

Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

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WORK POETRY/

POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

You Are What You Eat (what the restaurant had for dinner)

a janitor from Fiji who came in every morning at 5:00 for two
years and was never given a holiday

a preparation cook who spent his days riding a carousel of
raw beef and his nights in the bar trying to regain his
balance

a hostess who really enjoyed her work but only got one shift
a week after she stopped sleeping with the manager

a bartender who did exactly what he was told and made the driest
martinis in town, using no vermouth whatever

a waitress hired for her nice tits and good teeth

an eighteen-year-old broiler cook who ransomed himself to
General Motors for eight cylinders and a set of mag wheels

a seventeen-year-old broiler assistant who spent all his money
on marijuana

the captain of the college football team, hired as a waiter
because the boss had a soft spot for anyone who looked
at home in a locker room

the broiler assistant's kid brother

a dishwasher whose name nobody knew and whose disappearance
wasn't noticed until halfway through the first turn.

each entree was served with salad and a seasonal vegetable.

the bill came to three dollars an hour and a percentage of
the tips.

Slapstick

even from inside the mill
the lumber carrier always sounded
like a sky full of geese
dive bombing the yard;
but one time it came through
like a bloated elephant
unable to fart because
some guy had a hangover
and filled the horn with toilet paper
and a kid on the dayshift
had his guts
spread like gossip
all over the sawdust.

then the guy who tailed number three sticker
came over to see what happened
and went ass over tea kettle
when he stepped on a kidney.

the foreman said
it was the funniest
thing he ever saw.

It's All Our Fault

it's all our fault -
we killed the redwoods
and now we're ready to take the blame
and pay the money that we get paid
to see them protected in national parks
that we don't own.

we're the people who fished out the oceans
 so our kids could eat oatmeal
 and day old bread
 and now we're waiting out the moratorium
 on the catching of roe herring,
 waiting also for the first unemployment cheque
 and the kids are eating oatmeal
 without sugar, but we're not complaining -
 it's all our fault.

we're the people who followed the boom
 and brought the oil out of the ground
 to fuel the cars that others of us made
 so they could eat,
 and we're the people who built the roads
 we use to get to places
 where we build more cars, more roads
 and better mouse traps
 and now that we have to wear gas masks
 and listen to smog alerts, we're sorry -
 it's all our fault.

we're the people who are ruining the economy
 with our outrageous wage demands:
 father, forgive us, for we understand not
 the ways of inflation.

we're the people who destroyed
 the institution of marriage and the sanctity
 of the nuclear family
 by not resisting the sexual advances
 of our bosses -
 it's all our fault; we should have had
 more personal integrity.

we killed the whales, the seals,
 the buffalo and each other,
 we poisoned the air, polluted the water
 and made this a planet
 fit only for insects.

we did it for wages;
 it's all our fault -

we did it because we didn't know
there was anyone else to go to work for.

Show Business

At five o'clock they drift in
from mill, ranch and road crew,
all hard hats and greasy hands,
to order twenty beer and slap
their quarters on the pool table.

Dusk has fallen on
the far side of Marlboro Country
and the entertainer, armed only
with his guitar, two draft
and a package of Meggezones,
is about to commence his nightly ritual
before these emperors of the north.

Before the night is over
he will have sung seventy-five songs,
drunk twenty beers,
made three friends,
had at least three drunks ask to borrow his guitar,
been told that he sounds just like everybody from Jimmie Rodgers
to Neil Sedaka
and had an indecent proposition from the ugliest woman in the bar.

His struggle, unlike that of
the gladiator and the old-time trail rider
is not the stuff
of which movies are made.

He will never be played
by Victor Mature or Randolph Scott;
his fate is held not on the hands of
Caesar Augustus or even Ben Cartwright,
but in those of a half-pissed
heavy equipment operator from the department of highways
who hates country music.

Before the week is over

he will have sung
 four hundred and fifty songs,
 drunk one hundred and twenty beers,
 made nine friends,
 had at least twenty-four drunks
 (allowing for an increase on Saturday night)
 ask to borrow his guitar,
 been told that he sounds just like everybody from Hank Williams
 to Enrico Caruso
 and the ugliest woman in the bar
 will have given up men and moved in with a grizzly bear
 from Fort St. John.

His survival, unlike that of
 the gladiator and the old-time trail rider
 will earn him neither
 an appointment in the praetorian guard
 nor a dirty weekend in Dodge City.

Before he reaps his reward
 he will have paid sixty-two dollars and fifty cents
 to his agent,
 spent fifty-eight dollars on food and drink,
 paid one hundred dollars to the Greyhound bus company
 for transporting himself and his equipment twelve hundred miles,
 forfeited thirty dollars by losing his voice during El Paso
 and not finishing his last two sets,
 owed most of the rest to the income tax authorities
 and frozen his butt waiting for a bus that didn't arrive
 till two in the morning.

His replacement, arriving on Monday,
 will have nothing in common with
 gladiators and old-time trail riders.
 Toga and Stetson will be packed off to
 mothballs and cedar chests
 and judgement will be easier
 at the hands of a half-pissed
 heavy equipment operator from the department of highways
 who likes strippers.

sticker crew

assured that a constant diet
of hemlock, fir and cedar,
seasoned with occasional fingers,
will keep the metal reptiles
as quiet as stuffed anacondas

trios of men
force mouthfuls of tree remnants
through the steel bowels

their security guaranteed
by iron snores,
their lives haunted
by the long spectre
of the mating season.

Coon Hunting on the Afternoon Shift

every Monday at four
he stuffs his interrogative barrels
with ritual birdshot

a Greek version of Davy Crockett,
camouflaged in five o'clock shadow,
stalking sexuality
through the processed forest.

“how you make out
on weekend, young fella?
get piece tail?”

my tongue twists to answer
but flops like a flaccid balloon
unlettered in this language of trophies:

his wife's genitals
dripping from the back
of his baseball cap.

Lunchroom at the Millwork Plant

four walls and a few rows
of collapsible tables
and tubular chairs

a hammock, hung

between the whistles
that call us back
to the making of money and doors.

Michelle

Michelle and her sister, picking over
the fish and chips in a Hastings Street
oyster bar, half drunk
at four in the afternoon,
writing postcards to Pender Harbour.
been in town two days and haven't drawn
a sober breath - last night the Brandiz,
tonight the Travellers;
maybe tomorrow they'll look for work.
Michelle says if she can find a logger
who can drink her under the table
she'll marry him;
her sister wonders where
they'll have the honeymoon.

Al Grierson

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