

## Work Poetry / Poésie Du Travail

Volume 11, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt11wp01>

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**Publisher(s)**

Canadian Committee on Labour History

**ISSN**

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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**Cite this document**

(1983). Work Poetry / Poésie Du Travail. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 11, 171–182.

# WORK POETRY/POÉSIE DU TRAVAIL

## Paper, Scissors, Stone

An executive's salary for working with paper  
beats the wage in a metal shop operating shears  
which beats what a gardener earns arranging stone

But, the pay for a surgeon's use of scissors  
is larger than that of a heavy equipment driver removing stone  
which in turn beats a secretary's cheque for handling paper.

And, a geologist's hours with stone  
nets more than a teacher's with paper  
and definitely beats someone's time in a garment factory with scissors.

In addition: to manufacture paper,  
you need stone to extract metal to fabricate scissors  
to cut the product to size.  
To make scissors you must have paper to write out the specs  
and a whetstone to sharpen the new edges.  
Creating gravel, you require the scissor-blades of the crusher  
and lots of order forms and invoices at the office.

Thus I believe there is a connection  
between *things*  
and not at all like the hierarchy of winners  
of a child's game.

When a man starts insisting  
 he should be paid more than me  
 because he's more important to the task at hand,  
 I keep seeing how the whole process collapses  
 if almost any one of us is missing.  
 When a woman claims she deserves more money  
 because she went to school longer,  
 I remember the taxes I paid to support her education.

Should she benefit twice?  
 Then there's the guy who demands extra  
 because he has so much seniority  
 and understands his work so well  
 he has ceased to care, does as little as possible,  
 or refuses to master the latest techniques  
 the new-hires are required to know.  
 Even if he's helpful and somehow still curious  
 after his many years,  
 again: nobody does the job alone.

Without a machine to precisely measure  
 how much sweat we each provide  
 or a contraption hooked up to electrodes in the brain  
 to record the amount we think,  
 my getting less than him  
 and more than her  
 makes no sense to me.  
 Surely whatever we do at the job  
 for our eight hours — as long as it contributes —  
 has to be worth the same.

And if anyone mentions  
 this is a nice idea but isn't possible,  
 consider what we have now:  
 everybody dissatisfied, continually grumbling and disputing.  
 No, I'm afraid it's the wage system that doesn't function,  
 except it goes on  
 and will  
 until we set to work to stop it  
  
 with paper, with scissors, and with stone.

**Waiting For Them To Come Back From Coffee**  
 (inspired by a recent anthology)

Monday, A.M.

They're late from coffee  
 again.  
 If I complain  
 I'm on their backs.  
 They'll call the shop steward.  
 On the sales counter  
 I let them do crossword puzzles  
 and snap gum  
 in the customers' faces.  
 The alternative is a slowdown strike.

The head of payroll has a B.A.  
 in business administration.  
 She is illiterate.  
 She majored in math.  
 Three and three equals seven.  
 When I question her calculations  
 she lectures me on Thoreau.  
 She marches to a different drummer.

The quality control foreman is an activist in  
 The Workers' Struggle for  
 Individuality and Human Dignity,  
 Branch Thirty-nine,  
 Local Sixteen,  
 Affiliated with the Brotherhood of C.F.L.I.O.U.  
 of America.  
 He inspects riveting.  
 I ask why some sheets pass by him  
 with only eight rivets in twelve holes.  
 It's simple.

He can't write poetry and  
 watch holes at the same time.  
 He is a free spirit.  
 Nineteen Eighty-Four is not here  
 yet.  
 I leave with instructions  
 to read Orwell.

Tuesday, A.M.

They're late from coffee  
again.  
They arrive in tears.  
The Union Hall decorations  
for the "Oppressed Workers Of The World  
Springtime Dance and Solidarity Banquet"  
have arrived eight days late,  
torn and smashed.  
When they went to the post office  
to ask the reason,  
the unionized clerk  
told them to fuck off.

The pay checks are  
not available.  
Thoreau helped put the  
figures in the computer.

The shop steward  
has not arrived.  
He straightened out an "S" curve  
on his way to work  
in his new Ford  
when the union-made steering mechanism failed,  
splattered his face through  
the unbreakable windshield.

Tuesday, P.M.

I turn my Toyota  
smoothly into my driveway.  
God is not dead.  
And the rest of the week  
looks a lot brighter  
for the bourgeois.

Bruce Cudney

## SORTING MAIL AT XMAS

any job can be  
improved with  
imagination,  
I tell myself

so I pretend I am  
in Heaven  
sorting prayers  
for the Master  
& this whiles away  
the time

*a prayer for him . . .*  
*a prayer for her . . .*

suddenly I feel  
more productive.  
perhaps I should have been  
an angel.

when the row boss  
isn't watching  
I note the number  
of chess card games  
going through the mails  
or read the postcards  
from exotic places.

on letters I know  
I add cryptic notes:  
*"You owe the Post Office \$1 million."*  
or *"The Postmaster General  
rescinds your rights to the mail."*  
against the vow  
I took for God & country  
earlier.  
meanwhile, sorting mail  
at night here in the  
boondocks imagining  
all the Christmas  
parties going on around me.

Nellie McClung

## job description

care for Mr. Crystal:  
salute his eye  
caress him  
lift his head  
to take the juice  
slide the soap  
along his thigh  
stroke his shoulder-bone  
and follow down  
to powder folded loins  
sting his tongue  
with sweetened lemon  
sweep his lips  
with vasoline  
dress him turn him  
roll him in your arms  
then  
with your finger-tips  
draw out his teeth  
press shut his eyes  
wind his ring off  
and send it to the safe  
tie a tag  
around his toe  
and another round  
the plastic bag  
shove him on a stretcher  
and wheel him to the fridge  
orderly help push  
it's cold down here  
hurry: hurry  
close the door  
kill  
the lights

Alicia Priest

## 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 mousetraps  
and now that we have to wear gasmasks  
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.

Al Grierson

### What He Knew

If he had been able to silence his heart  
 what his strong heart knew

Years on the passenger service, fifteen hundred miles  
 across half a continent, a few inches of globe

He can't tell his grandchildren  
 what his heart knew

In the pullman sleepers for thirty-five years  
 obsolete time

Work in the berths four hours  
 in the morning, four at night, sit out the miles  
 glad enough in the service

If only he had been able to silence his heart  
 after thirty-five years of trains  
 Forcing it

until it silenced him, on his  
 driveway of wet snow, holding the shovel, a few steps, startled,  
 Just two weeks on the pension

What his heart knew then  
 His thousands of heart-beats stopped telling

Erin Mouré



## We Are a Trade

Sometimes people clutter in aisleways, holding  
 unspent money,  
 their eyes tired, by days travelled  
 in broken airconditioning,  
 the sun & prairies cut in their bodies, their stance —  
 You can't say you don't see  
 Pythagoras,  
 the immigrant Canadian sending money home;  
 he's out there in his lousy field of rapeseed  
 on New Holland equipment, cutting  
 one yellow swath from the horizon.  
 Some will call this impossible  
 politics.  
 Pythagoras will turn his tractor toward the train.  
 His belief bends the earth & grows.  
 Wheat corporations take the money, America —

In the train, passengers eat & return  
 to watch & drink whiskey,  
 speak old aphorism —  
 the duck-lakes of Saskatchewan, money in Alberta,  
 Valley farmers dead in their silage  
 & us, employees, members  
 of the weak union who won't vote anymore  
 who serve doggedly  
 18 hours every day, who work dogged  
 For the time off at home, whole afternoons spent  
 in poolrooms, or sleeping  
 Affluent in dreams, paying rent in public housing

What do you expect from us  
 We earn dividends for no one  
 We watch Pythagoras & prime ministers from the same train  
 flat & curious

We are a stubborn trade

Erin Mouré

## THE STRAIT OF BELLE ISLE

Sure, we can study kings and princes,  
 Watch the sweep of Empire catch  
 Even this lonely Shore within its grasp:  
 For dry men in old chambers  
 Have copied it on parchment for our future eye.

But, if we seek to disembark,  
 If we leave behind the merchant's brig  
 (Turn our backs upon her),  
 Ask instead  
 Of local men, of living and of dying on this Shore,  
 Of cooks and servant girls  
 And youngsters;  
 If we seek to find  
 The generations of the Strait;  
 If we try to comprehend  
 Their interwoven life and land and sea —  
 Where is the charting of their days?

The answers are not written in a well-formed hand,  
 But found amid the gravestones and the wooden homes,  
 Amid the seamed and weather-beaten faces of the old,  
 Learned from a life where cliffs and strand  
 (The ocean and the land)  
 In subtle balance with each other's wealth  
 Jointly supply the riches of the poor.

Here's an integrity of earth and man,  
 Complex and finely-turned to fit the balance of their days:  
 This is their ledger and their life's accounts.

## THE DETROIT STATE POEMS: FINAL DAY

Last day of term, but the night before  
 a phone call to say  
 Plummer is in town. Formerly he worked  
 as deckhand on the west coast tugs;  
 now he has completed the Ministry of Transport school  
*and is second mate on a Great Lakes freighter,*  
 in for twenty-four hours  
 at the salt dock below the Bridge.  
 In the afternoon he's off watch  
 and I leave the bar on Cass  
 where Buckholz and I have gone to celebrate  
 and drive over to pick him up,  
 then back through Customs again to the tavern.

He has to be on watch by 8, so we drink  
 and he talks about the life:  
 learning the rivers and channels  
 upbound and downbound,  
 the steady checking and double-checking of position  
 while under way. When cargo is being loaded  
 he has to constantly figure  
 the change in the vessel's center of gravity  
 to ensure she doesn't roll over  
 and sink right at the pier.

Buckholz wants to know  
 about conditions, and Plummer explains  
 he quit one ship at the Lakehead  
 because the other officers would sometimes  
 physically kick the crew  
 — mostly young Maritimers and Québécois.  
 "We wouldn't put up with that for a moment  
 on the tugs," he says. "But the union here is weak."  
 He tells how when the Lake boats berth some places  
 no one is on shore, so the ships  
 swing a man out on a small boom  
 to land to receive the vessel's lines.  
 And how once or twice a year a man gets caught  
 between the hull and the dock  
 and crushed.

"Plus there's applying for Unemployment  
 when the Lakes freeze," Plummer says.  
 "Since it happens each year

you'd think by now they'd have worked out a procedure.  
But no, you have to go down like everybody else  
and wait.

I finally was interviewed by this guy  
who asks me my 'reason for leaving previous employment.'  
I leaped up, strode over the window,  
yanked back the curtain and pointed outside at the snow.  
'See?' I yelled as loud as I could.  
'It's freezing. When water freezes  
boats can't move. Understand?'  
Everybody is staring at us  
and I got my money with no more hassle."

We drink, and Buckholz and I talk about the year just ended,  
both of us finished with this job.

Then it's time to go.

As we start the long rise of the Bridge

Plummer says: "I thought it would be different  
as an officer,

like beginning again, but it isn't.

It's more exciting in some ways: to navigate —  
monitoring your speed, the beacons, the buoys.

But I went on the tugs at eighteen

and I'm over thirty now. It's a shock

to realize sailing is about all you know how to do."

We pass the crest of the Bridge, and far underneath us  
we see the tiny freighter tied to the edge of the river.

"It's probably too late to learn another trade

so I guess this is what I am. After these many years

working watch on and watch off, round the clock,

I don't even know if I could handle

a nine-to-five job."

We descend to the lineup

at Customs,

then downriver to the side of the ship.

And I leave him there

to return home to pack: setting forth once more this season

on my own uncertain

voyaging.

Tom Wayman

## Telephone Operator

After a few months  
the fluorescent glare  
fits her with glasses  
she'd never needed  
before this job;

& she begins to see  
her supervisors  
as grade school  
teachers  
from whom permission  
for basic functions  
must be begged:

Even at home  
in sleep,  
when her bladder  
shakes her shoulder  
from dreams,  
she wakes to her hand  
waving anxiously  
in the air.

Sandra Shreve

give away

on the way into camp  
the faller  
next to me

wants to know if this  
is my first day  
logging.

a lucky guess  
I figure  
intuition.

but he keeps on  
says don't know much  
else than work kid

but one thing sure  
either that hardhat's  
backward  
or you are.

Ken Cathers