Where Dogs Go Quack
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IF, BY SOME SOMERSAULT in time, A. A. Milne were alive today and peddling his first manuscript of poems for children, *When We Were Very Young,* he would probably be advised to try something less fanciful and more salable—perhaps a book about rock formations, a "supplementary text" for the school market. And if he persisted in his versifying, some well-meaning editor surely would caution him to delete such "difficult" rhymes as,

> What shall I call
> My dear little dormouse?
> His eyes are small,
> But his tail is e-nor-mouse.

Nowadays, most children's book editors —but not all, praise be—prefer fact to fiction and fiction to poetry. This is hard on poets; it deprives them of their natural audience. It is also hard on the rest of us, children and adults alike.

Many people find the wares of "children's" poets far more accessible and satisfying than those of "adult" poets. Compare, for instance, Browning's puffed paean to love (written for adults):

> O Lyric Love, half angel and half bird,
> And all a wonder and a wild desire . . . .

to E. B. White's sweet, sad swansong of love, in his book *The Trumpet of the Swan* (Harper & Row), written for children:

> Oh, ever in the greening spring,
> By bank and bough retiring,
> For love shall I be sorrowing
> And swans of my desiring

White's is wispier, but its lilt and precision stay with us longer.

Choosing words that stay with us—the art of being memorable—is the poet's job. That is why children are natural sayers and writers of poetry. They are always trying to tell us things we won't soon forget. They aspire to persuasiveness. Occasionally I visit schools and talk with children about poetry, theirs and mine. I ask them to think of something they have seen or felt and to tell me about it in a way I won't forget. Their responses can be startling. A girl in the first grade wrote about her kitten, "it softs me so," a line as clean and sharp as any we are likely to read.

I do not claim that children always write or speak poetically; I say that in their yelps and meditations there is often a rhythmic integrity that bespeaks the Muse. In addition, children seem to know in their bones what Wallace Stevens meant by "the essential gaudiness of poetry." (I think it was also Stevens who spoke of "the red and yellow air of childhood.") Good poetry is gaudy in the sense that it takes the ho-hum out of the commonplace. It astonishes—therefore it liberates.

"We are free, free," wrote a little girl in New York City, one of many children inspired by that remarkable poet-teacher, Kenneth Koch who quotes in his book *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* (Vintage):

> come, come, I am inviting you to
> the land of freedom where dogs go quack quack
> instead of bow, wow, bark bark . . .

Alas, many publishers and schoolteachers continue to entertain the notion that quacking dogs, being "unreal," are frivolous. To these gray arbiters of children's taste poetry is not flame but floss, the mere residue of fact.

The peculiar idea that poetry is garnish rather than nourishment has led to a virtual wilderness of prose. Isabelle Jan, in her interesting new book *On Children's Literature,* (Schocken) has described some of the salient dunes in that desert: "Flimsy, pretentious novels, abridged versions of famous works, the ceaseless reprinting of children's 'classics' and the nauseating exploitation of the most lifeless plots and the most repetitive techniques . . . ."

Still, a few good poets have slipped through the publishers' dragnet. Beware, for example of Eve Marriam—she is joyfully nasty. In "Mean Song" *(There Is No Rhyme for Silver,* Atheneum) she warns,

> Keep out of sight
> For fear that I might
> Glom you a gravel snave.
> Furthermore,
> Don't show your face
> Around my place
> Or you'll get one flack snack
> in the bave.

Valerie Worth's *Small Poems* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux) are like her "Zinnias": "stout and stiff,/Stand no nonsense . . ." And like her "Raw Carrots," which taste "Cool and hard,/Like some crisp metal." Worth's slim, wiry lines contain more *facts* than do all the supplementary texts in all the schools.

Maurice Sendak is still the best, though he masks his poetry in prose. Sendak's measure is true to his reader—not the simple iambics of Dr. Seuss but the chain-link breathlessness of a child trying to speak unforgettably: "That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew—and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and he sailed off through night and day . . . ."

Children require that sort of sustenance—bedroom ceilings "hung with vines" and oceans that tumble by. Otherwise, as Isabelle Jan has asked, "How can they defend themselves . . . against the pretenses and forgeries which assail them from all sides?" □

RICHARD J. MARGOLIS is the author of two poetry books for children: *Only the Moon and Me* and *Looking for a Place.*

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