

Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

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WORK POETRY/ POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

THESE POEMS are about work, racism and exploitation. Being a member of the visible minority, my experiences as a letter carrier are somewhat different than my co-workers. In 'The Postman' I explore these feelings about my fellow workers, the people that I deliver mail to, and the work itself. At times the helplessness a worker feels against the employer and in general the entire ruling class is the focus in 'And You Know It.' The ideology profit before people and the push for privatization is resulting in degradation of labour relations in the post office as reflected in 'The Dangerous Dogs.' Institutionalized racism against Farmworkers in British Columbia results in their slave-like work conditions the focus of 'Farmworkers are Workers Too.'

Sadhu Binning

THE POSTMAN

in the dark
from the mouth of a radio clock
English words hit like a hammer
half opened eyes unstable feet
from toilet to kitchen
dead silence
a cup of tea a lunch bag
labeled clothes take control of your body

sorting mail for Jacksions, Sandhus and Wongs
surrounded by people
who have learned life's secrets
from Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse
some of these 'brothers'
don't want to laugh with you
but at you

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they don't even see you
they see an image
nailed in their heads
by the creators of Donald and Mickey

letters in your hand
rain on your head
every dog is a lion in its house
crooked high stairs
the cats watch you and jump away
buried under fliers from Sears and Bays
your back screams
still you watch your steps
and they watch you
through their half open curtains
Whites Blacks Indians Chinese
those kept in the house
have sharp eyes but limited vision
some of them see you
as another somebody
who goes on strike just to trouble them
you deliver letters
that travel from your hand
to the garbage pail
what once was a tall and proud tree somewhere
piece by piece delivered to a garbage heap

you start with a handful
ends with nothing
one year two years ten years
and then you count no more
along the way your hairs change their color
perhaps to make some white man happy
the rest remain the same to the end
yet piece by piece you deliver yourself

AND YOU KNOW IT

no answer
 to my good morning
 she stares at the bag
 and always with a deep sigh:
 'is that whole thing for us'?

her heavy makeup
 fail miserably
 to hide her weariness
 her tired and suppressed voice
 speaks loudly
 of open exploitation
 of boss/servant relation

of course she can never dare
 to express things this way
 all workers in the office
 are part of a 'big happy family'

and then enters
 the boss
 with big round stomach
 first in sight
 (another proof the earth is round)
 in a commanding voice
 he demands
 'is that all you have for us'?
 propelling words
 his rotten breath
 almost touching my eyebrows

he further interrogates
 'hey what is it i hear
 you guys
 going on strike again'?
 doesn't wait for my answer
 'you sure are crazy
 never understand

soon you get a raise
the prices will just fly up
(throw his arms upward in the air
on the way down a finger
from his right hand
starts shaking while he stares
straight into my eyes)
you'll never catch up
and you know it'

it makes me feel
like a prisoner
when told by the guard
'don't try to run
my dogs will catch you
and rip you apart
and you know it'

*FARMWORKERS ARE WORKERS TOO**

we are proud to be farmworkers
we sweat like all the rest of toilers
as they do in factories and mills
yet you say in the eyes of your law
we are not workers

we came here with millions of dreams
breaking away from the soil
that fed us for centuries
for labour we left the sweet village behind

the pictures we saw, the stories we heard
before coming here
do not correlate to the reality
we are transported like chickens
to and from the farms
or made to live in barns made for cows

the length of our work day is such
stars watch us come and go

late at night and early in the morning

we hear our children cry neglected
 in the strawberry rows
 yet we push on forward
 our elderly give to the last drop
 of their blood to your crops
 many a bangles from newlyweds' arms
 lay broken around raspberry bushes
 in the place of colorful bangles now
 many of us wear skin rashes

farmers and contractors don't always pay us
 when they do it is next to nothing
 when we are hurt and that happens quite often
 we are conveniently thrown out of the system

there is no protection from dangerous chemicals
 our employers act as old feudal lords
 and treat us as part of their property

don't take us wrong
 it's not the work we complain against
 work is what we have known all our lives
 work is what gives meaning to our lives
 there is no job in your fields
 that we can't or won't handle

in response to our complaints
 we are told that in the eyes of the law
 of this beautiful land
 'farmworkers are not even workers'
 that is an insult we can no longer ignore

this is a battle we have been forced to fight
 to pick a stick, to defend our rights
 now you will have to hear our side too
 we will show you
 that farmworkers are workers too

*(Until recently farmworkers in British Columbia
 were not protected by labour legislation. The farm-

workers, mainly immigrants from India's Punjab Province, have been struggling for their rights.)

THE DANGEROUS DOGS

(For Pat Moore)

rain or shine, hail or storm
the mail must go through?
forget it
if it is not good for business
hell with service to the people
profit is what we must strive for
nay we must live for

those are the orders from the top

and how is it going to be achieved?

all that is old must change
each and every one of us must become
the spit image of our god: the businessman

starting from the basic things
like greetings in the morning
there is to be no more
un-business like things as good morning
comments about weather or one's health

so sir!

now when you walk in
the greetings mean business
they are meant to show you your place

where is your tie? they ask you

it is not the words
but the tone of the voice that
carries the real message:

you are nothing
an easily replaceable piece of nothing
how dare you to be you

in here you must be an image of our god:
the businessman
wear your tie or else?

where is you i.d.?
the voice again hits like a bullet
don't you know
it must be exposed at all times?

the message carries by the tone is:
this is not your home you know
we don't care
if you have been here thirty years
we do no un-business like things
as trusting or dealing with people
as human beings
you must prove to us each morning
who you are, or else?
?

the letter will go on to your file
which has the power
to eventually annihilate you as a worker

in these days more letters are going on files
than honors given to mother Teresa

the pictures of 'guys at the top'
emerging during shop-talks
come pretty close to Bukowski's The Stone
if not more sadist or cruel

there is constant fear in the air
yet the dangerous dogs
are the last things on our minds

Sadhu Binning
(18 June 1988)

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