

ÉCOUTE

by Bill Tremblay

Flashes of sound pulse outward
from children's cries as vaccination needles pierce
soft shoulder muscles and piano notes
chords and melody of a minuet as other schoolkids
in ante-bellum tuxes and white hoop skirts
make bridges with their arms arching.
Some vibrations soothe, some shock, some rumble
low as a caterpillar inching across sidewalk cracks,
an under-sound below the human hearing.

Five o'clock winter, factory whistles mingle
with vesper bells. Men, women, overcoats, galoshes,
slop through slush from mills home to make supper,
sleet stinging their faces, the final *travail* of Adam's curse.
My aunt says "*É coutez et apprenez.*" I like the rhyme.
Listen and learn, she tells me.
By ear I can tell foot stomps by fat hairy wrestlers
make punches sound like jack-hammers cleaving cement.
It's not real when they grunt like wild boars
rooting for truffles. What is all this sound for
but yearnings of hearts with wings?

Summers, the ice-man clomps upstairs
to the second floor of a triple-decker tenement
with his orange rubber cape, tongs chunked
into a fifty-pound block as Mme. LePlante opens the door
in her house-dress: *Comment se va, George?*
Vegetable men in a canvas-top truck whip up dust
as they charge down the street singing their obligato:
Tomatoes, potatoes, cu-cumbers,
ripe juicy melons, fresh from the vine.
Dizzy's father shambles drunk, slipping on sand
Laid down by plows scraping sparks.

His wife sighs in the kitchen.
She married a child and now must put him to bed.
A Ford pickup rumbles after him.
Fish men arrive from stinging ocean swells with tuna
from the Outer Banks. On the radio a woman's voice:

"Once I had a secret love that lived within
the heart of me." She reaches for a crowning sound:
"Now I shout it from the highest hills ... "

Car brakes screech, a dog whimpers.
People on Central Street hold their breath.
Silence is the death of sound. Sound is the death of silence.

Like gears in a wind-up train set
with a train station, stores, houses, a church,
God's tongue bonging, just as any town does.
My mother and father speak French to keep their secrets.
I agree: I don't want to know.
She has a recording she plays on the Victrola:
a woman sings *allez vous-en, allez vous-en*.
I can hear the heartbreak in her throat but not the reason.
English is my mother tongue. I cling to it as if it were
a life-raft and I lost on the open sea.
Si le Paradis est notre véritable maison,
qu'est-ce que c'est, mon petit, qu'est-ce que c'est?