

POETRY OF PLACE

a review by Chris Abbate

Molly Rice. *Forever Eighty-Eights*. Press 53, 2022.

CHRIS ABBATE's poems have appeared in numerous journals including *Connecticut River Review*, *Cider Press Review*, and *South Florida Poetry Journal*. He is a two-time nominee for a Pushcart Prize, has been nominated for a Best of the Net award, and has received awards in the Nazim Hikmet and North Carolina Poetry Society poetry contests. His latest full-length collection is *Words for Flying* (FutureCycle Press, 2022).

MOLLY RICE has held several residencies teaching poetry, storytelling, theater, film, and English as a Second Language in hundreds of schools, colleges, and organizations in North Carolina and beyond. She has taught for seventeen years at St. Stephens High School in Hickory, NC, where she is the director of the Tractor Shed Theater. Her poetry has been widely published, and her chapbook, *Mill Hill*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2012. She lives in Hickory with her husband, Adrian, and their son, Micah.

In the poem "McAdenville" of Molly Rice's *Forever Eighty-Eights*, the poet introduces us to her place of origin: "Walking everywhere you go, the whole town a family that you / know – a village." The poem is Whitmanesque in its long lines and sweeping imagery of McAdenville, NC, a nineteenth-century textile village along the Catawba River. It is an intermingling of the town and her life within it, complete with its downtown and river, its schools and homes, and her coming-of-age experiences that give meaning to her surroundings.

Rice, however, avoids white-washing her hometown, reminding us that there is more to a place than meets the eye. In "McAdenville," the speaker branches out, becoming both an objective bystander and an integral participant. Throughout the poem, Rice counterbalances innocence with uncertainty, as in the lines "fishing for crawdads and minnows, careful / not to cut your foot wide-open on broken beer bottles." She describes the town's abandoned mills: "Horrible monster noise when opening the mill's doors / beware of the textile teeth," and the "yarn mills – inside a hive of lost parents – outside kids latch- / keyed – the village raised their young."

The two poems that follow springboard into a gripping portrayal of Rice's hometown in its post-industrial state. In "Pharr Yarns," the speaker ponders the future of the mills and their workers:

And I have breathed the dirt and lint
Like my parents did before me.

...

I have spliced till palsy comes
And my canteen coffee spilt

...

The Mill Hill is razed
And now

Ghosts out
Across the threadbare distance.

The poem, "T," a reference to markings that indicate an abandoned mill house that will be razed, begins with these four terse lines: "Terminate. / Tear down. / Take away. / Torch." It continues, "Nothing's left / Even the memories / Are tagged by time."

McAdenville is such a significant presence in this collection that Rice carries its dirt; its very ground is embedded in her and the objects around her. In "Many Moons Ago," she recounts walking in mud until it caked into her shoes, and they became "boulder boots." In "Clipping for Quarters," she recalls a neighbor, Old Man Gladden, paying her a quarter for cleaning earth from his tractor:

I dug out the dirt,
Dirt from the turnip-green fields,
Dirt from his plow and potted plants,
Dirt that he couldn't get out.
Dirt that waited for me.

Throughout *Forever Eighty-Eights*, Rice's memories are both plentiful and powerful. In her opening poems, she paints a mosaic of the wonder and magic of childhood, but deftly includes a reminder of the town's origin. "Homefront" recounts the delight of catching lightning bugs while also describing the texture of her mother's hands:

Rough, yarn-worn fingers
Press my face.
One stripe
down each cheek –
Warm gut glow.

In "Sightings," the speaker star-gazes with a friend while eating potato chips. In "Winded," she skates in her shoes with her brother before he spins her,

causing her to fall and lose her breath. In "To Be a Boy," she wishes she could enjoy the freedom that boys seemed to have, "to not be told what to do and how to do it," but concludes this could only happen, as her grandmother tells her, if she can kiss her elbow. In "Girls Only," Rice recounts building a fire with a friend and having to call the fire department after it gets out of control.

These and other coming-of-age poems portray a young speaker in relation to her surroundings, carving out her life under the historical weight of a town. It is left to the reader to determine exactly where the town ends and Rice begins. Like McAdenville's painful transition from past to present, Rice weathers a turbulence that threatens her own transition from childhood to adolescence. She counters the care-free nature of her youth with an overarching danger from within her home that is both consuming and heartbreaking. In "Homefront," amid the exuberance of the moment, there is another, more personal peril that the speaker must endure:

But tonight, with him not home,
We three little Indians
Escape a scalping
And dance in the dusk
Glowing.

Rice begins the poem "Tough Love" with, "I'll jerk a knot in your ass. / I'll knock you clear into next week." In "Lullaby," she is banned to her bedroom after being told, "You are, little one, / A mistake." In "Hickory Switches," Rice recounts having to find a hickory switch for her mother to punish her with, one "that wasn't too big / But one that would satisfy her." And in "Christmas Town, USA," she



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describes her father, dressed as Santa Claus: "Under these lights, / Magic can happen. / Even Satan can turn into Santa." This sobering series of poems leaves the reader feeling the severity of the place the speaker inhabits and how she must fend for herself in navigating it. There are, however, some glimmers of strength and hope. In "Let Go," Rice declares, "The trash truck of my soul hauls a heavy load," before concluding, "But sprouting / From the pile – / The moss of / Forgiveness." It is a poignant and satisfying line as well as a simple and solitary response to all that this place has burdened her with.

Rice primarily finds redemption by taking refuge in and paying tribute to her family and ancestors. "Forebears," a poem that compares Rice's ancestral search to deep sea diving, ends:

Decompression
From death's kingdom
Bears a depression
And a longing
To go home.

Rice's longing to connect to her roots, not just as a biological impulse, but as a means of hope and survival, is pervasive. She describes walking through fields of tall grass with her mother (in "Fried Green Toma-

toes") and how her mother would write the lyrics to songs on the radio and choreograph dances for her so that she could perform them in her school's talent show (in "DYB").

Rice's ancestors continually invite her to a renewal of her childlike spirit and into a place of serenity. "Genesis" depicts the poet scattering her grandfather's ashes into the ocean while fondly remembering how he had taken her to the coastline each summer:

His ashes – sand
His bones – shell
Gone.
Bygone.
Genesis.

In "Singer," she recalls her grandmother sewing skirts and costumes for her and attempting to teach her to sew. Rice recognizes the precision and skill her grandmother possessed. She calls her "a pro" while also expressing a more symbolic undertone to her sewing: "Her / Patterns / Forever stitched in me."

In *Forever Eighty-Eights*, Rice's reckoning with the place of her origin, a place of both hurt and healing, conveys an undeniable need for connection. This brings us full circle to the collection's (untitled) introductory poem and the basis for its title, in which Rice lists the various symbolic meanings of the number eighty-eight, including

... CB lingo for love &
kisses; math's untouchable,
palindromic, mirrored, four-
way number; the sky's number of
constellations ...

Rice ends her list fittingly, with a conclusive stamp of hope that underlies the entire collection, "Only forever / love is eighty-eights. XOXO." ■