FEATURE REVIEW

Barbara Myers

Walking Around Writing

Méira Cook. *A Walker in the City*. London, Ontario: Brick Books, 2011.
Michael Lithgow. *Waking in the Tree House*. Markham, Ontario: Cormorant Books, 2012.
John Terpstra. *Naked Trees*. Hamilton: Wolsak and Wynn, 2012.

The idea was to see what these books might have in common, what with the inducement of trees and urbanity beckoning from their titles, both of which, as someone who has almost always lived in cities, I approve of. Think of Virginia Woolf's fondness for walking the streets of London, and for long country jaunts—the habit of writers to go for walks is close to sacred, their favourite stimulant (really). The essayist Phillip Lopate, in his *Waterfront: A Walk Around Manhattan*, writes, "The mind relaxes through the calming, repeated movement of a stroll, while the legs' cadences trigger the rhythms of poetry." He calls the result a "walking-around literature."

My expectation of these three books was that they would form part of this tradition. But we also know that choice of subject is no more than a starting point for the poet; as Richard Hugo points out in *The Triggering Town*: "This is probably the hardest thing about writing poems... you must switch your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words." Which is where individual style emerges, the truth of the writer's own experience and sensibilities.

Of the three books discussed here, Méira Cook's *A Walker in the City* is the most experimental stylistically, and the one in which walking is the ostensible triggering

subject. Méira Cook, a South-African born poet and novelist who now lives in Winnipeg, has won the CBC literary prize and other awards, and this year was long-listed with this book for the ReLit Award. It's a book of many parts, and the long opening sequence that gives the book its name might be the springboard for all that follows. Perhaps. A situation, if not quite a narrative, unfolds in different, quite mysterious ways, and if all the parts do not quite constitute a whole in a straightforward unfolding, they intrigue and please in all their difference. The eponymous opening sequence dazzles with its groupings of quatrains that take us on a jaunty sojourn, with innovative syntax often reminiscent of James Joyce, and occasional shout-outs to Lewis Carroll:

> Then, shining all
>
> and sure, vaults she the wind's
> cathedral, stamping booted feet,
> lifting a hand unmittened, yes,
> the better to balance welterweight
>
> wind (flying fists) on a wet fingertip.
> *Hello again, hello. It's me (it's only me).*

It does take the reader a moment to adjust, but soon the inverted sentence structure, the innovative vocabulary, brighten the walk—a brisk and purposeful journey in which one encounters city scenes, gloves lost or frozen, a bus ride, street lamps, an intersection (Portage and Main) and all the while the (third-person) soliloquy puzzles out relationships and the world at large. And (aha!) she comes across

> Lit windows, bent heads
> absolving the dishes clean. Passes
> the old city poet in his aerie,
> dismantled this night by lust
>
> or virtue, pacing his rooms, scribbling...

And gives us the two characters who together and apart will speak and be spoken of throughout the book in their various aliases.

In reviews of Cook's collection published to date, there has been some theorizing about the story that (sort of) unfolds—just who the various characters are and what they signify in the seven stand-alone but connected sections of *A Walker in the City*. The second sequence, "The Beautiful Assassin," gives us a noirish death (the old poet) dramatized as murder; it's followed by "Being Dead." With names and aliases scattered throughout, the reader must contribute her or his own interpretation. Read one way, the entire collection is an elegy to one who loomed larger than life: the poems in "Being Dead" are all the more affecting for being ferociously graphic. Brilliantly inventive throughout, the language is never formulaic, never frivolous, although there are moments of passionate frivolity, of breezy or clipped expression, a tone invented to speak about loss. The truth of momentous experience is told without lapsing into either banality or sentimentality.

Without connective narrative between the poems in Michael Lithgow's debut collection *Waking in the Tree House*, walking is more presumed than literal; as in Cook's collection, cities do figure, and there is at least one tree. Lithgow plumbs experience in the lives of children, teens and adult men, for glimpses of what matters. Distinct from the teaching of the Buddha in the Fire Sermon, who taught that everything is burning with desire and a cause of suffering, in the poem "The desire of everything" we are in "the heads of eleven-year-olds, / stuffing ping pong balls with matches," children who love fire "more than smallness and boredom, /...More than discovering a world of exhaustion," a triggering world with its own veracity. In "A rescue," where "it started with drinks" young friends come across abandoned crates of chickens and "we were left alone / with our consciences." They grab "two battered birds in a box" and run away: "Saving two lives / makes one's feet lift off wet pavement in a light rain" and a chicken and a rooster live out full lives, eggs and all. Now living in Ottawa and studying for a Ph.D., Lithgow is a well-published writer with poems in a number of Canadian magazines and in the anthology *Undercurrents: New Voices in Canadian Poetry*. This first collection exhibits a wide range of material and a modest range in form, with lyric poems that often rise from the competent to the memorable.

In "Signal to noise," one of several exceptionally strong poems, we are back with the child, now at the dinner table, where "the silence seemed tectonic," prompting escape to "the wind-swept iciness of a small park." We are shown a raven on a communication tower, and a sumac's "bent arms" holding "their frozen fruit / like trophies." The child

finds himself bowing to what seems like applause from the frozen sumac, although he is wary of being observed and showing “the terrible extent of my hunger.”

More than one poem treats old age with Lithgow’s own brand of compassion and fascination, and a state he can only project as lived experience. In “The old man was laughing,” the description of an encounter with the inhabitant of old home on the east coast is steeped in foreignness; the land of the old versus the land of the young. And again, in “Roofing,” the speaker’s father

> rubs his knees and looks around, sighing at a planet
>
> that has grown ‘round him for 72 years, blinking up
> at sons who are strangers.

The speaker recognizes the father’s need, while “my need has changed” and the brothers tarring the roof with affection are “watching // from a height a man puzzled by the brevity / of his life.” Then, in the powerful “I was only passing. Actually I was in a rush” the old person is a heavy-set woman who has fallen on a cement step, where she lies helpless and in pain, “her horrible / cry when they moved her body.” The speaker notices an old man in the crowd stomping away and it seemed “we were all falling” and the only thing to do is to stamp the foot “at old age and spit at its unfairness.”

While Lithgow is “[w]aking in the tree house” having been “cradled… in the musky smells of forest,” John Terpstra is observing “[n]aked trees extend their complicated praise” in the city. In Terpstra’s re-issued *Naked Trees*, where city and walking are presumed, the poem “Poiesis” (a making or creating) alludes to work that “reconciles thought with matter and time, and person with the world.” It is, perhaps, his *ars poetica,* tree standing in for poem:

> that splendid marriage of spontaneity and discipline which exudes mastery of the form… a thing of structural necessity, which, when it was complete, showed no evidence of its having been accomplished… By nature anonymous, ongoing, and sprung from the earth.

Terpstra identifies with trees (this award-winning author of eight books of poetry is also a cabinet-maker), losing himself in his subject just as Keats advised. His prose poems

are so lyrical that the notion of lines begins to seem like an over-refinement that would add nothing but preciousness and unwanted artifice to the clarity of his compositions. The current volume, a handsome re-issue of the out-of-print original published in 1990 by Netherlandic Press (Windsor), is enhanced with illustrations by Wesley Bates, who is primarily known for his work in wood engraving. The first third of the book is a long sequence, "The Street Where She Lived," that recounts the experiences of the speaker's neighbours when trees on their street were cut down by authorities. The "she" of the title both describes a woman who has lived there from girlhood to old age, and a silver maple of approximately the same number of years.

Terpstra manages to be conversational and lyrical at the same time. He doesn't shy away from direct reporting, a device often avoided by poets, and the narrative thread of "The Street Where She Lived" is interspersed with direct speech. It begins, "This is the year they're taking down the trees. Six so far in the immediate neighbourhood." Much of the poem is in the voice of the old woman, with a narrator picking up threads, filling in. We who live in cities (as most of us do, now) have witnessed the loss or cruel disfigurement of old familiar trees, if not on our own streets then close by, and perhaps, feeling the effect of Terpstra's work, could wonder at how the tree feels in the circumstances. One section in this sequence begins with "Knowing their names," mixing trees and plants with kids and surnames, and goes on to "Knowing their habit. Roseclipper. Birdfeeder... snow peas"; "Knowing the ones who grew from seed"; "Knowing the ones conspicuous in absentia. *Ulmus americana. Acer saccharinum.* Mrs Doris Gage." This simple list poem merely names persons, plants, habits, and so on, but its deliberate invocation of minute particulars both evokes intimacy and taps the reader's intuitive grasp of Terpstra's world.

The remainder of book, "A Deciduary" (no slight to conifers, the author assures), offers the experience of trees from "Habitat" to "Hypothesis" and "Indifference" to "Varieties" in an alphabetical order that uses randomness to interesting effect. This extensive second part invites more than one reading for its originality and tenderness. "Memory," for example, invokes an erasure, when "[t]he forgetfulness of winter is firmly locked in... the true present, coming in fits of bare flailing arms... if only the wind would let up." Other poems, such as "Transpiration," verge even closer to prose. It begins, "As humankind is to fauna, the tree is to flora: we stand together at the top of our respective heaps... So much has transpired between us." For all its reverence and appeals to the tree-huggers

among us, the thrust of the collection is clear-headed in also describing the uses of trees as wood; keeping in mind Terpstra's other craft of carpentry, this piece is also an essay on utility and relationship. Whether in use, in admiration, or in cataloguing, it's hard to resist Terpstra's unabashed enthusiasm for his subject.

How can I tell what I think till I see what I've said, as Forster famously wrote, and perhaps thinking-in-motion; thoughts triggered by the cadences of the legs—digs up the deeper truths. In these three collections, with Cook's sharp, distinct lyric *I*, Lithgow's complicated compassion, Terpstra's ability to straddle and transcend the line of subjectivity, the truths are different and the themes vary. The result on the page is poetry as necessity.