

The time of our lives

David Waltner-Toews

I am having the time of my life
digging up an old pine stump
with my daughter
in the bright fall sunshine.
Everything I need to know about life
and death is in this moment.

The spade is singing
among the white-collared mushrooms:
Praise to the Fungi Imperfecti,
the Fusaria and the Cladospores.
The hatchet chops a tune
into the wood's soft heart:
Praise to the wood lice, the earthworms,
millipedes, hister beetles, common black
ground beetles, the slugs like ushers
waving their antennae at the calamitous lightspill.
Please close the door. The show's in progress.
Praise to the unseen saints of Gaia,
the Bacilli, the Clostridia,
and the pearly Micrococci.

Praise to the myriad of unseen
crawlies, the forgotten ones,
the bond breakers, hewers of cellulose
who make possible this uprooting.

After so many years
a friend becomes part of you.
Where the roots begin and the earth ends,
where pleasure, where pain,
where wishful memory, or truth,

cannot be dissected.
It is I myself who would be uprooted
if I uprooted you.

Time is an arrow
only in the briefest bug-life fragments,
and at the meteoric limits of our growth.
Where we live time is an inchworm,
rhythms of seasons and spades,
roots broken and re-sprung.
The stump is lifting
under the pry of my spade.
A mouth opens below,
a dark mouth singing
soft fleshy things,
singing multi-footed messengers,

singing lieder of cycles—
the carbon cycles, the nitrogen cycle,
the water, the sulphur,
singing of the microscopic fixers,
singing lustily, with full synthesizer backup,
in chlorophyllic warbles,

who make me, *Hominus Imperfecti*,
possible, and you, and our sons
and our daughters, and
brightly, in the blue, sharp sunshine,
as the roots lift free, I am dug in,
rooted,
earthworms, beetles, fungi,
bacilli all around me,
skittling up the spade handle toward me, singing:

Welcome home.
Your turn is next.

About the poet

David Waltner-Toews, Guelph, Ontario, is a poet, essayist, fiction-writer, veterinarian, epidemiologist, husband, and father of two grown children. This poem is reprinted, by permission of the author, from *The Impossible Uprooting* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1995).