

## 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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