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## On Lee Bassett

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*Hatsutaiken*

Lee Bassett

Copper Canyon Press (1980)

Port Townsend, Washington

To read these thirteen prose poems by Lee Bassett is to reenter the junior high unnoticed, where we are handed the keys that will open again those sensuous, initial rhythms of our lives. Who tells the experience here is the cast of voices inhabiting that adolescent world: Doc Bird, Niki, Nasu, Little and Big Bear, Still-Smoking. The poet fills these prose poems with conversation, diary entries, student essays, letters, and journals. Like eavesdroppers following at a distance, we watch, for example, the group at the symphony or at the target range. When Niki enters the boy's gym after practice and falls in love with its strange smell, we stare almost from where the stage curtains part.

The poetry in "Field" is astonishing.

The world is junk. Everywhere we go, we stop and gather it. Right now we are on a field trip. As a matter of fact we are in a huge brown field, collecting junk. Crickets, seeds, cabbage butterflies. Look at us in this field. Niki, Big Bear, Little Bear, the collecting jars, the nets. We're so out of place here, we're the junk, and birds yell at us. We're scared of many many things and everything. Nansu pulls and guts from a milkweed pod and the bees come. Their cousins the wasps come. Then ants and spiders, a whole family that we don't belong in. We're lonely. A thousand eyes like the bee, a hundred hands like the spider, and still we're lonely. I tell you it's funny. The glands we are made of, the marrow and the veins and the flesh, are really all hands and eyes. And behind all of them is a lonely field where the empty heart moves, like music.

The poems take great risk in that they assume these different personas. Many poets, fearing failure, will not speak with the voice of the opposite sex, or with the voice of a child. Bassett seems unafraid

in taking these roles and delights in the possibilities of this freedom. However, it's too bad all of the poems do not do this as successfully as "Field" or "Symphony."

The girl Niki in "Letter" who writes, ". . . I've got a new boyfriend, well, I'm not sure if he likes me yet but he sure is cute! . . . Yesterday, I was sitting in class just staring at his blond curls," is not the same Niki who writes in the next three sentences "Then he started breathing and I watched his back and shoulders go up and down. Then I started breathing right along with him, you know, the same way. God it made me feel weird inside!" These last lines are lovely perception but don't fit the silly boredom with which the letter begins and ends. The speech and thoughts of any twelve year old are not poetry; it is the poet recollecting his childhood that supplies this sensitive perception.

Intuiting the sexual thoughts of twelve and thirteen year olds requires an honesty and insight that Bassett sometimes doesn't bring to the poem. The boy speaking in the poem "In the Hotel" can look out his window and remark, "across the street an old man is also retiring. He carefully folds a dark blanket next to him in a double bed. It looks like the shape of a woman," or think about Niki, "You could see the top of the crack in her butt and parts of the bones that probably go all the way up to her head. She doesn't even know." I don't believe this last sentence. The girls throughout the book are made to seem silly and vulnerable, and I don't think it's true that young girls are as foolish as Bassett would have us believe.

Bassett's response throughout *Hatsutaiken* is to celebrate these first physical experiences, to simply rejoice in the unexplainable. Although this is a commendable and very attractive chapbook, I kept wanting to hear his voice, not how that voice sounded in the speech of an adolescent.

*Jack Heflin*