

Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

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WORK POETRY/ POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

Brian Burch

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HEAP

Supply teachers
are at the bottom of the heap.
Students, other teachers
and administration share jokes
about us, treating us with everything
from contempt to denial.

Entering a classroom taking over the work
of a person I'll never meet, I am expected
to be the master of every subject, a person
able to control 35 strangers who all have
something better to do.

Waiting for a 7:30 a.m. phonecall for the chance to work
for the first time in two weeks, a supply teacher
is trapped. If they aren't available every day
they won't be called in. If they get other work
to cover rent and food, they'll miss calls
and be dropped from the list. Supply teachers
are expert lottery players---Will I get a call?
What are the odds?

The Toronto Board of Education trustees claim
that they can't guarantee us work or wages.
They also claim that they can't keep
enough teachers available to fill the demand.

Logic would solve this problem--guarantee wages
and we'll guarantee workers. Logic never governs
bosses. In Toronto, our bosses gave themselves
an 86% raise. They feel that without such a raise
"The right type of people won't stand for election."

You know you're at the bottom of the heap
when a demand like 'work and wages'
is seen as greedy by those with an unlimited
trough to slurp from.

A SIMPLE ACT OF CHARITY

Mist rolls across the field
followed by scraggly lines
of labour.

The mist lies low across the fields,
clinging to everything
with a musty sweetness.

A few coughs, some spreading rashes later
and the workers finish their trek
across the grape fields.

At the edge of memory
a child is being formed.
At the edge of memory is a reminder
to not go into the fields during spraying.
At the edge of memory is the foreman's promise
that nothing is going to hurt you.
At the edge of memory
a child is being formed.

LESS FOR MORE

Another form to fill out, begging
for money from some department
of some bureaucracy. What you want
is being put aside. The form seeks
an untruth. The vision of justice

is diverted towards some statistical phenomena.
 Two community gardens to be developed, jargon
 about community development. Education
 about why food is scarce, money scarce,
 beauty scarce is not a category. The proper
 mix of agency veto and myth of community control
 must be described. Through something
 about avoiding dependency, don't let them ever
 feel they are able to trust you, prepare to
 abandon the project when funding priorities change.
 The progressive fundraiser continues to ethically
 seek the money that, with each successful application,
 moves the agency from being with the outcasts
 to yet another bureaucracy that can get more from
 those in power while doing less to increase the power
 of those outside.

JUST ONE MOMENT BEFORE

Just one moment before
 I stepped out to join the Labour Day Parade
 and march to Toronto's C.N.E.
 a friend of mine from the peace movement
 reminds me that today military aircraft,
 some capable of dropping nuclear bombs
 and firing nuclear-armed missiles
 will be proudly flying past. Shame
 flowed over me and I turn aside,
 not willing to let my presence
 give moral force to labour's presence
 at an arms display. The labour movement
 I belong to supports peace, the movement
 going to the C.N.E. just doesn't care.

BENDING OVER, THE DANCE

Bending over, the dance continues:
 Weeds dug; Weeds dug; Weeds dug;
 Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed;
 Rashes Grow; Rashes grow; Rashes grow.

Tomorrow, the planes come by. The next day
we return. Tomorrow, the planes come by.
The next day we return. Tomorrow, we visit
the doctor and the priest. The doctor will say,
"Nothing new." The priest will say, "I have
no miracles." Tomorrow, the planes come by.
The next day we return.

Felipe still believes he will grow arms.
Twenty friends had miscarriages. Jose lacks fingers.

Tomorrow the planes will come, spraying the fields.
The next day we return. The priest says maybe
we shouldn't work so soon but he can't feed us.
The doctor says its dangerous but he can't feed us.
Tomorrow the planes will come, spraying the fields.
The next day we return.

Bending over, the dance continues:
Weeds dug; Weeds dug; Weeds dug;
Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed;
Rashes grow; Rashes grow; Rashes grow.

Brian Burch