

A photograph of a weathered, peeling door. The door is dark with large areas of white paint that has chipped away, revealing a lighter material underneath. A large, dark, irregular stain is visible on the lower half of the door. Through the opening of the door, a large, dark tree is visible against a light sky. The door is set within a dark frame.

affinities

ken belford

It just happens the idea of meaning exists only in fiction, where it takes on a life of its own. The evolution of the living image pleases our dispositions but the pliable appearance does not walk around on the ground and lives only in the fictional world of flashback and dream. The reality is, scenes take place, and these impossible events, these replications of objects that are not very much like the world are second hand experiences, an idea, a likeness of scenery, or an event staged in front of a microphone.

My home was dangerous. A carrier of conflict,
I sought safety in a strange land, and lived
for a while with nothing over my head.
The living conditions get lost in translation
but I'm a refugee in my own country
where it's safe for some, but not for me.
I'm trying to blend in.
It's not possible to translate what I know into English.
I wasn't pulled, but was pushed.
No one asked me who I was.
I didn't grieve the loss of my hand-made home
but I left everything I knew.
I'm from behind the mountains I once loved.
Now I'm outside my country and
would like to go to Canada.
If you knock on my gate
at two in the morning, come in
to the crowded single room of poetry,
into this dining room, bedroom and kitchen,
everyone telling their story at the same time.

I can't really say what I know
but I write provisional inferences
and, like others, perpetuate copies.
I don't know what's going on.
From simple beginnings, the poem
works in reverse through generations,
fibers meet just below the retina,
and perceptions shift. I don't care
about what's in the blind spot. At first
I saw animal faces in the trees, then
ambiguous figures moving off. That's
how it goes. Ordinarily, I'm not aware.
I don't know why we're alive.
There's always a rivalry wherever
I've gone, and the same old forces,
the same incompatible images involving
fears that can never be erased
suppress the imagination over time.
But I'm not locked on to metaphor
or what someone else says is the truth,
even though I'll remember the suffering
and fear and pain of poverty forever.

What took place was the second story wall
collapsed onto the first,
and then onto cars.

A tank farm burned and
the displacements weakened deposits
that spread laterally away
from the centre to the edge.

In every sense of the word,
sections of the interchange
started out for the apparent.

The thoughts that crossed my mind
as I salvaged items from the rubble
were of the sentence,
the habitual custom of debt,
and the stern reappearance
of the likeness -

measures of a deceptive,
out-of-order slash and crash text
after the muscle of order broke down.

I slept beside a grizzly, each of us unaware of the other, and when I awakened, heard his breath next to mine. Time began for me in that instant when I arose and saw him sleeping there with a salmonberry leaf on his head. No longer alone, all things since are altered by that switch. What else is there to know, each of us asleep and happy? But he awakened just then and barreled off into the brush, toward everything necessary. At that moment everything I knew left me and now a new world has taken place. It comes to the same thing—astonishment that this should happen at all. But I heard him breathe, and saw him make tracks before I could think. To see this thing was not horrendous, and to see it go was not delightful. Nothing meaningful occurred, but time started with a big bear. This is not about anything, but I'm waiting for some thing to come up behind me in the night. I'm like something else now, and every breath I take anticipates that moment I want again and again.

I was a man, the story goes, who needed a name, but before I get to it, let me tell you the stories about my other name. My pen name was Ken. I was translating the poems of Dhompa just before my death. Some of you follow my name around. My poems are my only property. I was unsuccessful at love and work but was generous with my money and gave it away as it came in. There are stories that are written about me but narratives were imposed on my work, and all of them ignored my complexity. I pissed out the windows of my friends, drank in the local dive, and puked on the doorsteps of my neighbours. My name was an empty space, but according to one version my lover caught a glimpse of me. Her friends called her Si. She adopted my name and the names run together. In another version, she followed me home to Hazelton and went up to me as I reached my tent. When my poems are read out, it is in the context of my name story. I have had to cope with competing narratives, but my name was chosen by me and the variations of the tale are my attempts to explain him.

Once I was dependent on my tools
but now I'm not so sure. I think
the acceptance of risk
is a science, but with pathogenic language,
the theory of risk is infected
with subprime mutants and
the theories of poetry have never been unified.
Poetry can make something
more dangerous than its parts
and this is why the consequence
of reading a poem is unpredictable.
The body is weather, the mind is a wetland,
instincts come and go, responses evolve
and signals mix but making cheese goes back
to the acceptance of uncertainties.
Don't stand alone.
Influence is never remote
and flows almost everywhere,
including the strands of the flu.
The manipulated body of the pig
is planned in secrecy and leads to improbability,
but it's a good idea to burn the GE crops.

Many watersheds are not closed, but when the forests are cut and burned for conversion to pastures, the toxic flow paths leach the sand and clay of my valley and I think of the timing of losses and the cattle of secondary growth. The weathered old soils where I lived were cycled below the forest cover like I was. Land use changes - I'm a sixty-five year old forest and my watersheds pulse. I'm plant available, an example that isn't representative, not so abundant, and preferentially lost in a nonconservative cycle. I know about losses through fire and forest to pasture conversion, and these large mats of grass called clearings, but I do not actively cycle within the system where I live on tough lowland soils, which are not flat.

Rocks sparkle and the well water rises
when the carriers awaken. That's when
the bonds are open and the lights begin
to sing, when they rise from the ground
like flames and are seen on ridges
and at sea. Movement leads to stress.
Full of flaws, forms are imperfect states
and deform when pushed against another.
It's never far from one side to the other.
Either the brittle bodies begin to move,
or the flow through the forms becomes
entangled, and locks and ends. When
existing knowledge becomes unstable
and currents that did not flow before
are flowing in the ground, when
the capillaries of porous bodies swell, and
the non-believers are somewhere in transition,
currents flow along the surface
and overwhelm the others that flow below.
One partner becomes reduced,
and the other is lost in information,
and someone asks a question about conversions
about how love spreads across the dirty surfaces.
Once we were non-conductors,
but now currents flow through the rock
and we are generated, arriving at the surface,
where impact occurs.

But one can only understand
what happens. Now and again
I pick up and piece together
the lines and measures of literal holdings
such as the canon, and I think of
the forms texts assume about slavery,
the jealous and clever code of laws
that suit the national narrative,
circulating specific cultural memories
that work very hard, making again
and again the literary form of the subject,
the plodding beasts of burden, the playthings,
the anecdotal versions, the slave poems
so loved by the white readers of the north.

Before I understood the overstory structure, I lived among the poor that result from deforestation, on the edge of an abandoned pasture seeded with aggressive grasses. Many transitional families live a while by the forest edge wherever there are remnant trees on the unproductive land around the city. Out on the patches I mean, pastures are prone to burn, ridge and valley are controlled by fern, and drying leads to abandonment, increasing fragmentation. Several authors could have an impact on the abrupt decline of diversity, but luckily, trees fall in storms, and fire burns them later. In the valley, introduced grasses are a barrier to succession. The seeds that fall into abandoned areas are not enough, and it is only much later when trees slowly shade grasses out, the large disturbance of cattle is replaced by the regenerating trees.

And some can fly, and some
can swim, and predators are
usually more dangerous
than falls, but when a cow trips,
falling takes on meaning,
and big animals know
the immediacy of gravity.
It seems the ratio of words
about cattle to words about size
has nothing to do with truth,
but runs parallel to that moment
when we step out of sequence.
If you slice anything thin
enough, everything disappears
into waves and rays.
Meaning never gets far
from the sweetheart deal,
and we make poems about
comparable coherences,
with a bias towards topics,
and rummage for rules
in the immediate world.



Ken Belford is the author of six books of poetry including *lan(d)guage* (Caitlin Press 2008), *when snakes awaken* (Nomados 2007), *Ecologue* (Harbour 2005), *The Post Electric Caveman* (Talonbooks 1970), and *Fireweed* (Very Stone House 1967). Belford has written 20 chapbooks and received two BC Arts Councils grants (2007, 2009). His poems appear in many journals and anthologies. Living in Prince George, Northern BC, Belford writes a type of poetic pidgin, mixing the avant-garde language of the modern west coast with an older contact lingo of the lands beyond the edge of the farmers' and ranchers' fields.

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Season 10-1, Tuesday, September 8th, 2009
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