

Work Poetry / Poésie Travail

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[See table of contents](#)

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WORK POETRY / POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

Carlo's First Born

Carlo never takes Franco to the poolhall.

Before buying his first car,
Carlo visits a relative early Sunday morning,
leaves Franco there,
and meets with fellow workers for an afternoon of cards.

When he finally buys a Ford,
he tells Franco to keep strangers from it,
and explains he'll pick up bread for Sunday dinner.

Locked in a station wagon five hours,
Franco hums songs to himself,
watches other fathers take sons into the bakeshop
and come out, pastries in their hands.

At twelve years old, Franco
writes letters in Italian for Carlo
who has remained illiterate.

Franco turns sixteen. Carlo gives him work on a roadcrew,
boasting to men who mark time cards with an X
of his son's writing skill.

Sundays, Carlo still goes to the poolhall
while Franco studies books and mows the lawn.

In the time he has to himself, Franco
builds the best ships and warplanes hobby shops sell,
learns History and Latin inside out, and puts
his heart into a new guitar.

Though he has helped Carlo pay the rent,
Franco does not ask Carlo for money
when university begins.

Carlo hopes his son will be a teacher, and
marry Filippo's daughter after getting his degree.
Franco wants to be a planning engineer.
Has no interest in a girl he knows as loud.

Arguing with Carlo day and night, Franco
finds himself behind half way through first semester.
Dropping out, he needs money and accepts
Carlo's offer to work roads again.

Franco is among men working with their hands,
but Carlo has stopped boasting.

Franco only writes for his mother Concetta now.

On the asphalt crew, Carlo starts a fight
with a rival foreman,
who criticizes Carlo giving Franco work.

Franco interferes and loses his job.

Carlo wants to start his own company.
Franco only wants to play guitar,
and refuses Carlo's demand to return to university.

In winter, Carlo has a kidney stone removed.
Franco leaves the house by noon
and works late hours in a grocery store.

Carlo begins the spring with another company.
Though the pay is good, Franco
will not work for him.

Carlo visits the poolhall less, but when he does
he invites Franco along.

Franco takes his guitar,
and singing a song about a Calabrian brigand,
puts fire in the workmen's hearts.

Carlo cracks a triangle of balls, and pauses
before taking his next shot.

The workmen want another song.

Carlo leaves the poolhall
and sits behind the wheel of his Ford.

First Job

Sal never calls it toil or labour.
Each day he swings his pick
hard into earth, moves
heavy chunks with a teasing laugh.

When we break for lunch,
he's the one slapping his thigh,
whistling at girls
and telling the best jokes.

With a long nose and yellow teeth, Sal
has little choice in looks,
but as lunch ends
he's first to set his muscles into motion.

"*Ciucciu beddu di stu cori . . .*" his donkey song,
cuts the thick air of the job-site, swings
his body up and down,
making every move seem simple.

Infected by his casual approach, I try
a song of my own,
and put my back out taking slabs of concrete off a truck.

That night, Sal visits me at home. Smiling,
he shakes his head from side to side, and says,
"You gotta use the muscles right."

Back at work two weeks later, Sal stands by.
Making sure I use my legs when lifting,
he grins, "*Ciucciu beddu.*"

"*Ciucciu beddu di stu cori . . .*" translates as "Sweet donkey of my heart . . ." from the Calabrian folk song of the same name.

Whitewall

Rosario's wheels spit back dust.
Hand hugs the shift,
angling gears on job-site roads.

As he races speed's unknown,
tight corners
slip his pickup towards the homestretch,
no one seeing the drywall crew
crossing slabs
for half-built homes.

Unlike Napoleon

Five-foot-two Pasquale has it rough
getting men to follow
simple orders.

He claps his hands, screaming, "*Avanti!*
Asphalt is coming!"

We don't budge, but joke
about his reddening doll-face nose.

"Who is the boss here?
Me or you?" he challenges.

"We are!" we answer
as he throws his clean white hardhat
to the ground.

Mid-Season Strike

Machines are still today. Strike
Placards lulling men whose muscles
itch in idle air.

Eight weeks ago, Spring brought good news:
a project meant to last us through October.

"The union makes the rules," says Pasquale,
rolling down his shirtsleeves.

"And what are we to do?" I ask.
"Stand silent like machines?"

Joseph Maviglia

