

from *WORKING STIFFS*

by Michael Ventura

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...our work produces nothing but more work our work produces nothing we can love
produces nothing but more of what we're trapped in
We work to strengthen the trap we were born in
 and all they gotta do is pay us not enough
 and we'll work and work and do what they tell us
and when the dayshift is done the nightshift is ready

The office towers massive with certainty -- we'll show up
That is their height and the weight the security of their investment
 the certainty that we will do nothing about it
 that we *can* do nothing

That they have been right so far is our shame

 And in no time at all in the office, you knew
what was filed in the locked files which boss took his coffee "cream no sugar" whom to fear
 and how you would greet each other every morning
and you felt the greetings form in your mouth and you felt
 it was not you who spoke them
What you said Mondays what you said Fridays and what every day
 you said to yourself and never came right out and said
 the shame of that silence
day upon day till the lives of all of us seemed made
 of what we couldn't bring ourselves to say

You smile at me a smile I will not forget
 then our faces go grim at our machines
 trapped and working to strengthen the trap
That is your face on the train your face on the street
 when you open the door to your apartment
 you take that look in with you
 watch television with that look
and often you wear that look
 listening to someone you love and that look does not wholly leave you when you sleep
In this way your life has stopped being your life

 So when we were fond of each other
it was silence answering silence
 our fingers busy all day at the keyboards
 touching memos and cigarettes coffee-cups paper clips
It was the way I smiled and inhaled that enjoyed the way your hands moved when you talked
That was where to look for us if anyone looked for us
 in our hands in how we crossed our legs
in the way you stood leaning on one hip
 in how I slouched in my chair
 a glance a gesture a bit of trust emblems
of a whole person a whole life that would not be wholly lived
 there was no longer enough of it to share

no matter how often we told each other our troubles
the comfort we gave each other was an emblem of a life that might be
how it insisted on itself insisted it might have been might yet be
which is what that meant that swing in your walk
Your walk still knew things you would swear you'd grown out of

On the way back from lunch I bought *Life* magazine
on the cover was our Earth Terra whole
blue-green in darkness
She asked, "Why don't the seas spill into space?"
She thought I must know because I wrote poems
The look on my face embarrassed her she said, "I guess I'm just stupid"
and looked down at her hands .

Why doesn't that look fall into space?
For it is a very great space between your downcast eyes
and your own two hands
You can drive from New York to LA and not cross that space
and if you fly to the Moon you take that space with you
people who jump off rooftops are trying to jump through that space
and when she put her arms around her lover her two hands pressed against his back
all she had done was to lose him in that space

I'm just speaking of my friend when she looked down at her hands
In five minutes those hands would be earning her living

The reason the seas don't spill into space is called *gravity*
and I don't really know what that is
not at all
and now
I will look down at my hands

...we are common people eating lunch with thousands like us
In no special way she said, "I hope you put that in your poems."
She meant our keyboards our coffee-breaks how our paychecks are never enough
what we'd been speaking of
as millions speak of it every day a common thing as the sea is a common thing
as it is a common thing that seas don't spill into space .
She was a daughter lover friend sister mother watcher
a worshipper one who remembers one who works
and in all these acts a *speaker* with every right
to ask poems of me
because millions talk as best they can
about troubles jobs the weather what's on TV what they have dreamt
It is only out of this ocean of speaking
that a poem sometimes crawls like some first creature .

If everything that's said in kitchens wasn't said
no one could say a poem. . . .