Labour/Le Travailleur

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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,
owned 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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