

Writing Exercises

by Dave Johnson

The Work Poem

One of the toughest tasks for educators teaching young writers is to get them to see that poetry is everywhere in our lives. Most early poems consist of young loves, heartaches, break-ups, and make-ups. The “site” of the Work Poem is a good place to engage young writers to focus on a specific subject matter and to encourage them to explore the language that surrounds the jobs and work they do daily. Some of my best students in the Cooper Union Saturday/Outreach Program wrote about their extracurricular jobs in nursing homes, offices, night clubs, their everyday chores, the tasks of the visual artist, and about the job of being a student.

As an introduction to the Work Poem, in a recent class, we read these poems by Susan Eisenberg, from her book *Pioneering: Poems from the Construction Site*, H.R. Press, 1998.

Transients

Walking onto job sites lugging
toolbox gear and a lunch
to be eaten at morning coffee
we make home by conversation
gathered around some appliance
hauled back for the dumpster;

settling in – even on a long job – with
only
our place on a bench and a nail hook
we’ve driven in ourselves.

Gaping earth to steel to trim –
the decks of players
get shuffled and reshuffled.

Hard times: almost
anything
traded to avoid layoff.

We discussed how Susan describes with clarity and detail certain moments in her day. She uses the language of the job itself. And then we read “Did She Tell You About Running Pipe?” Afterwards we discussed her role as a woman on the construction site and how she relates the issue of gender in the workplace to a larger communal context.

Did She Tell You About Running Pipe?

Racks of them slicing the vault air
spinning leaping kicking
their powerfully rounded thighs in
perfect
unison like an ensemble of Russian
dancers
soaring robustly across a long stage.
Muscular limbs synchronized
dive into switchgear
thrust up through concrete!

Woman whose hands for millenniums
shaped dough into bread
shaped clay into pots
shaped plant fiber into cloth
apprenticed to Vulcan Himself
practiced all His secrets -
now she runs pipe
and lights the Heavens with laughter

After reading this poem we discussed our own various jobs, past or present, and how they relate to our lives as a whole. Does our work define us? Are we doing it just for the money? What is the role of work in our society? How does our chosen work compare to what we want from our lives? We then took up the challenge of writing our own Work Poems. Here are a few examples from students in the Cooper Union Saturday/Outreach Program. Ormon Long wrote about his job working with animals in a pet store.

Photo by Martha Cooper



A student reads her poem at an open mic during The 2001 People's Poetry Gathering.

Chaos in the Store

Many different voices
all at once shouting,
I need my water changed.
Where are my Kiddles-n-Bits?
They're bothering me.
Where's my mother?

Events in a loop.
The frogs jumping
the newspaper being used,
the little rabbit abused,
tortured ones in cages,
singing their hearts out, enraged.
I can't take it anymore.
Please release me,

The *pain* is overwhelming.
Let 'em out!
Let 'em out!
Let 'em out!

Jermaine Bland wrote about washing clothes.

Long Morning at the Laundromat

stressful separating
colors, different textiles,
using detergents
for these different
colors and watching for hours the
clothes spinning around
like a wheel of a
train.

And Katie Baldassaro penned “The Cost.”

The Cost

Two AM on a Tuesday night,
coffee rings on an index finger mocking
The ones on my eyes,
with a single fluorescent,
I work,
staring blankly into a screen
programming, manipulating,
calculating,
recalculating,
rubbing away the carpal tunnel,
intricately designing the codes, the
numbers,
the beautiful structure of the
hidden web,
so some boob can sell handstitched
celebrity pillows
to the over-seas market.