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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ POETRY

Five Foot Voice: The Selected Works of Alise Versella

Alise Versella
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Poet Alise Versella is barely into her twenties, yet the majority of the poems she has crafted in her debut collection use fresh imagery and resist clichés. Even though she is young, she does not take her youth for granted, as shown in the collection's short introductory poem, "In My Age": "The most sumptuous things in life / Are the ones that scar your soul / Wrinkle your skin / And break your bones."

From the start, the reader is in capable hands with a poet whose heart and mind are wide open to experiences that hold the potential for transformations of the soul. Versella uses the events and issues of her own life to connect with readers by using language that is rich with experimentation yet retains its clarity.

The book is divided into three sections: "Love and Heartache," "Faith and Struggle," and "Beauty and the Open Road." About 75 percent of the poems are in the first section, and it seems that heartache is rarely far from love in these poems. In fact, amorous struggles are one of the main themes of the collection, as are the matters of attraction without love, relationships that are addictive, the destructiveness of drugs and drink, and betrayal.

The first poem in the "Love and Heartache" section, "Mirror Images," is a satisfying bolt from the blue, with the poet addressing someone she refers to as "you": "I'm not who you thought I was / I refuse to give up just because you knocked me / down." The reader might think "you" could be a contrary friend, an unsupportive boyfriend, or even a clueless teacher or parent. The last lines—"I've packed up to get away / From your stupid reflection staring back at me"—are a nice twist; perhaps the poet is calling out her own unreliable self. Poems such as these, which give the reader enough to grasp a miniaturized yet dense recounting of the problem at hand, are unexpected and refreshing.

It is also interesting to find a young poet who is not afraid of good old-fashioned rhyme and form. Versella favors sonnets, and her knowledge of the form is clear when it comes to utilizing meter. She delves into archaic language, using "thy" and "thine" in "Is This Love I Feel?" Most of her poems are brief—a page or so—and there is also a song's lyrics thrown into the mix. Some poems seem perfect for recitation in a slam poetry competition, such as "Moonbeams and Gamma Rays," which uses astral images to describe a volatile, doomed love affair.

While Versella's subject matter may be dark at times, her future as a talented poet is bright.

OLIVIA BOLER (November 7, 2012)

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