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 it's 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.

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