

Hogtown Diary I: Edward the Caterpillar

by Andrew Macdonald

Twice, in late September and again in early October I sojourned to the Don River valley below the Bloor Street (Prince Edward) viaduct. The first time I got lost and skidded down the western side of the valley south of the bridge; the second time I found the stairs flush with its southern buttress. Late September:

Emerge just shy of a culvert on the valley floor,
dart across yellow-lined (park)way,
monkey over a fence and drop down beside a moist bed of reeds,
border of an abandoned rail line.
All vigour and curiosity.
Gingerly slippin' through eye-high cattails, crossin' cut-gravel and twin steel spines:
Union Station curvatures.

Hard path pocked and dusty, courted by wildflowers and waist-length grass,
I'm wadin' through Golden Rod, Queen Anne's Lace, Purple Loosestrife and burrs.
Pace slows, half pluckin' burrs from sleeves half eyein' the tell-tale ribbon of trees lining the bank of a river:
Willow, alder and a meagre smattering of hardwoods bud this tongue of biota stuck between the asphalt strips of the Bayview
Extension and Don Valley (Park)way.

Passin' a patch of saplings, nestled in swaths of grass
and reach visible water, reach the Don River.
Tangled locks of vegetation obscure its bank,
Fall current slips by en route to shoreline wharves and industrial marine facilities,
Great Lake Ontario.

Resting, rocking on haunches I contemplate a bee who rummages for nectar.
A halcyon sky drifts over afternoon, buoyed by Sun's shine
Rays slant to the nape of my neck: wax ecstatic;
willin away the motorists' drone:

Most of my urban-slung dreams include pining for fresh water to listen to,
or into which dip a paddle.
For a quarter-century I've lived within walking distance of a river;
suddenly I have a strange sensation
of being ridiculously late for a spontaneous meeting.

Bikers flying low like swallows flicker past the blind of trees on the far bank.

From my position a quick scan captures the breadth of the valley from Danforth-side to Bloor-side, east-side to downtown-side.
Dwarfed by the viaduct's titanic legs and muscular steel webs
like a pebble in the shedded skin of a glacier
I'm gazin' up at a frozen caterpillar spanning this unruly gap.

I try to imagine it isn't there.
Wonder how the valley was perceived by someone living in Toronto before 1918: People crossing flimsy wooden spans or
bolted iron bridges in the gut of the valley.
Wonder who (if anyone) lived by the river?
People do now.
(My other trip: unlashed tarp on a shelter; blue tongue ranting with wind in the husk of our metropolis)

Troddin' upstream beneath willow branch eves,
exposed river bed rises around the footprints,
water spins by the far bank and
F a n s-diaphanous-,
chattering over stony flats,
senses steeper grade and disappears at my heels.
Mud shelf tapers to the river bluff and a path above snakes northward;
in places decayed brickwork lines the inner banks, forming a discreet channel.
The sun's rays jostle with distant branches: Waxen orange perched on inverted roots.

