

Rick Campbell

More Sacred and the Profane

Gerry LaFemina. *Baby Steps in Doomsday Prepping*. Madville Publishing, 2020.

Baby Steps in Doomsday Prepping is Gerry LaFemina's thirteenth collection of poems. Three of his previous books, and this one, are prose poems. It's beyond the scope of this review to explore whether prose poems render the life we live on this earth differently than lined and formal verse, or if they give us our lives more like a novel or a collection of essays than a volume of poems. But this may explain why, as Janet Lowery on the back of GL's book claims, these poems "celebrate the quotidian, the commonplace, the ordinary things of this world."

After looking up quotidian and reading this fine collection, I am willing to agree. Gerry LaFemina writes about the things of the ordinary world in an extraordinary way. The title presents us with two areas of inquiry—"baby steps" and "doomsday prepping." One needs to be careful about focusing too intently on the common and dire definition of doomsday. It's the baby steps, the simple shuffling stumble and totter of one moving through life that this collection is about.

The most constant indication of the quotidian doomsday is our attempts at finding and sustaining love. These poems have much to say about this struggle. Love leaves the speakers here hurt and yowling. Love might mean "getting my mouth washed out with soap," or be a towel "damp and left on the floor, with the scent of you . . . a dropped flag of surrender." In "Tarantula," the spider as metaphor results in this lament: "Sometimes, I'll say it loved me, but truly I know otherwise."

Prepping for doomsday isn't an end of the world reckoning, which some will claim is in the realm of the sacred, but the more profane items of the everyday. A laundry list of topics in these poems includes a diner, an umbrella, a monkey wrench, a manhole cover, a boil, squirrels, a pencil, a Frisbee, a bed, a pocket watch, a toenail, and a number of cats. Doomsday is not the end, or not just the end, but the trials and tribulations that make up a life.

However, these items of daily life usually fall short when it comes to finishing the tasks at hand. The monkey wrench leaves so many things undone. The umbrella flaps in the gale like a bat. The bed is a foreign land. In an homage to a Joe Jackson song we find out that yes, she really is going out with him and we are left in a dark room

Kestrel

listening to “the national anthem of the small country that is the self.”

Before the reader gets the idea that these poems are a baleful trek across the land of close calls, small and large failures, let me say that somehow this isn't so. Perhaps because these are prose poems they allow us to go on looking for hope and finding it in the intrepid act of putting one word in front of the other. More so than in a collection of lined poems, where the visual nature of the poem and its discrete lines make single poems the focus of our reading, this prose verse is more like a vignette. The book itself is the final statement on doomsday and it somehow manages to stave it off, at least for now. These prose poems are plucky; they keep on coming and going. They keep trying to find hope, as in “The Squirrels of Houghton Lake” when one “looks both ways, chirps with happiness, brings [the acorn] to its mouth.”

These prose poems might not give us many of the singular ecstatic moments one might find in lined poems, but there is one for sure. Tucked between a poem about a rock collection and a bullet box, we find “Gibson Les Paul Double Cutaway,” a jubilate to love, to a guitar that “weeps gently in my arms like a lover once did.” This poem, this guitar, gives the reader hope; it's made for “our feral souls to rock, to scream, to shred.” It makes us feel like the angels “when God made the heaven and the earth and declared it was good.” This guitar can save us after we have “repented and trespassed again, head banging. All barre chord and boogie. All feedback and growl. All torch and dirge”

This is what Gerry LaFemina's best poems do for us—keep doomsday at bay.

Gerry LaFemina is a frequent contributor to *Kestrel*.