

James Arthur

IN AL PURDY'S HOUSE

It is strange, living in the house
of a writer who has died. I use your cutlery,
your typewriter. I read your autobiography
while lying in your bed, trying to imagine Roblin Lake
and this lakeside piece of land
as they were sixty years ago, when you and Eurithe
built the A-frame by hand,
with no experience of carpentry, using salvaged lumber
and whatever materials you could find.

Critics seem to always talk you up or talk you down,
casting you as the forerunner
of all Canadian poets who were to follow,
or else as a roughneck and a clown.
For me, it's enough that you were endlessly demoted
during a war you found unreal;
that you lived and wrote according to an image
you had in mind;
that you called your house *A drum for the north
wind, a kind of knot in time.*

Your mother's good china
is still here, asleep inside the hutch. History,
your personal history, hangs around the record player,
which I haven't dared to touch—
but this year there's been so much rain,
Roblin Lake has climbed up fifteen feet on the grass,
making an island of the short peninsula
you and Eurithe added to the shore.

Standing at the window near the kitchen,
watching a single sailboat pass
back and forth across a distance
that couldn't be more than a mile from end to end,
I feel a collapse of distinctions
between the real and the unreal,
between what has already
taken place, and what is happening right now,
as if time had been doubled over into itself,
like a sheet of folded steel.
Cottage country becomes backcountry,
as houses along the shoreline
blink out and disappear.

I know better than to make myself at home
in a house that isn't mine.
Soon, I'll leave the keys
on the counter, turn the lock
on the inside, step out, and close the door—
and from that point forward
there won't be any of this, anymore.

Maybe because I'm left-handed
I made my way through your collected poems
back to front,
so I ended with the love songs of a young man—
poems for women
you seduced, or thought you might seduce—
and I began
with your regrets, the many places you visited,
and your elegies for friends
who during my backward progress
came to life one by one.