect joins perception, but a child gets there as fast as she or he can go down the slippery slide, with immediacy and uncensored thoughts, in a flash without much premeditation. The perceptions pop and disassociate rather naturally. I have been teaching with the California Poets in the Schools program for 20 some years and I marvel each time I leave a classroom at the magic that appears on lined paper. That's why I keep their poems on my laptop. That's why I sing their poems to anyone who will listen. In honor of National Poetry Month let's just read some of the poems of children.

Silver

Silver feels like a gust.
It sounds like a fish
swimming through a river.
It looks like glitter
falling through the sky.
It is a box of snowflakes.
It reminds me of
a piece of glass.
Silver is the song
of a star.

-- Caroline Herdman, 1st grade, Tam Valley School

Playing With Words

Owls bring windows to the wind,
The list of spears:
A symbol of the gecko's backbone.

You wish you could grab hot surfaces,
The ripe book,
The distance between greatness
& the chant of stars.

-- Andrew Jeffries, 3rd grade, Park School

Poetry is Like What This Poem Says:

Poetry is like the moonlight
of January
when rough winds blow
and cattails sit on the edge
of a swamp.

Bobcat is slowly walking
in the grass
beneath a tree.

It seems like night-time
has been going on
for years.

It's like wisdom
is blowing
in the midnight air.

--Dana Dveris, 3rd grade, Park School

Wednesday

Wednesday is so fat
he just got stuck
in the middle of the week.
The radio went on strike.
The chocolate ate himself, all
while riding a tricycle on Wednesday.

--Jackson Hettler, 4th grade, Tam Valley School

What is Peace

Peace is a perfect circle
filled with all the colors of the rainbow.
Peace is like the full moon frozen in space,
glittering on an ocean as the waves lap on a
beach undiscovered by time.

Peace is a high standing tree in the
middle of a forest,
knowing nothing of the world beyond other trees.
Peace is like a liquid that can slip through your
fingers
no matter how dearly you hold tight.
Peace is the sparkle of frost on a blade of grass
pointing
upwards towards the winter blue sky.
Peace is the thing you dream of
in your deepest calmest sleep.

--Peter Swanson, 6th grade, Mill Valley Middle School

Kathy Evans has been bringing poetry into the classrooms for many years as a poet-teacher with California Poets in the Schools. Kathy has published three books of poetry and has received grants from the Marin Arts Council and the Headlands Center for the Arts.

The preceding poems were written by student poets in the Mill Valley Schools, and chosen by Kiddo! for their whimsy and wisdom.

A gallery show, "Celebrating the Arts in our Schools", will feature children's poetry and other artwork from the Mill Valley Schools, and photographs of student-artists by Laura Epstein-Norris in the 142 Throckmorton Theatre throughout May, with an opening May 6 from 5-7 p.m. Children's artwork will also be on display at the Mill Valley Library May 1-15.

