



FisherPoetry: An Occupational Tradition

by Jon Broderick

The FisherPoets Gathering, the last weekend of every February in Astoria, Oregon, is an honest celebration of commercial fishing culture. A hundred skippers and deckhands—current, former, female, male, grizzled, green—each with authentic experience working in the commercial fishing industry, and many with no more in common than that, come from coasts far and near to perform original poetry, prose, and song for one another and for a surprising number of fisherpoetry fans, too.

Work knits commercial fishing culture together and fisherpoets are compelled to write creatively about it. Rob Seitz has written about mending torn nets, about a cracker-jack deckhand who dreads demons awaiting him back in port. Maggie Bursch about ghosts that haunt a young skipper's

Photo by Perry Broderick, son of the author, features their crew at work.

restless sleep. Toby Sullivan about the durable equipment, both mental and material, a new deckhand will need. Meghan Gervais about repairing a blown hydraulic hose in the thick of a frenetic season.

In the audience, everyone nods.

Me, I've written about my son Pete hauling back a heavy net, about Ole Olson starting a stubborn outboard, about Mike Treesh stopping by our boat on a rare calm evening after delivering his fish. Like a lot of commercial fishing outfits, ours is a family operation. I wrote "How to Tell a Good One" after watching my youngest son, Henry, who was about 12 at the time, during his first trip as crew. Now, years later, he's a veteran and runs one of our boats. I should probably write another poem.

Veterans in any trade will always assess, always warily, the new guy. To craft this poem I concentrated on describing Henry's specific behaviors that impressed me without explaining their obvious effect.

Some vocabulary is specific to our salmon set gillnet fishery. In Bristol Bay set netters fish by chasing the tide's rising or falling shoreline up and down expansive mudflats, moving and anchoring, then moving and anchoring some more, a shallow 100-yard gillnet, keeping it in the path of migrating salmon, perpendicular to the beach. While it's anchored we pick fish, sometimes an awful lot of them, from the net into the boat. There's a technique. Part of it is to let gravity hold the fish for you. Before long you realize there's only a finite combination of ways a salmon can tangle. I made up a name for one of them.

In the poem as we tow the net deeper, chasing the falling tide, I didn't want to explain too much. The new guy is a little puzzled, too.

An effective poem's end will avoid the obvious and predictable and, through some combination of subtlety and surprise, invite insight, offer new perspective, suggest further contemplation. Henry's question from the bow, where safely out of the way he's watching, reveals a lot about his nature. Not only observant and curious, he fancies himself already part of the crew. "What did *we* just do?"


If you're lucky enough to find a satisfying end to a poem, then a satisfying title—one that doesn't reveal too much—may still elude you. Emily Dickinson seldom titled her poems. They're mostly referred to by their first lines. But a title can contribute profoundly to a poem, and be nearly part of the poem itself. For example, Robert Frost's famous poem is not titled "The Road Less Traveled." "The Road Not Taken" is about the other road.

As titles go, "How to Tell a Good One" tries to create some anticipation without revealing too much. Better than "How Henry Impressed His Dad the Skipper" but probably not much better than "The new guy wears waders..." Robert Frost could have done much better.

To avoid cluttering poetry or prose with the obvious, I try to describe observable behavior, without explaining its motive or effect. To show without telling. To demonstrate without explaining.

I'll often observe the finest details of someone, say, at work, noting even those details that don't seem significant. I might try describing the specific actions, the observable behaviors of a patient person, or a wise person, or an arrogant person.

Maybe you'll have a try. Show everything. Explain nothing. Then bring it to Astoria—we've an open mic—and read it to us.

Jon Broderick lives on the Oregon coast and is the guy who made the first phone calls years ago that started the FisherPoets Gathering. He and his family have been set netting summers in Bristol Bay, Alaska, since 1987.  ORCID 0000-0003-2176-2963

Learn more about the FisherPoets Gathering at <http://www.fisherpoets.org>.



Photo by Perry Broderick.

How to Tell a Good One

For Henry

The new kid wears waders that come clear to his chin
and a life jacket at his mother's wise insistence.
When, at the end of a long slog across the mud, we reach the skiff
Pete, his brother, a veteran of a dozen campaigns,
hauls him aboard by the scruff of his gear.

But the kid coils the line as Pete pulls the anchor.
Nobody has to tell him.
And as we set for the first time this season
he neatly throws clear a loop of leadline from a binboard snag.

He pulls when we pull.
He picks when we pick,
making surprising quick work of your basic #1 double-gill-on-the-bagside,
he hardly touches the fish.

When we take a break at the water's edge
he's quick to the beach with the dipnet
rounding up stragglers
and climbs back in the boat three times.
"Practicing," he says.

At the bottom of the tide we cut the skiff loose.
Pete carves a tight turn at the outside buoy.
The skiff pulls up easy alongside.
I snag the trip line, tie it astern,
Pete tows out and up
until we like what we see and nod both.
He cuts the throttle and I cast the buoy free.
The boat drifts a moment in the lazy brown current and the blue two-stroke exhaust.

In the bow the new guy is watching.
He hikes up his bibs,
hooks his thumbs in his suspenders.
"What'd we just do?" he wants to know.

—Jon Broderick

Classroom Connection:

How to Write an Occupational Folklife Poem:

First, read a bunch of them and find some you like,
but stay away from rhymers for now.

Pick two or three favorites.

Say each one aloud, slowly.

Notice what parts you like best.

Maybe write those words down to keep somewhere
sort of like a photo on your phone.

Now, wonder what prompted someone to write that poem you like best.
Ask what might prompt you.

What if you

describe what you think your mom or your dad does at work
or describe how to do a chore that others might not be familiar with
or describe someone doing something he or she is really, really good at
or describe someone attempting something difficult for the first time
or list the businesses and shops you pass on a trip through your town,
list the sounds you'd hear, the fragrances you'd smell, the bits of conversation you'd catch as you
pass.

Wonder.

As you do, write sentences, plenty of them.

And when you're done, read what you've written aloud, slowly.

Fix the parts that don't make sense. Take out the parts you don't need.

Now, here's the poem part:

Read your sentences aloud again, slowly / and put a slash mark / where you'd like to pause / even
just / a little bit. /

Get a clean sheet of paper.

Sharpen your pencil.

Copy down your sentences

but put the parts between the slash marks
each

on its own line.

Now read it to someone

aloud, slowly

who has also a poem

to share with you.

—Jon Broderick