

WYTHE HOLT*

THOUGHTS ON HANK LAZER'S "LAW-POEMS"

... ever greater fidelity to something

—Hank Lazer, "Law-Poems"

The thing is, neither the words of poets nor the words of lawyers capture human life. The one is too flighty, imprecise, unsure. The other is too staid, too concrete, too sure. Hank Lazer's law-poems exhibit this, interspersing snippets of each in contrast. The only connection between a snippet of law, bordered on both "sides" by snippets of poetry, is this contrast. But does meaning lie somewhere between?

... grace is the hope
that we may ever learn to live at-
tenuately not constantly distracted but able
at last many of us all of us to keep
in mind a train of thought a love of being

For Lazer, the answer is at least tentatively "no." Meaning is on the edge. Getting it together is his every-moment thing. Such is the post-modern world, a world I also live only on the edge of, since I disclaim and reject it as best I can. I am a lawyer. I am an unreconstructed child of the Enlightenment. Lazer is always only a child, always abruptly facing what is apparently new.

think of the shock when you learned ...
... that the story
you tell yourself you are is but
one of the ways you take shape only
within language and the rest is sleep
that we already speak the language of the dead

Hank Lazer's shimmering, doubtful, insecure world is frightening to me. What is grace for him is my own every-moment thing. He and I keep sliding apart, sliding past each other, though he is more adroit, since sliding is the condition of his existence. It is a condition arising in part from his Jewishness, but he is ever devoted to serving grace.

... when mooses grew
confused god drew him a simple sketch

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if it is in the scheme of things that
i am to be denied grace that does not
prevent me from laboring nonetheless
in the service of that grace

Thank goodness. For here is my world:

13A-6-1 Definitions. (2) PERSON. Such term,
when referring to the victim of a criminal
homicide, means a human being who had been born
and was alive at the time of the homicidal act.

Lazer and I have the same progressive concerns. Power and author-
ity mean to take our freedom in the name of freedom. We must care, we
must fight tyranny, we must speak out.

16-40-3 (c) The direction of study shall . . .
. . . emphasize
the free-enterprise-competitive economy of
the United States of America as the one which produces
higher wages, higher standards of living,
greater personal freedom and liberty
than any other system of economics on earth.
It shall lay particular emphasis upon . . .
the evils of communism, the fallacies of communism
and the false doctrines of communism.

* * * *

a new treatment for the mentally ill is
to give the person a one way bus ticket
far away from the community . . .

* * * *

. . . no wait a minute this
time the enemy was named "the government
forces" but still they were backed
by another enemy with their own cost
overruns and bad planning but anyway
they are insurgents of one sort or another

* * * *

i don't like countries that harbor terrorists and that export
revolution or too many subcompact cars . . .

* * * *

as a good american i am compelled to picture
history as a tough guy but nothing to be afraid of
nothing that can't be fought or bought off

And all persons are sacred, all are us, all are to be fought for.

when they came for me handcuffed me and
threw me across the backseat of the car
even then i could not believe it was
happening when they tied the blindfold
and taped my mouth shut i began to believe

* * * *

. . . she has
no work at age 86 to go to a friend with
a mending leg none who drive any more once
a week the club and bingo to breakfast and
to lunch and to dinner . . .

Thank goodness.

We both also know that it will not be the law which does the
fighting, which is useful in the fighting, which wins the battle. My
words, my precision, are also only a means, a hope.

is there a law between us some pact
we go by . . .

. . .
as we seek some other form of proof
a way through the night to prove ourselves
to each other

* * * *

it is time now to open up your books
for general inspection so that the columns
can be carefully added and subtracted squared
so that the courts can determine if any
thing has been left out

* * * *

13A-11-12. Desecration of venerated objects.
Commentary: With no clear decision on flag
desecration statutes the lower courts have gone
both ways. The constitutionality seems to center
on the courts' interpretation of the conduct,

that is, whether it is conduct per se,
or symbolic speech.

But. Will poetry win the fight? Is there a winning? For me, the lawyer, the Enlightened one, the answer is yes. For Hank Lazer, the answer is more doubtful than the question, and often, pleasingly, degenerates into whimsy, word play—only the pleasure of internalness, of pure escape from the world of suffering, of ridiculing the law's precision.

... up hold it
as we (tacitly) promise to uphold the law
of the land paws of our hand
go light on the coriander ...

Even to accomplish anything is achingly difficult, and perhaps we should be satisfied with less than winning, maybe with just fighting the battle.

to make some small new order and not
get vain about it to make some new order and know
it as but a small domain temporary as the impulse
which sustains it to make some small new order

that's a mighty tall order stranger
you'd best be moving on pilgrim

Hank Lazer and I agree, however, poet and lawyer, that we imperfect word-users will fight.

... we are
all held accountable we are all
found wanting ...

Thank goodness.