

## Labour/Le Travailleur



## Work Poems / Poésie du Travail

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## WORK POEMS/POÉSIE DU TRAVAIL

### Surplus Value Poem

All day, metal curls up from the drill  
or bends and falls from the shears  
onto the cement floor. Grit from the files,  
the sawn-off ends of bars  
rivets that failed, washers,  
and even sawdust that someone tracked in  
from another department  
lies underfoot. When we're parts short  
or otherwise have to look busy  
or in any case before the last hooter  
somebody grabs a broom and gathers  
what we have discarded  
into a pile, then onto  
an old piece of cardboard  
and into a waste can.

Then

if it's the end of the day  
we take off our coveralls,  
go wash up  
and spend the last minutes of the shift  
peering from our area out at the time clock,  
to make sure no one from another department  
gets there ahead of us.  
Suddenly somebody with the acutest of senses  
of the inner workings of a clock  
starts the dash, and a half-second later  
when the hooter resounds  
there's already a long line,  
everyone urging those in front  
to hurry it up, while a few deals get proposed

*I got coffee for you yesterday.  
 So punch out for me today, will you?  
 and resolved Screw off, or  
 accepted Okay, but tomorrow  
 you punch out for me.*

Then the clock efficiently stamps our cards  
 like the good bureaucrat it is.  
 And meanwhile the next shift is coming in.  
 And the PA is busy trying to redeem itself  
 for the past eight hours, and now insists  
 there is another world out there, announcing  
*Phone calls for Ken Smith, for Johnny Kurchak,  
 Archie Pierce.* The PA follows you  
 to the parking lot, and if it's anyone we know  
 there's a certain amount of kidding *Hey, it's your wife,  
 Billy. She must have found out.*

Then the tangle of cars  
 at the lot gate, and the next second  
 you're heading home. Whether you made production  
 or not, whether it all went smoothly  
 or not, it's done for another day  
 and anyway it wasn't your fault  
 and even if it was  
 there's nothing you can do about it now.

In the plant  
 the guys from Maintenance carry the waste cans  
 out to the yard  
 and empty them into the bins: the shavings and  
 scraps from fabrication and assembly,  
 plus the worn ribbons and botched papers  
*from the office.* At this moment,  
 as the next shift starts,  
 the security guards  
 drift over to stand by the bins.  
 For the trucks that arrive to pick up  
 what fell away from each hour we worked  
 have armored sides.  
*As these move out of the plant*  
 and along the avenues, the police  
 keep a casual eye on them, ready at any sign of trouble  
 to speed to their aid. For the trucks  
 pull in not at the junkyards,  
 but at a bank

and when they leave from there  
 they haul only thin white envelopes  
 to be delivered  
 at the homes of certain men  
 from the executive offices, and those of other people  
 who never go near the plant.  
 Something taken out of the hours we work  
 they cherish; what we throw away  
 and never miss  
 makes them rich. The money they get  
 is like another deduction  
 on our cheque each Friday,  
 one that isn't listed  
 so we don't complain.

But it keeps us  
 what we are.

Tom Wayman

### spout deck

black liquor ran orange  
 down the cast iron spouts.  
 molten  
 hissing and spitting  
 burning my clothes  
 as i lanced the glowing orifices  
 to maintain the synthetic  
 lava flow.

we were all green  
 boiler and crew.

going to work the next day  
 i saw the hole  
 where my relief had been  
 blown through the wall.  
 but i couldn't  
 no matter how hard i looked  
 find the mark across the road  
 on the concrete wall  
 where, they said  
 he hit.

bernard hobby

### Boiler Lancer

It's three o'clock.  
I can't tell night from day  
but it doesn't matter  
in the lancers' shack.

There was a time  
lancers went out with banners and bugles  
to face the enemy.

But this is 1981,  
my lance an air-pipe hissing  
and my banner a paycheck  
every other Thursday  
and I can't hear bugles  
(or anything else,  
through my earplugs)

as I drive my lance rapping  
across the flaming rows of tubes  
like *cleaning pipes on some encrusted organ*  
within the doors of #2 Slag Boiler.

And my enemy?  
(I think about that  
sometimes  
when I am not lancing.)

The other lancers sleep.  
My red eyes sweep the floor  
and drill into the door  
across the room, the one  
that you can see was painted  
orange before it was blue  
and green before it was orange.

It has a ragged scar  
where a thousand careless  
angry lancer boots have kicked  
their way out of this disgusting  
shack full of idle bullshit  
and old newspapers.

It's three o'clock  
we've read it all  
and said it all  
(I think about the enemy  
but he is not here)

In a few hours  
I'll go home  
to the world.

John Morton

### Slime Warning

The alarm bell  
pulls him  
grumbling from his daydream.

He is the Control Operator,  
must get up to press  
the override button  
and restore the peace  
such as it is  
in the Furnace Control Room:

the Top 40 repeating  
itself endlessly  
over quiet thunder.

The alarm bell again.  
Get up.  
Push the button.

The operator curses.  
He always says  
he should have a long stick  
to push the button from his chair.  
(But there are limits  
in the Furnace Control Room.)

It is only  
the slimes tank  
overflowing.

John Morton

### The Academy

The open door of Baler No. 1 is pig iron,  
ten feet long, a foot  
thick, weighs maybe half  
a ton. It blocks the area  
from view. We pause there

and rap. About a shop meeting.  
 About striking  
 unless we get at least  
 50 cents. About  
 the rats we work for.  
 Ben calls it  
 "The *academia*, the place  
 where we intellectuals submit  
 and discuss  
 our ideas."

Roger Taus

### Factory Time

The day divides neatly into four parts  
 marked off by the breaks. The first quarter  
 is a full two hours, 7:30 to 9:30, but that's okay  
 in theory, because I'm supposed to be fresh, but in fact  
 after some evenings it's a long first two hours.  
 Then, a ten-minute break. Which is good  
 another way, too: the second quarter  
 thus has ten minutes knocked off, 9:40 to 11:30  
 which is only 110 minutes, or  
 to put it another way, if I look at my watch  
 and it says 11:10  
 I can cheer up because if I had still been in the first quarter  
 and had worked for 90 minutes there would be  
 30 minutes to go, but now there is only  
 20. If it had been the first quarter, I could expect  
 the same feeling at 9 o'clock as here I have  
 when it is already ten minutes after 11.

Then it's lunch: a stretch, and maybe a little walk around.  
 And at 12 sharp the endless quarter begins: a full two afternoon hours. And it's  
 only the start  
 of the afternoon. Nothing to hope for the whole time.  
 Come to think of it, today  
 is probably only Tuesday. Or worse, Monday,  
 with the week barely begun and the day  
 only just half over, four hours down  
 and 36 to go this week  
 (if the foreman doesn't come padding by about 3  
 some afternoon and ask us all to work overtime).

Now while I'm trying to get through this early Tuesday afternoon  
 maybe this is a good place to say  
 Wednesday, Thursday and Friday have their personalities too.  
 As a matter of fact, Wednesday after lunch  
 I could be almost happy  
 because when that 12 noon hooter blast goes  
 the week is precisely and officially half over.  
 All downhill from here: Thursday, as you know  
 is the day before Friday  
 which means a little celebrating Thursday night  
 — perhaps a few rounds in the pub after supper —  
 won't do me any harm. If I don't get much sleep  
 Thursday night, so what? I can sleep in Saturday.  
 And Friday right after lunch Mike the foreman appears  
 with the long cheques dripping out of his hands  
 and he is so polite to each of us as he passes them over  
 just like they taught him in foreman school.  
 After that, not too much gets done.  
 People go away into a corner and add and subtract like crazy  
 trying to catch the Company in a mistake  
 or figuring out what incredible percentage the government  
 has taken this week, or what the money will actually mean in terms of savings  
 or payments — and me, too.

But wait. It's still Tuesday afternoon.  
 And only the first half of that: all the minutes  
 until 2 — which comes at last  
 and everyone drops what they are doing  
 if they hadn't already begun drifting toward  
 their lunchboxes, or edging between the parts-racks  
 in the direction of the caterer's carts  
 which always appear a few minutes before the hooter  
 and may be taken on good authority as incontrovertible proof  
 that 2 o'clock is actually going to arrive.

And this last ten minute break of the day  
 is when I finally empty my lunchbox and the thermos inside  
 and put the now lightweight container back on its shelf  
 and dive into the day's fourth quarter; only 110 minutes.  
 Also, 20 to 30 minutes before the end I stop  
 and push a broom around, or just fiddle with something or maybe fill up vari-  
 ous parts-trays with washers  
 and bolts, or talk to the partsman, climb out of my  
 coveralls, and generally slack off.  
 Until the 4 p.m. hooter of hooters



when I dash to the timeclock, a little shoving and pushing  
in line, and I'm done. Whew.

But even when I quit  
the numbers of the minutes and hours from this shift  
stick with me: I can look at a clock some morning  
months afterwards, and see it is 20 minutes to 9  
— that is, if I'm ever out of bed that early —  
and the automatic computer in my head  
starts to type out: *20 minutes to 9, that means  
30 minutes to work after 9; you are  
50 minutes from the break; 50 minutes  
of work, and it is only morning, and it is only  
Monday, you poor dumb bastard . . .*

And that's how it goes, round the clock, until a new time  
from another job bores its way into my brain.

Tom Wayman

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