

WORK SONGS



by

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SALESMEN

Have surrounded your home,
They sleep in shifts, handcuffed
To black satchels.
They demand one of your party hostage,
But you are alone.
You send them a message, "No Deals."
Tonight your attempted escape
Was anticipated.
As they gather around the car,
You turn up the volume,
Wheels spinning tirelessly.

LOOK WHAT THE SUN
HAS LIT UP

A black silk stocking a mile long and full of holes.
It has the look, it has the feel of the most
expensive fabric.

See how it works, its lens distills all color
into light,
its patterns clear as salt, its frequencies wash
against our shore like waves
of rings on dark fields.

Inside our hearts there are other hearts,
strings of motion sewn into cinematography,
threads of voices pressed
onto blue rectangles.

It's the medicine dropper's quivering eye,
it's the sensation of lubricants passing between us
and over us and through us
like battalions of roses.

Our hearts pass by one another on pulleys,
You can see them on silver conveyor belts
drawing near their destinations.

THE MAN IN THE AIR

The man in the air has been falling since Thursday.
He has an appointment on Sunday, at noon.

Time is important -- he has always been punctual.
He checks his watch for the seventh time today.
In his mind he goes over the names of the clients
ahead of him,
the names of their families, the memory
of the perfect handshake.
My business is people, he says in the air.
I'm not just selling pieces of paper,
I am selling satisfaction,
I am selling myself.

He is almost sure how to do it this time.
A terrific idea will come to him soon;
until then, Pleasant day,
unlike Friday, falling all afternoon and during the best
hours
of the early evening through light rain.

He holds out his hand in the rush of air.
Warmer now, almost perfect, he thinks.
Already I am having presentiments of success.

The man in the air is turning and twisting,
the cloth of his trousers is flapping around him.
He is falling head first,
he is sure he will get
where he's traveling soon, flying upward
like a stone.

PARKING LOT

The attendant at the parking lot
Was angry this morning.
His shovel was missing,
And in a crack in the blacktop
Near the corner of Eighth & LaSalle,
Five weeds were sticking their heads up,
Looking for trouble.

THE AUDIENCE

Sometimes I played out in back of the meat mart,
hoping maybe the Polanskys would see me,
let me into the pool,
let me ride the horses,
or let me watch Steve's go-kart.

One day I opened a drum by the rendering plant.
Inside were the eyes of a hundred head of cattle,
some looking this way,
some looking that,
and that, and that, and that, and that,
each one the size of my fist.

Today Steve Polansky still works at the meat mart.
He and his brothers run it now,
hauling the sides of animals on hooks
up and down the sawdust floors.

But with me it was different.
I am an actress,
and I live for my audience.

UNIVERSITY AVENUE

I was working at M&L Motor Supply
on University Avenue across from Wards,
making \$108 a week as an order filler guy
while attending college part time. It was 1969.

My job was to take phoned in orders,
push a cart through the warehouse,
locate the parts that were in stock, box them
for shipment, and backorder the rest.

This particular day I was standing on a step stool
poking at the box-end of a Mopar combo
tailpipe and muffler for a '64 Plymouth Fury
when the pipe began sliding down toward me.

The box was eight foot long, contained 46 lbs.
of hardened steel. It was falling now, falling
from the stacks, sailing down to me like a bride,
and it struck me on the left side of my forehead.

The blow alone would have knocked me out,
a baseball bat could not have hit harder
but first it sent the ladder teetering, back, back
until I fell backward and crashed to the floor.

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand.
My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud
from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty
warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock
in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building
at the University. I had completely forgot.
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said
1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing,
I staggered out to the street in T-shirt, tie-dyed
but I did not feel cold. A 16-A bus was just

approaching
from Hamline Avenue, and I boarded, wild-eyed.

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!

I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg and said You have to get me to the University! and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.
One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,
And the same word on his jacket and thermos.
The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them
Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,
I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,
I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself
in a way you will be proud of. The assembly
and forklift people will not be ashamed this day
of one of their own climbing the heights of classical
poetry.

I stepped off the bus at the University quad,
made my way to Ford Hall Room 108, burst
through the door, and every eye looked up
at the egghead from the Midway in the torn T shirt.

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:
Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain
how poetic form helps further the poet's message.
Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

with this assignment but I had been struck
by a muffler from the gods, and I had insights
I had never had before, when the pipe hit me full
it poured into me a galaxy of lights.

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt
on its floor and drunk its dark waters.
I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and
began to write in the book, in big black letters.

"Each sprinkle of the clock tower bell
brings the condemned man closer to his time.
Each stanza of the poem is his knell,
each line a stair to, trembling, climb."

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall
and the graduate students on scholarship
whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

I would get an A, of course, but that was not
the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.
I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over
the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals not
by our bloodlines or superior mothering
but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky
that tempers and makes us fit vessels for suffering.

University Avenue begins at the Capitol
and peters out only God knows where, in Blaine.
But I am with you to the fullness of all time,
and in my bones and skull I map your pain.

IN AMERICA

In the beginning we expected a land smothered with
buffaloes,
A continent of verdant floes
Of grass and Indians strumming banjoes
And singing in their teepees of hunters with haloes
And other kinds of heroes
And the usual aboriginal bravadoes.
What he has to do, I guess a man does.
And in America, where tornadoes
And volcanoes
And all the other throes
Of nature hold sway, we cling to our mottoes.
One of which says that when we experience fiascoes
We forget them, we forget all the peccadilloes
Involving frayed manifestoes
And Tippecanoes
And hurled tomatoes
And tea-party cargoes
And weary men leaning on hoes
In frescoes
And anxious women on tiptoes
And millions and millions of disappointed negroes
And thousands and thousands of confused mulattoes
And everyone society has handed out zeroes,
To all the hoboes slapping at mosquitoes
And the other small potatoes
Hunkered in their ghettoes
Hoping to be excluded from the next day's vetoes.
You're lucky you're white and never had to wear their
shoes,
You probably couldn't even get your toes
To fit, but that's the way it goes
In America.

TYPEWRITER

military cemetery

anodized raindrops

pileated woodpecker

on a black tree branch

OVERDRAFT NOTICE

The blue wind that blows through the soul
blows cold, it scatters leaves and opens envelopes
with your name hovering in the cellulose window.
You know in an instant the news will be painful.
You cry my god and fall to your knees.
Sometimes you go long weeks without opening them,
sometimes you hide them under phonebooks
because if no one else sees them they maybe never
came.

Other people's lives seem unhaunted, they write
the amount of each check and subtract it from the
balance,
it is a wholly unsatisfactory way. And yet
they don't get these things all the time,
whereas you don't go six months without one, and if
you get one on a Monday chances are good
you will get another Tuesday, and even if
you go to them and thrust fistfuls of loose cash
in their hands and pockets and say please, please
take my money, and they look at you
the way people look at an unclean child,
You will get another notice Thursday.

Each one costs \$20 but you don't mind, you are glad
the bank is getting something for its trouble
and for putting up with you, you who were never meant
to carry money around or write checks
when something wonderful catches your eye.
These thin slips of paper with the blue circles
that identify your sin and decide your punishment
are your judges in this life. You bow to their power
and file them away in the secret shrine of pain,
and scurry away to places of pleasure,
bouncing end over end.

SIGNS

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods
there are signs posted saying
No Hunting and No Trespassing.
People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold,
and do not want to return to a shot-through window
or knocked over pumphouse.
And a good sign, suggesting violators will be
prosecuted
seems to keep most people away, except for
some hunters who need everything spelled out.
You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time
ago
because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every
sign
leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.
So that every hundred yards is a tree
with a perfectly blank sign on it.
The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots
and whorls of the plywood,
gray from the rain and north woods wind,
a wordless advertisement to wilderness,
a message the animals read as well as you
saying this is this, and here is more,
and a few steps further into the pines, still more.

A DRIVE IN THE COUNTRY

Summer was dry but the
Farmers forget and plow
The dead stalks under.
Today the wind is lifting
The first loose dirt away.
The elms in the Mahnomen
Park are striped for
Felling, and sugar beets
Litter the roads at sharp
Curves. Tree trunks lay
Scattered where they
Landed after the tornado
Of 1958. Outside
Crookston a yellow dog
Just made it to the ditch
To die, and farther
Ahead, a mile from the
Border, old shoes line the
Shoulders. Canadians are
Home now, wearing new
Ones.

TAKING A JOB IN
ANOTHER TOWN

Life by the freeway's
Like life by a great
Two-way river, north-
Flowing and south.
Always vapor bluing the
Air and sand-fine chunks
Of street. The wise
Dwell to the leeward
Side, the less wise peer
At the neon tree of
Midwest Federal, the
Sunset swims red against
IDS mirror, and every
Night very late the
Traffic and the
Breathing sound of tire
On asphalt stops
And many times when that
Happened I would open my
Eyes in the quiet and
Listen.

THE HEIGHTH
OF THE DROUTH

The ice in the
Pitcher spins round

And around.
No rain, no food,

An equation fixed
When the colors of mid-

Winter occur in mid-
Summer. Farmers cite

Crop damage figures
Begetting Armageddon.

Even the fish at
The bottom of what's

Left of the spring-
Fed pond are ap-

Prehensive.

THE BUSINESS OF BEES

When prices are normal
And weather cold, bees clump
In a knot, suck sugar
And hum to stay warm.

But when sugar is high
It's cheaper to dump them
Out of their drawers and buy
A new queen come the spring.

This year the bees are
Tumbling, hear: sugar
Is dear, the snow lies
Buzzing on the ground.

TIERCE

Everything points upwards
Here, the prayer of the
Rails leading out from the
Concrete block yard, the
Breath of the street
Escaping the hole the man
With the jack hammer
Punctuates, the furling of
Triplicates like carbon
Doxologies past desk tops
And tucked into clip
Boards and carried under
Arm on up in the shaft of
This city's newest B
Building's birthing, the
Whistle weighting the
Foreman's shirt or the
Handful of pencils waiting
To be sharpened or the
Childlike character of
The salesman arriving for
The day's first prospect.
There is ambition in
Announcing Yes, let's to
The suffering attending
Each new mornings' waking,
To men and women wide eyed
Thinking This is our
Chance, let us try and
Complete these walls
Before dark.

REMAINDERS

Copies of my poems went on sale at Odegard Books,
The precise word is remaindered,
Marked down from three ninety five to just the ninety
five,
And it hit me that this gambit by the bookstore
Was just what people had been waiting for.

Sure, you expect people to hold back,
Especially at today's prices. Three ninety five is
A piece of change, no doubt about it,
And there must be people who thumb the book
And pat it with one hand as if weighing the
Poems against the expense, the expense against
The poems, take one step toward the cashier,
Then fail in their purpose, put the book back
In the rack, and pick up a copy of American Poetry
Review,
"Beautiful things wonderfully said,"
For under three dollars, a wonderful buy, instead.

But who could balk at ninety five cents,
Why, that's less than a dollar with a nickel left over,
You could buy the poems and have enough to
Handle the sales tax, nineteen for the poet and
One for the State of Minnesota and its beautiful
Forests and waterfowl.

[Actually, all nineteen don't go to the poet. I was
Promised a ten percent royalty, which meant forty
cents
On the full price, and the fine print here says
When a book goes remainder there isn't really
Any royalty at all, but I don't care, I didn't
Write them for the forty cents, you see,
I wrote them for this feeling I'm having right now
Of breaking through, of getting out,
Of seeing the birds I'd stored in the box fly out of it,
White wings fair clapping the morning air.]

Ninety five cents for thirty five poems,
That's less than three pennies apiece. Here's one
About some weeds growing in sidewalk cracks,
So what, it's only six lines long but at three cents
Who's going to complain? Here's another,
A beautiful lyric, a love poem connecting
To the Italian futurist movement of the nineteen-teens,
It was published in a number of respected magazines,
For less than three cents you won't need a vacation tour
this year,
Just read the words and feel their awful power.

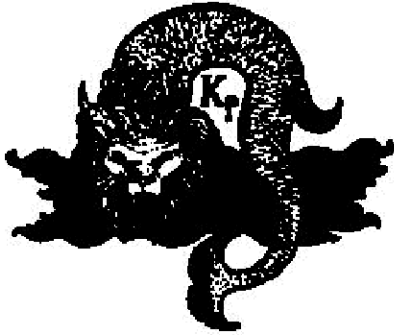
Or the final poem, I call it "The Light," which was all
My life in sonnet length, how there were things
I thought I always wanted, but when I got them they
were
Different, or I was unable to recognize them --
Such pathos as would melt the stony heart,
And I lay it all down for you,
Vulnerable, small, the shattered clown,

The paper trembles with the grief of truth,
Because here it is, softcover renaissance,
And all it costs is three lousy cents.
My ear to the ground I can detect
the build of momentum, people swearing off bad habits
forever,
People afraid to look one another in the eye
Now looking and seeing the pain and love that had
been there all along,
Now reaching out, fingertips touching,
The sting of tears collecting in the corners
Of millions of eyes, the soft collapse
Of a hundred brittle barriers of reason and attitude
Finally available, the incandescent word
At prices the masses can afford.

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.
For life has many sales but few true bargains.
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the
person

And remember to ask for the receipt,
If you're a poet your whole life is deductible.
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his feet
And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.
There are myriad of you there,
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,
Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,
He cannot see you, but he hears you, breathing.

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