Labour/Le Travailleur

Work Poems / Poésie du Travail

Volume 8-9, 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt8_9wp01

Citer ce document

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

277
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