

1972

How Poets Make a Living

Richard Hugo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hugo, Richard. "How Poets Make a Living." *The Iowa Review* 3.4 (1972): 69-76. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1439>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Impressed by the expanse you said something about going on and on. And that's exactly what we've done. We have a new club called the South Shore Inn, fair food, good drinks and a panoramic view of the mountains and lake. Also a couple of posh motels have been added, a new supermarket and in progress a mooring harbor for yachts. I personally think the wolf wants to be one of us, to give up killing and hiding, the blue cold of the mountains, the cave where he must live alone. I think he wants to come down and be a citizen, swim, troll all summer for Mackinaws and in autumn snag salmon. I have to close now. The head of the posse just called and two more calves with throats cut were found this morning one mile south of the garbage dump. Our chief said this time we'll get him. This time we plan to follow his howl all the way to the source, even if it means scaling cliffs and beating our way through snow. Why does he do it? He doesn't eat what he kills. I hope we find out. I hope he breaks and spills all the secrets of his world. By the way, it turns out he's green with red diagonal stripes and jitters in wind like a flag. Take care, Bill. Dick.

How Poets Make a Living

Richard Hugo

Question: You worked for 13 years in the real world before you went into academia? What are the differences for a poet?

I dread that question but by now I've developed some replies the audience might find funny. How do you answer it seriously? I hate that phrase 'the real world.' Why is an aircraft factory more real than a university? Is it? At Montana we have people in school on a state 'work-study' program. They were in the state mental hospital at Warm Springs, and some of them are desperately trying to hang on, to remain stable enough to pass the courses, to avoid being sent back. At The University of Iowa, I knew ex-convicts on parole. I've met drug addicts (not just pot heads, real addicts), homosexuals, alcoholics, a variety of the forlorn. Not people you usually meet in industry, at least not in the offices. In some ways the university is a far more real world than business.

Really, what difference does it make what a poet does for a living? Or how he lives his life? Sometimes these preoccupations can become absurd.

I have here a book by a Llewelyn Powys, called *Advice to a Young Poet*, The Bodley Head, London, 1949. You needn't read far until you run into:

(1) To be a poet you must live with an intensity five times, nay a hundred times more furiously than that of those about you. There is no scene, no experience which should not contribute to your poetic appreciations and culture.

(2) You must regulate your life as strict as a religious devotee. You must keep a strict eye on your health. Live healthy. Though you go in rags be careful every day to wash every inch of your body so it is always beautiful and *fresh*—even if you are too hard up to afford extravagant washing bills, wash your underclothes with your own hand as though this extra personal fastidiousness were part of a religious rite. Never use powder or scent under any circumstances. In your eating keep as far as possible from animal foods, eat dairy produce, fruit, and vegetables. Always sleep with your windows wide open. Always try to take natural exercise. Aim at getting up half an hour earlier than other people and walking if possible to catch a glimpse of the sea *every morning*. These walks should be very important to gaining a heightened consciousness of existence. The senses are most keen and receptive at such a time. Do the same if possible in the evening, sending your soul from your wrist like a Merlin hawk to fly to the stars, or to ride upon the winds or shiver in the rain above the housetops.

That seems silly in print and in life it can get boring. I've been seriously advised to take drugs, to avoid drugs, to eat only seafood, to live on welfare, to stop drinking (good advice it turned out), to drink more (at one time an impossibility), to avoid sex, to pursue sex, to read philosophy, to avoid philosophy. Once someone told me I should master every verse form known to man. A poet is seldom hard up for advice. The worst part of it all is that sometimes the advice is coming from other poets, and they ought to know better.

But the question has been asked about the differences between the business world and academia. And because it doesn't deserve a serious answer, I'm perverse enough to give a few from there (business) and here (university).

There: 62,000 employees and no one cares that I write poems.

Here: When I first start, 26 employees in the department and three of them hate me because I write poems.

There: Those who know I write poems don't seem to assume anything is special about me.

Here: I've been named the head of a student dope ring. A student informant tells the administration I've advised students to print and distribute copies of a 'dirty poem' about the campus. I am a homosexual. I am a merciless womanizer. I throw wild parties. I write my poems in Italian and then translate them into English. I come to class dressed in dirty torn T-shirts. I am a liberal, a reactionary, a communist, a nazi.

There: When you leave at the end of eight hours, there's a tendency to feel you've fulfilled your obligation to the universe. Why go home and write?

Here: When teaching well I'm making love to a room of people. Is that the

same energy that goes into a poem? Is that meeting my obligation? Is the day over now? See. I'm a victim too.

I'm apt to sound too self-assured about the unimportance of a poet's job because no matter what I've done for a living I've gone on writing, and because with one exception I've never found the initiating subject of a poem where I worked. That one exception I didn't see myself, but rather heard about from an immediate superior.

C was easy to dislike if you saw only his surface. He was humorless and seemed to have no friends, and he tried to be what he thought big business wanted its executives to be. He hid his emotions under a mask of self control. His upper lip had vertical creases from years of pursing his mouth in what would appear to be considered objective thought.

Once he confided to me that he found democracy wanting because the vote of each person in the shops who didn't have the prestigious position he had and who hadn't made money in outside investments as he had, counted the same as his vote in an election. Another time he called a black who worked in our office "Rastus" aloud in a meeting. By then I knew him well. When he said Rastus he was actually trying to be funny and informal, to include the black rather than ridicule him. He was in fact a decent man, but he had practiced inhumanity so long, when he tried to be human he was crude.

He was obsessed with success. Once he told me about a man who was offered a bonus of a million dollars to take a position with a large industrial firm. A few weeks later, half drunk on martinis at lunch, he told me *he* had been offered that million dollars to take that job. I don't think he believed it, but he wanted to say it about himself. And typically, while he had spent years repressing his warmth, he had also developed ways of gaining the emotional advantage. (Whoever described the bourgeois as an emotional politician knew what he was talking about.) Once I brought him something to sign and thinking he had no pen, I offered him mine. He said coldly, "I have my own, thank you," and pulled it out from his inside jacket pocket. Even though he knew me well, he couldn't stop himself from chalking up another victory.

One day in his office he started chatting about a distasteful job he once had as one of a small group of men who were assigned to evicting a squatter from company land at Plant I. Plant I was the first and, for a long time, the only Boeing plant. It was on the bank of the Duwamish River, between the river and the Duwamish slough where, as a boy, I'd fished for porgies. Later the slough was filled in.

Plant I was now a small facility. They developed a gas-turbine engine there for trucks and cars but never could get the price down to compete with conventional car motors. Plant II, the Developmental Center, Renton, these had become the centers of activity. Plant I, once a narrow hope for the unemployed during the depression, was now all but forgotten. A few minor machine shops, some draftsmen and engineers, a couple of labs, whenever I went there it seemed to me a welcome relief from the bursting profitable huge factories and offices of Plant II. Even the forlorn drabness of it was attractive. Compared to the rest of the company it seemed almost pastoral.

The company owned the land, nearly all of it, right up to the river, or rather where the river swelled to when high tides in the bay two miles downstream backed up. Naturally, when the plant was fenced, part of the property remained outside the fence. The fence had to be straight for practical reasons, and the river bank was serrated with coves and juttings. On the northeast point of the property sticking out into the river and outside the fenced boundary, a squatter lived with his wife. They had a shell of a house, four walls and a roof, doorless doorways and no partitioning walls inside. No windows. No floors. No running water or electricity. And no one remembered how that shell or that squatter came to be there, but part of the house was on company land. It couldn't be moved back or it would fall into the river.

The squatter was a small man and he and his wife never bathed. His wife, perhaps 20 years younger, always had on rubber boots. They hauled water in buckets from a gas station about three blocks away. When they walked along the trail just outside the fence, between the fence and the river, the Boeing guards would taunt the man, and he would jump up and down in violent anger and scream back wild, incoherent phrases. He dominated his wife something awful, ordering her about like a slave. And she obeyed every command.

They had been living there for about five years. Under state law, two more years and they'd have legal ownership of the land. The company had plans for the property so they started eviction action.

As C talked, a picture started to form. The squatter, evidently insane, frightened, even terrified at the idea of moving. The woman, totally dependent, probably masochistic, maybe subnormal. What also fascinated me was C. I could sense his complicated feelings. He was troubled by the man even after all these years because the man was so irredeemably outside any values my boss assumed normal. He was regretful because he had been assigned to the eviction and so was partly responsible for throwing those sad people out. And secretly, even to himself secretly, he admired, almost envied, the man because the man was not civilized, and I suppose basically no one wants to be civilized. In his own way, C was civilized and at what a price.

The poem almost wrote itself. After it had been accepted by *The Yale Review*, but before it was published, I transferred to the Renton plant, said goodbye to C and hello to another boss. Changes of that kind were normal at Boeing. Treat those who work for you well, tomorrow you'll be working for them, we used to say.

When the poem was published I showed it to someone at work and before long several people in the office at Renton heard about it. It turned out many of them had been at Plant I at the time of the eviction, and they remembered it vividly. Especially they remembered the strange man and woman who were evicted. They all wanted a copy of the poem so I kept sending away for copies of the magazine. Never have so many copies of *The Yale Review* found their way into the Boeing Company. I included the poem in my second book, *Death of the Kapowsin Tavern*.

THE SQUATTER ON COMPANY LAND

We had to get him off, the dirty elf—
wild hair and always screaming at his wife

and due to own our land in two more years—
a mud flat point along the river
where we planned our hammer shop.
Him, his thousand rabbits, the lone goat
tied to his bed, his menial wife: all out.

To him, a rainbow trail of oil might mean
a tug upstream, a boom, a chance a log
would break away and float to his lasso.
He'd destroy the owners' mark and bargain
harshly with the mill. He'd weep and yell
when salmon runs went by, rolling
to remind him he would never cheat the sea.

When did life begin? Began with running
from a hatchet some wild woman held,
her hair a gray cry in alfalfa
where he dug and cringed? Began in rain
that cut the light into religious shafts?
Or just began the way all hurt begins—
hit and dropped, the next man always righteous
and the last one climbing with a standard tongue?

In his quick way, swearing at us pressed
against the fence, he gathered rags and wood
and heaped them in the truck and told his wife
"Get in," and rode away, a solid glare
that told us we were dying in his eye.

It was a good thing I wrote the poem when I did. The people at Renton who saw it brought me so many more facts and stories that my imagination could never have handled it all. I would have needed years to forget the details in order to create.

The squatter had worn a yachting cap and the employees called him The Admiral. I'd made one good guess. The man had kept rabbits but not nearly a thousand as the poem says. I didn't know why the company wanted the land but I said 'hammer shop' because the rhythm seemed to ask for it. Actually they planned a sand blast facility. 'The lone goat' came from two goats I'd seen tied to a kitchen stove in an adobe whorehouse on the outskirts of Juarez on Christmas Day, 1943. Most of the rest is imagination, although salmon did come up the Duwamish River and did roll along the surface, and you could sell stray logs to mills if you found one floating that was unmarked by an owner.

D had been in charge of the eviction team, and he was now there at Renton. He was a far cry from C who had first told me the story. D had repressed none of his humanity in the years he had spent in industry. The eviction, and The Admiral and his wife, had made such an impression on him that even then, almost 20 years later, he still kept the entire file with him in his desk. He had me to his office several times (at Boeing your own office meant you were some-

body) to talk about The Admiral. And he talked about The Admiral with unqualified love.

He showed me aerial photos of the land, the point jutting out into the river beyond the confines of the rectangular fencing. And he showed me the following two letters written by The Admiral. All thanks to some heroic secretary who took hours to type these from near illegible, primitive scrawl so I could have copies.

Mr. D.

Head of Boeing Co. No. 1

6-1 ave. So.

Seattle, Washington

Dear Mr. D.:

I have seen the way you people straightened. You don't even come out to where you said it come to. I know a lot of more than you thought I did. You bought my lawyer but you're not buying me. You are not owning me. There is one person and he knows of all things of what men do on the earth. You did me a lot of harm but there's one thing, thank God I'm away from your outfit, as far as the poor man that has to work for your company. I feel sorry for them. Sure fine to see little people be pushed around but some day this war will come to an end and your outfit will be forgotten. You've scured a lot of help and a lot of misfedings amongst right out in the street. I know more about your outfit than you think. This country was built for more than one man to enjoy. Thank God there was one dictator that passed over the hill. You may be making millions of dollars but there will be a day when you won't be. I am still suffering from some of your dirty work. I know kind of man you are and the rest of your so-called class. I don't like white collared folks very well. I've mostly been with Navajo Indians and Mexicans when I was a kid amongst the Eskimos. All this I can prove. I can remember when your planes went down in the Bay. We got all the news in Alaska. I was there six years with my father for the Board of Education. These so-called four lawyers on those phony bunch of papers you served me. The rest were appointed. Only one was a lawyer. It is fine when you have everything in your hands but try and make people like it. Remember there will be a day for such people of your kind. My forefathers didn't fight for their country to be pushed around. Our boys are not fighting for Boeings.

Mr. D.: I want you to understand this is what I mean there is two people involved in this deal. This afternoon you said this material I take off this house at my risk. I do not want it damaged because it do not belong to me. I consulted with these people before I saw you. I know what a man can do. It is true that I am leaving some things behind. When we are in transportation at my risk I do not want anything. I'll start moving as soon as I get the trailer. I knowed I was ten feet on your ground but possession is nine points in law. The Welfare told me about the conversation which you and them have. I got very wet. This morning I'm supposed to get from your Company that

will be returned to my mother. The other concern is Sears & Roebuck. You better take it easy I said in your office. I know what a bunch of people can do a house because the day until the 15th is very short. I want to go to get away about as bad as you want me to get away. Could you let me have a little electricity to take off this roof—a long extension cord. I admit I'm on your ground and I'll be just as happy to get off of it.

A. R. McCollister

When a man is in the middle of the road I can give a man a drink of water and feed a man. I have done. I only lost homes in my lifetime. These rabbit hutches I'm taking with me and other planks that is loose and lumber. I will have to unbolt the planks to the rabbit house unless you give me a good price for them like you said this afternoon. That money will go to my mother. The Welfare will not advance any until the 15th of the month but I'm going to have the trailer before that. If I had only known what they was like a day or two ago things might have been different because I do play around, Mr. D., but a poor man has to do the best he can.

You can almost smell the man's fear in the words. What an act of courage it must have been writing these. How little that poor twisted man had and a terrifying billion dollar corporation was taking it away. And what sudden bursts of eloquence reserved usually it seems for primitives. "I only lost homes in my lifetime." T. S. Eliot said 'Bad poets imitate. Good poets steal.' If not stealing that line means I'm a bad poet, so be it. I couldn't do it, though years later I changed it to use in a long poem called 'Last Words From Maratea,' "Green in your lifetime/You lost nothing but homes."

As for The Admiral and his wife, their departure was something like it is in the poem. The Admiral claimed he owned property in the Monroe Valley, north and somewhat east of Seattle, about 30 miles away. The company provided a truck and driver and in a scene that must have been agonizing, The Admiral threw worthless things onto the truck, old pieces of dirty rags, hunks of wood, maybe even stones, anything that might show a hostile world that he was not destitute, that he had the pride of possession still. No one mentioned what became of the rabbits.

The driver drove The Admiral and his wife and their strange possessions to the Monroe Valley. There for hours The Admiral directed the driver to this place and that. Is this it? Yes. No. Wait. That's not it. Down the road farther. I think this is it. Finally at nine or after, the driver, tired and hungry, simply announced: This is it. He left The Admiral, his wife and the odd items, worthless except in The Admiral's mind, by the side of a remote country road in the dark. That was the last anyone I knew ever heard of them.

Although it didn't impress me at the time, it seems important now that no one at Boeing questioned the writing of the poem. It seemed an unstated fact that people like the Admiral and conditions like the eviction are what prompt poems. It was the only time a lot of people I didn't know at Boeing were aware I was a poet, and certainly the first time they'd read a poem I'd written. I was surprised

at the response, the sophisticated reception. I'm not saying Boeing didn't have its share of philistines. All groups do. I'm saying that there's a broader base to humanity than I'd been aware of.

I suppose I haven't done anything but demonstrated how I came to write a poem, shown what turns me on, or used to and how, at least for me, what does turn me on lies in a region of myself that could not be changed by the nature of my employment. But it seems important (to me even gratifying) that the same region lies untouched and unchanged in a lot of people, and in my innocent way I wonder if it is reason for hope. Hope for what? I don't know. Maybe hope that humanity will always survive civilization.

But the original question remains even though I've tried to answer it and some other question it implies. Let's drop the phrase 'as a poet.' As a person, I simply like teaching in a university better than working in an aircraft factory. The rumors have stopped. The three people who hated me for being a poet have moved on, and the remaining ones know I lead a rather solitary life, certainly not a swinging one. Here, I am close to poetry's only consistent audience. I like students because they are not far removed from being children and that is a bond between us. What adult would dream of writing a poem? And teaching gives me a personal satisfaction no other job ever did.

But no job accounts for the impulse to find and order those bits and pieces of yourself that can come out only in the most unguarded moments, in the wildest, most primitive phrases we shout alone at the mirror. And no job modifies that impulse or destroys it. In a way *The Admiral* speaks for all poets, maybe for all men, at least a lot of us. We won't all disappear on a remote country road in the Monroe Valley, but like *The Admiral* we are all going into the dark. Some of us hope that before we do we have been honest enough to scream back at the fates. Or if we never did it ourselves, that someone, derelict or poet, did it for us once in some euphonic way our inadequate capacity for love did not deny our hearing.