

Methods of Thinking and Methods of Working

I. A Story About

The poets are g
counts and po
they attempted

*The following was performed as part of
The Ides Manifesto during One Yellow
Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo,
March 15, 1988 in Calgary, Alberta.*



Brian Rusted

They began s
ence in the ce
praised the jac
poems over t
connected. W
insects, anima
into existence
across the coun
it were not tha

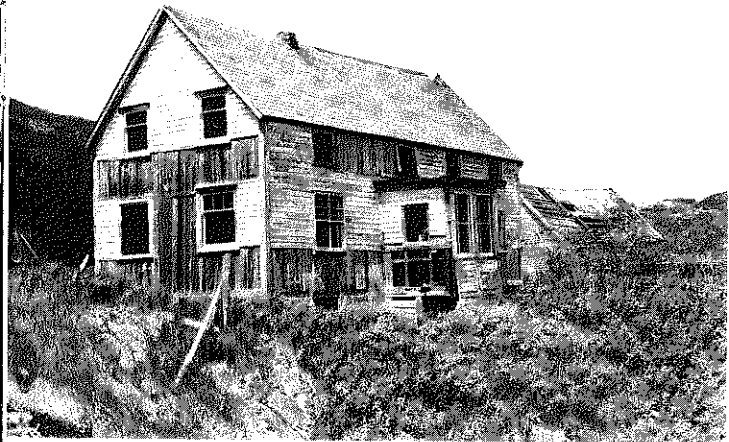
This version o
came and push
critical, dogs s
They did not u
covering their
wallpaper, wh
passages, at ni

The poem that
of it, lining kit



I. A Story About Poetry

The poets are gone. No need for them now. Interpretation is what counts and poets get in the way. I did hear that before they left, they attempted to write this country into a poem.



They began small. Unambitiously. Each working from experience in the celebration of what they called home. The poets praised the jackpines and alders outside their doors. They placed poems over the trees, making certain the pages held and connected. Whole regions were written, the movements of insects, animal dreams and the schemes of people. All written into existence they thought. You could find your own way across the country, read it from side to side like a book. Parts of it were not that interesting but on the whole it was okay.

This version of the country did not last, of course. Chinooks came and pushed one region's poem onto another's. Cattle were critical, dogs snapped at the edges and people became confused. They did not understand it all. They burned some, just the bit covering their garden, or their car. Others used pieces for wallpaper, while a few sensitive ones puzzled over favourite passages, at night after the hockey game, or *The National*.

The poem that covered us is gone now. You can still find pieces of it, lining kitchen cupboards, in magpie nests, or by looking

closely at ants: they carry fragments five times their size. But the poets are gone. Their houses are empty.

II. Stories About Poetry

That is just a story, not literary history. It did not happen, though it could. We have imagined words absolute. Poets do leave us with fragments that are opportunities for interpretation. If we tire of them, we make up new interpretations, new stories.

This is another story about poetry. I must tell it to you in case you do not have one of your own, in case you have grown tired of the one you have. And I must tell it so I can keep going. We do that: tell ourselves stories to keep going. This story about poetry is one. The poets are gone. Their houses are empty. We have only stories about them.

III. Dwelling on the Edge

In the morning I leave my house and walk down the path to the sea. There is a shack perched on the end of a wharf. The door is open. Harold and Evelyn are inside cutting up mackerel and slipping the chunks of dark flesh onto hooks. They catch codfish with these and later they will return and clean their catch.

"How's the fishing?" I ask them. "Not much good," they say. They are Newfoundlanders. "How's the writing?" they ask. "Not much good," I tell them. I am also a Newfoundlander.

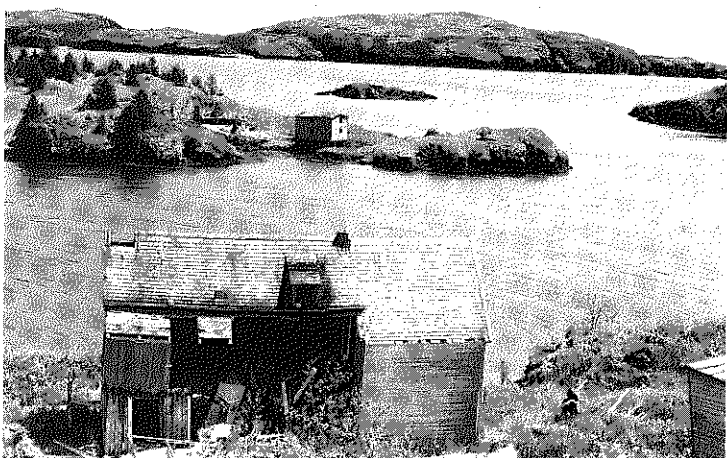
We lie about our work rather than have others envy our lack of complaints. I watch them load the baited trawls into their boat and then I walk back along the path to my house. Here, pushed to the edge of this country, we all make a living near deep water, but it is not much good.

In the evening, I walk back down the path to the shack on the

wharf. Harold and Evelyn are not there. In the evening, kids take it over. Monica, Philip, Wayne and Pauline. Ronnie and Todd, Vanessa, Jeremy, and Cathy. They are drinking cherry cokes and eating chips. They smoke cigarettes, talk about Corey Hart, and wait to see if something might happen.

Ronnie says, "Brian, look at this." He stands in the doorway of the shack. Harold and Evelyn think it is their shack and lock the door every evening after they have cleaned their fish. When they leave the kids come and break the lock, swing wide the door. In the cave of Morpheus there were no doors, *nulla domo tota est*, and the creaking of hinges did not disturb the manufacture of dreams. I guess in the classical world too there must have been kids drinking cokes, smoking Export A's, and breaking into places.

Ronnie says, "Brian, over here." He is inside the shack now and I follow. The door is open. "Can you see this?" he asks. "Here,



look over here." There is a faint glow on the table where Harold and Evelyn cleaned their fish. The glow moves. "See?" says Ronnie. I do, but do not know what. "It's phosphorus," he says, but that does not help. "The fish eat it, and it gets in their blood." What Ronnie waves and smears across the dark is the heart of a fish.

"Look," Ronnie says. He takes the heart deeper into the shack and presses it to the wall. He begins to write. Letters appear in

the dark. Ronnie is rubbing the heart against the wall of the shack. Words float before me and stand out from the dark. I think, we did lie, the fishing was good.

The poets have been pushed to the margins of the great poem they wrote. Only margins are left of it, margins and the stories we tell now that keep them dwelling at the edge.

IV. The Thing of Things

Poetry has been made a fetish. Like the relics of saints or high-heeled shoes, we believe the story that says these peculiar fragments of poetry are magic and truth. Unable to take the experience of poetry whole, we substitute, perversely, our strange manipulations of texts. We substitute them for the pleasure and surprise of sharing visions of real, possible or improbable worlds.

If we believe this, we submit to all the grade school teachers that accused us of not speaking proper English. And we exonerate those who dress moral visions in the selections of publishers, the readings of university courses, and the editorial policies of journals. They dress in good taste and leave us to unlace their perversity and rediscover the voices that have been silenced. The wish of history is to be in good taste and the fetish for documents laces it with objectivity. We think this is the way things are and do not ask, whose taste?

Those who make poetry a fetish struggle to have it absolute and encompass all. And yet we remain witness to the spectacular failures of Pound, and the seasonal attempts of Hallmark. Those who make poetry a fetish struggle with the remorse and nostalgia that it was once absolute yet is no longer. And they struggle because this loss of privilege pushes them to the margins. Oracles and seers become outlaws, cranks and hermits. It is not a pretty sight.

If we believe th
enough and ma
important. Poe
ignorance" and
a fetish and co
the poem will
expunged: rhy
yield to chang
more system
encourages th
centre, and fra
quotidian part
critics "don't k
talk like neuro



If we believe that poems are things, then we also believe we have enough and making more is at the expense of something really important. Poems invite us to wallow “in the rubbish of departed ignorance” and cannot advance knowledge. Some make poetry a fetish and cobble an answer with faith in progress. They say the poem will again match reality when all conventions are expunged: rhyme, archaic diction, and structures that do not yield to change in the world. This vernacular redemption is one more system of rules and artful manipulations. And it too encourages those with power to spin the poets out from the centre, and fragment audiences by geography and custom. Our quotidian particulars feed their fetish yet do not sustain us. And critics “don’t know how much farther” we can progress and they talk like neurologists saying, vernacular shows traces of brain

damage, which always means a “reduction to the emotional and the concrete.”

There is another story about poetry. In this it is a field of action, not a thing or thing of things. It is alive to the possibilities for change, alternative visions. It is “built upon the local” from “the mouths of the living” but is not itself a thing. It resists appropriation for it is “the body itself speaking.”

I have heard how whites terrorized and scattered native inhabitants to the margins of Newfoundland. And I have also heard how these native people were forced to paddle birch canoes across open sea to small islands at night, hidden by fog, so they might forage unseen for the eggs of nesting birds. I tell you this



because these people could navigate by pressing their bodies against the sides of their canoes. They could find their way by sensing the current's direction, and by trailing their hands in the dark, salt water and tasting it for the freshness of land.

These are poems of action and resistance. Here the body speaks with the particulars of the world, the hand trails in the salt, and the tongue finds another way home. This is not a world of things or direct experience. It is of representations. Worlds of representations. At the edge, these people learned a fierce new story about things. We did not listen and they left behind things only. Our stories about those things compete idly and will never become those people who left no representations. The poets are gone, you see. They left us things and their houses are empty.

V. The Renovation of Experience

In the morning I see Gertie walking down the path from the seniors' home. She clutches a small transistor radio to her ear, listens to voices from another world. She shouts at me. No matter what I am doing, she shouts at me. This morning I am helping pile old tires, broken fences and other junk for a bonfire on the beach. Gertie still shouts.

In the evening, the junk burns tall and wild, pushing back night's margins. Rotten boats, furniture, bits of old houses, and fragments of the poem, all in a necklace of tires keep the fire bright. At its edge I can see the shack on the wharf. The lock on the door has been broken again. Ronnie's words are still there, things now at the edge of the light.

Do not mistake me. There is a craft in selecting words and ordering them on a page. By such things our thought takes shape. We may be naive about words and things, we may pretend that neither are representations. That is a story and the poem as action reminds us of our complicity. It reminds us that we need

unofficial versions, and as action it reminds us that standards are still afoot and that this is not merely a game of literacy. The poem as action resists becoming a thing in someone else's story.

I tell you this because I was complicitous in finding relics to feed the fire. Poems are made from relics "and fragments of second-hand observation." Poems do not preserve though some might want to pull antiques from the fire and call them heritage. Antiques are just things and in the end it is the voice of representation we miss.

And I tell you this because Gertie still shouts at me. She stood in the glow and listened to the voices from another world. She is not out of touch. She listens to the voices and shouts at me. "Get to work!" Gertie shouts, "Get to work!"

And I tell you this because there are other shacks where locks are placed on doors, people are unable to write with their hearts, and things are preserved as true yet give no light or representation. There are fires like this all along the shore, and across the mainland.

I tell you this story about working our way back from the edge because you must continue the story. "On est chez soi et l'on a le temps."

You see, we have done it now, made a poem. In the firelight, I could still see the words inside the shack. There are fires like this all along the shore, and across the mainland. I think "replace the door when you leave." The poets are gone, their house is just a shack but I have some manners still. I saw those words glowing and can pass them to you just as Ronnie passed the small heart of the fish to me after he wrote, "we here."

Brian Rusted is a writer and researcher with a PhD in Communication Studies. He works in Calgary where he's been involved with a poetry collective, and with video.