Tangled Lines: Quizzing the Quotidian

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The editor said,
I like your poems
about quotidian living,
but they are not
sufficiently significant
for my journal,
and, at the time,
I didn’t even
know what
“quotidian” meant,
and I agreed
with the editor
he shouldn’t
publish my poems
about quotidian living
when I can’t even
define “quotidian.”

But I really wanted
to say to the editor,
If I had to wait
till I knew the words
to describe all the things I do,
I’d probably suffer
from agoraphobia,
fearful of leaving the house,
fearful of going into the world
because I didn’t have
sufficient words
like a squirrel
venturing into winter
without a store of nuts.

So, instead, now armed with a definition for “quotidian,” I venture
quixotically into the world, offering poems like love notes, even if nobody
wants them.

In his 1995 Nobel Lecture, the poet Seamus Heaney remembers his
childhood: “I had already begun a journey into the wideness of the world.
This in turn became a journey into the wideness of language, a journey
where each point of arrival—whether in one’s poetry or one’s life—turned
out to be a stepping stone rather than a destination…” (11).

Heaney also notes: “that child was already being schooled for the
complexities of his adult predicament, a future where he would have to
adjudicate among promptings variously ethical, aesthetical, moral, political, metrical, sceptical, cultural, topical, typical, post-colonial and, taken all together, simply impossible” (13-14).

What kind of schooling and curriculum and pedagogical ventures do we need for the tangled complexities of living well in the earth? Heaney reminds me of the impossibility of curricular goals, and so I, too, “credit poetry” and “the energy released by linguistic fission and fusion, with the buoyancy generated by cadence and tone and rhyme and stanza” (28). And like Heaney, “I hope I am not being sentimental or simply fetishizing . . . . the local. I wish instead to suggest that images and stories of the kind I am invoking here do function as bearers of value” (22).

So, I offer you a few verbal and visual images, a poem quizzing quotidian living:

Lilacs

the line is empty
but not for long,
we are home, and
Nan will hang clothes
almost every day
like semaphore flags,
signals of our presence
for the neighbours

&
I walk familiar streets, 
the air filled with lilacs, 
each breath a long 
draught of childhood, 
take photographs 
like storing jam preserves 
for writing in winter 

& 

that 
maple tree 
was a seedling, 
now grown more 
than a story high, holding 
more stories in its branches 
than I have 
life left 
to tell 

& 

long ago Pop carried 
a wild rose bush 
from his home in Britannia, 
ancient wild rose scent 
through the heart 

& 

summer squeezed between 
the long long winter’s end, 
a spring weekend or two, 
and autumn’s volcanic urgency, 
like a thin slice of Maple Leaf 
boiled ham that ties the tongue with 
traces of cellophane and gelatine 

& 

in front of the house 
Pop planted the snowball bush, 
petals of fractal abandon, balls in balls, 
like he might forget in summer 
the long last winter
for three decades
Pop and Nan have lived
on Lomond Street, moved in
when it was new, Pop says,
when we moved in, I could wave
to my neighbours across the gully,
but that was a long time ago, can hardly
see my neighbour’s house now,
through the dark, lush forest,
the hidden neighbourhood,
still rooted though

Pop tells me since spring
his knees have not been good,
but in the Legion magazine he read
about cod liver oil, how it repairs
cartilage, how he’s rebuilding his knees,
and I ask if cod liver oil can mend
a broken heart, too, but he isn’t sure,
will check the magazine later,
and I remind him about the time
he told me honey, sulfur and vinegar
could fix any ailment, too, and
all he says is don’t lose hope

the city night lights
are embers in a campfire,
the only way I see my past,
though in my heart’s keen eye,
the clusters of houses that cling
in mountain slopes and valleys
are a meadow of wildflowers

this graveyard
in the middle of the city
is a tangled garden of weeds,
forgotten, a place for lovers only,
a florist’s nightmare of wild rose and
chokecherry bushes, weeds, dandelion, hay,
forget-me-nots, and juniper berries like blood,
everything grows hot in full cemeteries where only
the headstones hint at the stories of smallpox, house
fires and drowning, mothers and children side by side
in this lost graveyard where nobody remembers the stories,
like unwed mothers, criminals, and the unbaptized buried out
side the sanctified and blessed church garden offenced plots

&

I chop wood for winter fires
while the sun burns my back,
one log is knotted hard my axe is too small
to bite the wood only nips at it
with a crackie dog’s spite,
I know from school mathematics
there is a formula for how
to divide a circle and find the center
that holds the log together but I can’t remember it
on this August day when
such knowledge would be useful

&
in the midday sun on the patio
with a Black Horse or two,
I forget how to count, I hear
lawnmowers and sparrows,
and the crash of wood trucks
on the Lewin Parkway
like a jagged scar
through the city’s rock heart,
and the leaves of silver asp whistle
in the breeze like light rain

&

widows and widowers
gather at Mt. Patricia Cemetery
to listen to lost stories
and breathe the scent of new ones
in the plastic and silk bouquets
of grief and hope

&

the sky is a dozen shades of black and white,
never monochromatic, and blue-light washed, too

Pop says, she won’t let me go
any further than the shed these days,
not that he ever listens, Nan says

Nan just called out
the long-range forecast,
mostly rain for the next week

rain bounces off the asphalt
with the lines, electric
and geometric, of a pinball game

I just visited Pop in his shed.
He said, I’m giving it all up soon.
I wasn’t sure what he meant.
He explained he wouldn’t be working in the shed much soon, he wouldn’t be making stuff soon

we eat a lot,
Nan marks each day’s rhythm with food,
even before a meal is eaten,
she plans the next and the next,
only running up to Dominion,
always the fear of running out,
with enough food stored in the cupboard and deep freezers to feed everybody on Lomond Street for a year at least

Nan says,
the toutons are right raw,
but nobody stops eating

&

the ocean always calls
on this shore forever,
for close to forever for sure,
the ocean always changes,
always a little more,
a little less, always enough,
more than I can name,
driftwood swept in a line
along the beach, a fence
around the ocean that can’t be held,
the ocean always calls

&

no line will ever hold
the tangled light of beachstones,
shells, windswept trees,
beyond counting,
morning glory, and family,
seen always,
only,

like a fragment
in a sea arch
without end

&
Work Cited


About the Author

Carl Leggo

on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, clinging to a branch of the Fraser River, dreaming how long it takes the Fraser to flow in the earth and commingle with the Atlantic Ocean where I also know the perils and wonders of clinging to edges.

In all my teaching, writing, researching, and questioning, I am seeking to live poetically in the world.

*(Carl is currently clinging to the snowy edge of the Atlantic Ocean, in snowshoes, living sabbatically in York Harbour, Newfoundland. He habitually resides in the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia. ed. note).*

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