Preface to The Best Teen Writing of 2007

By Billy Collins

When Allen Ginsberg’s canon-shattering poem “Howl” was published in 1957, I was sixteen years old and installed in a Catholic high school in the suburbs of New York City. Jack Kerouac’s “On the Road,” which continues to sell over a hundred thousand copies a year, was also published in 1957. The following year saw the appearance of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s collection of poems “Coney Island of the Mind” and “Gasoline,” the first book of poems by Gregory Corso. Up until that time, I was a fairly normal, well-behaved child—an altar boy, a choir boy, and a Boy Scout. But the appearance of those books that formed the core literature of the Beat Generation changed everything. In their writing I found a wildness and an outrageousness I did not know could exist. I finally understood the phrase “freedom of expression.” The only poetry I had heard, beyond the rhymes of Mother Goose, was the poetry taught in the classroom. The authors were all male, dead, bearded, and each of them had three names: William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson. The poetry was formal, elegant, sonorous—and it seemed as if it was issuing forth from the grave. The beat poets were spontaneous, angry, ecstatic, and their poems sounded as if they were being shouted from the rooftops of a city. They were “alive” in every sense of the word. Suddenly, “poetry” had a new meaning. It was exciting, rebellious, cool. I was hooked. A teenager in love with this new way to declare yourself in language.

Luckily, no poems survive from the many I wrote trying to imitate these new poets. I wrote as if I were a fellow beatnik, a free spirit, liberated, fearless, half-crazy. The truth was I was still diligently working on my perfect attendance record and making sure my homework was turned in on time. Even though the results of my imitation were
ridiculous, I was learning something. I was writing. I had found a way to externalize myself, an outlet, something to do with the inner turbulence known as adolescence. Though I would never tell anyone, in my heart I knew I was a poet.

If anything can be taken from my experience as a teenage writer, it is that writing begins by imitating other writers. A paradox of the writing life is that the only way to be original is to follow the path of imitation. What truly inspires writers is the writing of others. What’s more, in order to advance in your writing you need to find writers who make you jealous. Then you must react to that literary envy by writing in imitation of those writers. An “original” writer has really just learned how to absorb a variety of influences, combining them in a new way. Strange as it is to hear, some young writers say they don’t read very much because they are afraid it will compromise their originality. Nothing could be further from the truth. Writers learning by reading just as musicians learn by listening and painters learn by looking closely at the paintings of others.

Gathered here in THE BEST TEEN WRITING OF 2007 are poems, stories, and plays by writers who have clearly opened themselves up to the influence of other writers. In their work, I can hear the echoes of writers I know, but I can also hear an edge, a tone that is their own. These young writers are standing on the shoulders of others, but they are also reaching to find their own way of sounding. As different as they are, one from another, what strikes me the most is the way each piece dares to declare itself. There is an audacity here that emboldens the writer to speak out regardless of the consequences.

And this is the balance found in the best literature, a combination of indebtedness and curiosity which involves a looking backward and forward at the same time. Finally, the freshest voices speak from a platform nailed together by the writers who have come before them. After he had read “Leaves of Grass,” Emerson—he of the three names—wrote to Walt Whitman: “I great you at the beginning of a great career, which must yet have a long foreground somewhere, for such a start.” Who knows which ones of these teenage writers we will hear from in the future, but let us greet them too and recognize the possibility of greatness, which is impossible without such remarkable beginnings.