

## David Phillips/THREE POEMS

### AFTER READING *THE CENTRE*

gumboots & raingear, slopping around  
in the mud, working with my brother  
hauling railway ties  
hip still sore from the awkward grip  
cold hands in soaked gloves  
February rain, 40 years old,  
not bad work, not much money in it

in the work. In the Centre  
the computer terminals wink & beep  
hushed lighting, pacifying decor, pastels  
where it's warm inside & carpets  
muffle the sounds. muffled voices

& the light never changes  
& the temperature is constant  
(quiet you're being educated)

warm, comfortable, safe  
like any institution, secure —  
a closed system, air tight.

the students come and go  
through the doors of correction, quantified  
products of specialized  
instruction, measurable units  
of administered lives.

Outside in the February rain  
thinking about the Centre, glad to be working  
& outside, as if a choice, centered  
on the impact of sledge hammer & stake  
driven to hold the wall in place.

a stack of railway ties in the mud  
& cold rain. No keeping the rain out  
at best delay the inevitable  
with rubber pants & hat. Work hard  
stay warm. It won't last.

what could be worse — to have no food  
& the house cold, to have no house  
& no one there. no talk to make you known.  
to stare at screens all day  
in the hushed rooms of the Centre  
dry & warm, as if secure. or wake up  
in the Centre & know you're there.  
or have no choice & learn to live with it

## THE CARPENTER

he has a place to sleep, a room  
towel & wash cloth folded on the bed  
curtains open to the ocean

living with the family  
while he works on the house

a curious stranger though he knows them well

table saw set up in the carport  
tools in their boxes, edges all sharp

coming in & out of the house all day  
carrying boards & measurements  
thinking of adjustments  
no one will ever notice

he wants to be invisible

the life of the family swirls around  
the children, the marriage, such a mystery  
(thinks himself a spy  
in the house of renovation)

wants to be at ease in the work  
companion to it  
watching his hands  
especially with power tools

frustration, frustration, the house is old  
so out of wack  
every board a different length  
ends angled & planed

it's all illusion  
less these days he thinks

all day thinking over & over: pay attention  
don't think  
dance along with the numbers

quick measurement, are you sure  
no looking back

this goes here & that there  
& this fits with a trick  
older than anyone

there is skill involved in removing  
one's self from what one makes

make it right for them

the thought of walking in here  
years from now  
might be a pleasure

& the work a form of affection

he suddenly loves them  
their life, their house  
will never say that  
knows it's true

\*

sitting with the family at dinner  
his other life momentarily forgotten  
looking at the beautiful children  
without seeming to  
(news on the TV over there  
mostly images of violence & dread

but this is the real world!)

hiding the bottle of scotch among the books as a joke

eating breakfast at 7:30 a.m. with 6 year old Owen  
watching My Little Pony

walking along the beach at night  
cool wind off the water  
but warm for December, almost christmas

glass of scotch & a cigarette (don't smoke  
in the house, they quit)  
walking past glowing houses & night lights

thinking—it's a notion  
i want words for

a feeling, an idea really  
but felt

fresh salt air blowing down the strait —  
that beautiful word "outside"

sitting alone in the quiet house  
everyone asleep, walking around in stocking feet

looking at what he made that day

not bad  
(levels held true)

alone in this strange little unfamiliar bed  
falling asleep listening to sea lions —  
they bark & call across Nanoose bay

must be high tide  
waves breaking & breaking over all  
the beaches of this Coast

30 feet away

Lantzville, December 1986  
*For Ron & Pat, Nicole & Owen*

## THE PATH

walking the path through the forest of Light House Park  
rise & fall of broken ground  
but soft under foot

caught in mid-step  
others walk beside me  
gone forever in the next

above, Arbutus & Pine  
constant swelling ocean below

waves flash, wind whipped air  
stung with singing.

i hear it now, feel the heat of  
bleached rock under bare feet

climbing down where the path ends  
in a flood of sunlight.

(there are photographs  
but you can't go there in a photograph)

the hand-holds down  
are beyond erosion, the waves reach  
welcoming & cool

pause & look again, stand  
on that granite shelf, emerald lip  
the water washes over.

we dove in naked in those days.  
surfaced into suddenly brightened eyes —

compose effortless swimming, critically poised  
held out of depths  
by an act of conjuring, a liquid trick of light

buoyant proof. we were in that deep.

then slip out, soaked & sleek

(going there like this i thought  
erases each step back

there is no going back) the place

is in us now. compose a way of finding it.  
call it the path