

The Workplace in Poetry

Work! Work, and then Hunger will not be your companion,
while fair-wreathed and sublime Demeter
will favor you and fill your barn with her blessings.

—Hesiod

The “work” that Hesiod refers to in Greek Boeotia of the seventh century BCE was, of course, farming—hence he counsels the appeal to Demeter, goddess of fertility, grain, and harvest. Translator Apostolos N. Athanassakis says Hesiod’s poem *Works and Days* “is a manual of instruction in verse, which addresses itself principally to the tiller of the soil.” Greek prose had not yet developed in Hesiod’s time, so verse served as the medium for conveying such wisdom as how to make a yoke for oxen and the rising of which stars stipulated the right time for plowing.

Though most of us today are not yet farmers, we do spend about a third of our lives working. Philip Levine, a poet who often writes about labor, begins his poem, “What Work Is” with these lines:

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you’re
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.

With so much of our lives dedicated to the means of earning a living, we would expect to find many poems about it. There has always been a tradition of work songs, though they were not always about work itself, but intended to accompany work. In the written tradition, poems about work have been somewhat sparse, perhaps because of the social stigma attached by urban and educated classes to physical labor—a

very old stigma, such as the way Athenians regarded Boeotians from Hesiod's time onward as dull and stupid—even though such writers as Pindar and Plutarch were born in Boeotia. Farmers in particular in many cultures have suffered the image of the country bumpkin, but the stigma carries over to any kind of physical labor, in which workers are seen as “the masses” or “the rabble.” And yet, most of us, even the educated among us, have done physical labor to keep on keeping on. As Philip Levine reminds us, we know what work is.

A distinction needs to be made between “work” and “job.” A job is a particular form that work takes, and as such, will likely be the starting point for poems, because a particular job provides the situation, physical details, and focused subject matter that a poem requires. Indeed, most poems about work that we have read are focused on a particular kind of job:

THE TYPIST

I made 87 ½ cents an hour typing,
when I was a college student.
I was a great typist.
My boss was a woman
who used a Stenorette,
a recording machine with a foot pedal,
to dictate puny little messages
about things that needed doing.

After I typed a message perfectly,
she would read it over, change a word
or two, and ask me to type it again.
While I typed, she'd grab her cigarettes,
go down to the coffee shop,
and drink coffee with the Director.
I could tell she thought he was cute,
but he was married.

I had a kind of scorn for her,
that she couldn't type her own messages,
that she couldn't get it right the first time,
that she did so little
and I was paid so little.

—Barbara Drake

Most poems about jobs come with an attitude about the job, and Drake's poem is a classic example, in terms of "puny little messages." Drake has said of this poem, "It's a sort of proletariat poem. Women's work is not so dramatic as falling trees, at least it wasn't when I was doing this kind of work. I always envied the guys I knew who got those roughneck summer jobs while I was typing or babysitting. I thought at least I could have been out on a road crew flagging drivers and making some real bucks." However, as her own poem shows, a menial job like typing (or babysitting, or flagging drivers on a road crew) can serve as perfectly usable subject matter for poetry. Indeed, any job, if we could only see it with open eyes, constitutes rich material for a poem. Sometimes we have to overcome our own inherited prejudice about physical or menial work (see stupid Boeotians, above) to find our own experience worthy of poetry. *Any job could provide material for at least one poem!*

In reality, it is the physical kind of job, manual labor, that provides the most unique and vivid imagery for poetry. Office jobs, including teaching, are actually more difficult to write about because the imagery tends to be as homogenous as a "cube farm." That is, the large rooms full of office cubicles could be the workplaces for a variety of occupations: real estate, accounting, government service, insurance, or teaching. Such occupations may serve as subject matter, but the poet must work harder to find what is unique about the workplace. To an extent this may also be true of factory work, though factories differ enough in terms of production that they provide more for the poet to work with in specialized terminology and various machines and environments.

“The Typist” is typical of many work poems in that it focuses only on the job itself, apart from where the job is taking place. We at *Windfall* would like to encourage poets who write about jobs to take account of the locale for those jobs, to be sensitive to the uniquely local nature of the work. We would like to give a second meaning to the term “workplace” that allows for specific reference to where in the Northwest the job is embedded. Clem Starck, deservedly the best-known writer about work in the Northwest, gives us a job in Oregon, which by its very designation in the title seems a job like any other, but Starck makes it his own:

JOB NO. 75-14

Drive stakes, shoot grades,
get a big Cat to scalp and scrape and gouge:
contour the site for proper drainage.
Berm and swale.

Rough-grade it then, with
a blade, and hope
it don't rain. Set hubs,
haul in base rock, grade it again, then
pave it with a thick crust of blacktop
to make a parking lot.

I'm building
a new Safeway, in West Salem,
for some religious millionaire,
and we will all buy our groceries there.

“Well, tomorrow's Friday,” I say
to the guy who looks like Jesus driving stakes
and rod-hopping for me,
and he says, “Yeah, then two!
and then five and then two and then five...”

Picking out the dirt from his nose, he understood
not only was he in the factory, the factory was in him, too.

So he learned all the Kenworth slogans:
“It’s only a truck,” and “It’s only a Kenworth,”
and, “At sixty miles an hour, who is going to know the
difference?”

Also: “There’s a right way, a wrong way,
and a Kenworth way.” And Wayman mastered
the Great Kenworth Fault Game: “It isn’t *my* fault.”
Even if an error took only a minute to fix
like forgetting to drill safety light holes, for example,
everyone argued happily for hours
all the cosmic questions and implications
of each other’s ultimate innocence and guilt.

—from “The Kenworth Farewell”

Wayman gains distance and places himself in the factory by referring to himself in third person, implicating himself in the ironic critiques of practices in the factory. Naming himself allows him to name Kenworth, which in turns allows him to write about a specific factory and at the same time, factory work in general. The irony of the slogans is that they emanate not from the company, but from the perspective of the workers, culminating in the Great Kenworth Fault Game, about evading fault, rather than fixing mistakes—and then arguing about it as if it were more important than it is. British Columbia has a long history of socialist-oriented labor movement, a point of view Wayman shares and tests in numerous poems, such as “Days: Construction”:
“Days when the work does not end. / When the bath at home is like /
cleaning another tool of the owner’s.”

Factory work is often among the first jobs that people hold, and approaching it from this perspective often converts a menial task in disgusting surroundings into an initiation into earning money and

credibility in the adult world. Philip Levine, another poet who often writes about work in his hometown of Detroit, shows us in detail what work can be:

GROWTH

In the soap factory where I worked
When I was fourteen, I spoke to
no one and only one man spoke
to me and then to command me
to wheel the little cars of damp chips
into the ovens. While the chips dried
I made more racks, nailing together
wood lath and ordinary screening
you'd use to keep flies out, racks
and more racks each long afternoon,
for this was a growing business
in a year of growth. The oil drums
of fat would arrive each morning,
too huge for me to tussle with,
reeking of the dark, cavernous
kitchens of the Greek and Rumanian
restaurants, of cheap hamburger joints,
White Towers and worse. They would
sulk in the battered yard behind
the plant until my boss, Leo,
the squat Ukrainian dollied them in
to become, somehow, through the magic
of chemistry, pure soap. My job
was always the racks and the ovens—
two low ceilinged metal rooms
the color of sick skin. When I
slid open the heavy doors my eyes
started open, the pores
of my skull shriveled, and sweat

smelling of scared animal burst from
me everywhere. Head down I entered,
first to remove what had dried
and then to wheel in the damp, raw
yellow curls of new soap, grained
like iris petals or unseamed quartz.
Then out to the open weedy yard
among the waiting and emptied drums
where I hammered and sawed, singing
my new life of working and earning,
outside in the fresh air of Detroit
in 1942, a year of growth.

The essential irony that Levine achieves here is the contrast of the fourteen-year old boy “singing my new life of working and earning” in factory surroundings that make the pores of his (and the reader’s) skull shrivel. Levine gives us the gritty details of sight and smell of the place, as well as the details of the actual work that is done, removing soap and building racks. However, what raises this poem above the usual poem about a job is the overtone that resonates from the year, so explicitly acknowledged: 1942. The historically aware reader cannot help but associate the details of the soap-making operation to the details of the death camps and their ovens in Eastern Europe during World War II—a process gaining momentum in 1942. The greatest irony of all is that this year of the Holocaust is also for the speaker “a year of growth,” an irony underscored in the stunning last line. The “fresh air of Detroit” is an illusion, compared to the fetid air of the soap ovens, so even place reflects the fundamental irony of the poem.

Rarely does a job offer us the kind of material that resonates in layers as in “Growth.” But every job carries implications about its place in the scheme of things. Does the job you once performed still exist, or has it become obsolete due to technology, economy, or other changes? What was the social context of the job? How did it affect a worker physically or psychologically? Was this job made possible by oil (as fuel or in

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myriad other uses)? Most likely it was, and what is the future of that job now? That is to say, every job has a context, probably more than one context, which can provide perspective and organizing principle to a poem. To illustrate context, the novelist H. L. Davis writes about how his characters viewed work in *Honey in the Horn*, set in Oregon in 1906-08:

And there was something to their belief that the harder they worked the more certainly they could count on getting something out of it. It wasn't right, for often enough a man will throw away his work for nothing, get nothing out of it, never see it again, and never even know what the trouble with it was. But the rule these people knew was that they never got anything without getting in and digging for it, and the harder they dug the better the find was likely to be. So it was only natural for them to play the rule both ways, and conclude that if nothing came without work, everything must come with work. It helped their feelings to count up what a pile of toil they had accumulated that was still to be paid off.

The contexts for work that Davis provides here could lead to a thousand poems! For instance, in light of Davis, consider the following poem about changes over two generations of sawmill labor by Gary Lark, who often writes about work on the Oregon Coast, where he grew up:

FAULT LINE
Our fathers smelled
of sour millpond logs
they wrestled to the gang saw,
sorted as newly cut slabs
on the green chain,
stacked as lumber
in the kiln.

Growing up in the shadow
of the Cascades,
many of us expected
to work the trees
awakened by the rumble
of log trucks every morning.

Nobody thought big companies
would own it all
or that machines
would take our places
shifting lumber
but that's how things are.
The unions, withering
before the onslaught,
turned on themselves
or were betrayed by Congress
shifting along fault lines
of wealth.

Changing tires
sweeping the school gym
selling junk to each other
we wonder about the new economy
at half the wage.

Though various aspects of mill work are mentioned—gang saw, green chain, lumber kiln—each of which could carry its own poem, Lark's whole point is the local context of mill work. The expectation that the work would go on for the next generation is not fulfilled. The larger context is made consciously clear: big companies introducing new machines and unions unable to withstand company pressure, as well as being "betrayed" by Congressional action, lead to the sad conditions of jobs and lives without a future, such as sweeping the school gym or

selling junk. Lark achieves a striking compression in just thirty lines, which signify the whole life and death of a way of earning a living. Enormous changes in work might be the subject of many a poem, given the way so many jobs have been shipped overseas or devalued in other ways. At *Windfall* we look for the local context for such poems in the Pacific Northwest.

Ginger Andrews, a poet from North Bend, Oregon, has cleaned houses for a living, and though that work is only alluded to in the following excerpt from her poem, "Dear Dad," these lines are redolent of place and a way of life:

I miss Dillard, Dad, I miss Roseburg, Winston,
the swimmin' hole at Coon Hollow,
the South Umpqua River, stealing watermelons
from Burk's Blue Fruit Stand on hot summer nights,
and picking beans to help pay for school clothes.

All your North Bend/Coos Bay kids
are fine, and keeping plenty busy.
Monday I cleaned the church building,
Tuesday I cleaned at home. Wednesday
I taught a children's Bible class,
tonight I have a class. But come Friday

I'll be happy on Highway 42,
passing chip trucks in the rain, swerving
to miss mud slides, stopping in Remote
to get rid of coffee so I can buy more, and singing
with the radio, cruising through Camas Valley
hanging a right at Brockway Store...

Here house cleaning is of a volunteer nature at church—and volunteer work is an important source for poems about work. Memories of childhood in the first and third sections serve to frame the present

circumstances of work in the second section. Many of Andrews' poems evoke the difficulties of small town life and hard work, but here the pulse of underlying joy in life that drives her poems comes through clearly.

Eventually we come to the point in all jobs when our working life comes to an end and retirement follows. In spring 2010 we published in *Windfall* a poem that evokes this stage of work, among other themes, including class issues, such as we have seen already in Gary Lark's poem "Fault Line." Tim Applegate, who works in construction, knows whereof he speaks:

BLANCHE, PEGGY, PAIGE

At sixty, Franky's not sure how long
he can keep this up. Laying carpet. Pounding
nails. Finishing this room addition
for the Lake Oswego socialite who instructs him
not to park his truck in her driveway
because "it looks like it might leak."
He parks on the street.

Not sure how long, because after
a lifetime of such work the body
starts to give out, a leaky engine, while the mind,
once so focused, strays, recalling with an ache
the trout streams of his youth, the elk
in the mountains, the baseball games
down at old Multnomah Stadium.

And the women, yes, always the women. Their
lovely names on Franky's chapped
lips—Blanche, Peggy, Paige—as he
clinches the last nail, gathers up
his tools, and limps back to his pickup
in the dying light of day.

Retirement looms for Franky, though it might seem involuntary or inevitable. The other kind of retirement, one that many of us might prefer, means that the worker *chooses* to leave “the world’s dust” of employment working for someone else and instead seeks self-fulfillment in a personal endeavor. This choice became a primary subject of ancient Chinese poetry, largely imitating the example of a single poet: T’ao Ch’ien (365-427 CE). Born to rural aristocracy, he was educated to serve in government, and he tried his hand several times at such work, but repeatedly gave it up in order to return to the family farm. Though the farm had fallen on hard times because of rebellion and war, in 405 he gave up government service entirely and spent the remaining twenty-two years back home, working and worrying about the harvest, while pursuing spirituality and poetry. Here is part of his poem on the occasion, “Back Home Again Chant”:

Back home again—
O let me keep to myself, my wandering ended.
Let the world and I give each other up.
If I left again, what would I go looking for?
It’s loving family voices that make me happy,
koto and books that keep worried grief away.
And farmers here tell me spring has arrived. Soon,
there’ll be work out in the western fields.
Sometimes in a covered cart,
sometimes rowing a lone boat—
I’ll search out sheltered streams and quiet pools,
follow mountain paths up through the hills.
Trees revel in the joy of their lavish blossoms,
and murmuring springs flow again. In these
ten thousand things, each following its season
away perfectly, I touch that repose in which
life ends, done and gone.
This form I am in the world can’t last much longer.
Why not let things carry my heart away with them?

What good is it, agonizing over the way things are going?
Getting rich isn't what I want. And who
expects to end in some celestial village?
My dream is to walk out all alone into a lovely
morning—maybe stop to pull weeds in the garden,
maybe climb East Ridge and chant, settling into
my breath, or sit writing poems beside a clear
stream. I'll ride change back to my final home,
rejoicing in heaven's way. How can it ever fail me?

—Translated by David Hinton

T'ao Ch'ien gives us an idea of what work is *for*. In this poem, work as such may require some seasonal effort in the fields (spring and late summer/early fall), and after that, the poet will “maybe stop to pull weeds in the garden.” The real work is traveling about the country, pursuing Taoist ideals (searching out pools but otherwise going with the flow, rejoicing in heaven's way), and writing poems. Not bad work if you can get it! If you are retired, what is the “work” (as opposed to a job) that you now do? Where are those poems?

We have not here cited any poems in which work is seen as a joyful endeavor or the fulfillment of dreams. Perhaps such poems exist, though most we have seen view work as, in some sense, travail, what Yeats and others have called “Adam's curse.” Because all humans and therefore all poets have the experience of it, we all know what work is. Send *Windfall* your poems about your own work, grounded in place in our Pacific Northwest.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

Works referred to in this afterword

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