

Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

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[See table of contents](#)

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Company Town

I

Born in the spark light
Breaking tools make, our screams
Lost out to the stripping of gears
Deep in the cannery format.

Our first steps were taken
Not long after, on the day-shift
March to the time clock shelter.

But when the final whistle blew
We knew that our turn may never come,
That we may figure in a wasted plan.

So we jumped the last truck out.

II

And the road was full of holes.
And the bumps were too much for some.
And we knew that the promise
Of pavement was lost, though we clung

To the words of our driver:
That the road well-travelled
Was the route worth taking.

How wrong we were already.

From the smell of melting fly-wheel
 We knew that our ride was dying;
 And our driver, though kind enough,
 Was never meant to join us.

III

Still, we'd reached the city-limits.
 And we knew that a visit
 Would make us the wiser
 If we carried with us where we came from.

So we took apart our transportation,
 Taking turns on the rusty bolts.
 And with these bolts we would
 Soon make new ones.

We would discourse on their inner-workings
 And we would grind them together
 To start our fires, for we knew
 Not what we'd broken from

But how wrong we were already.

Co-opted

Becoming more like them,
 Adopting their gait, the way
 They say words like
 Stikine, Nass, and Skeena
 Rivers.

I fish in their wake now.
 Jigging for sole
 While the fleet is
 Gill-netting,
 Snagging on tires
 From their down-payment
 Pick-ups.

I welcomed them back once
 I paid off my rental.
 Now my boat is in shambles;
 And I still catch a sliver
 From the door they broke
 Open.

But I will not join them.
 I will live out my life on
 The banks of Kit-kat-la,
 Wintering back where they bury
 The children.

Abandoned Cannery

Always stunned at the ebb
 Your crooked legs tell me
 You're more barge than a building still,
 As if some good overruled your evolution.

You took your stand
 In the river's mouth, Stretching out your tongue
 In a burlesque of Tsimshian myth.

Into your lap you herded
 The souls of your labourer's kin,
 Informing them that their lineage
 Would be better served in a soldered can.

For one hundred years
 You bit this river,
 Chewing on your silver dollars,
 And spitting out what should have been
 Another perfect generation.

Bosses

Bosses are those who
expect you to be thankful
when they give you a month's notice
before the layoff.

Bosses are those who,
when they find out someone on welfare
has a colour T.V. set, wants welfare cut
because those lazy bums have enough
to spend on luxuries.

Bosses are those who,
when you ask for family benefits
at contract time, claim
that since your kids don't work for him
they don't get benefits.

Bosses are those who,
when you ask for a handout and they say
"Get a job" and you hand them your resume
say "We don't hire bums like you."

Bosses are those who,
when they break labour and environment laws
are honoured as good corporate citizens,
but scream "Lock 'em and throw away the key"
when a worker is arrested for yelling "Scab"
on the picket line.

Bosses are those who put their hands in our pockets
to pay their fat salaries and get mad if we notice.
Bosses are not nice people.

Office Worker Poem

File. File. File.

Type. Type. Type.

Answer ringing phone.
(repeat ad infinitum)

You do not see
the paper you shuffle
resulting in a home
or food or a person
able to read.

It is not real work.
When you work muscles move,
speeding up or slowing down
makes a difference;
at the end of your shift
you can measure what you have added
to the wealth or knowledge of the world.

At the end of a day
filing in for Dixon Hall's secretary
I can count the messages I took
that will be ignored,
look at the letters I filed
that will not be answered,
measure the time and skill wasted
in empty ritual.

Office work is not real work.

File. File. File.
Type. Type. Type.
Answer ringing phone.
(repeat ad infinitum)

I Missed A Farmworkers' Meeting Because

Last Saturday
David and I got to spend some time together,
walking around the neighbourhood,
stopping at the stores we frequent,

talking with other co-op members about the refusal of our Board to obey
a city order
to remove lead contaminated soil.

David wanted something special
—health food store peanut butter.
He enjoys watching the peanuts
being ground up to make a smooth filler
for his sandwiches.

We went and got some and then
I ran into another worker
from Dixon Hall, the community centre
I work for, and we talked about a
senior member who was too ill to go shopping
and the lack of funding that may mean
we'll have to end our senior citizens'
shopping trips.

I had some library books to return
and wanted to pick up some children's books
that Parents for Peace had recommended.
I had to read them to David then.

When we got home
it was to a livingroom
that our kittens had decorated
with wool and white rice.

After cleaning that up
and finding out that one kitten
had forgotten to use her litter box
and cleaning that up
and finding out David had forgot he was toilet trained
and cleaning that up
I didn't feel like doing very much
except reading The Industrial Worker, Sojourners
and The Globe and Mail.

When the time came to go
to the Farmworkers' meeting
I needed a break from political matters
and sat on my back steps blowing bubbles.

Brian Burch