

At Work

T H D Russell

*To the entire corporate firmament,
to every entity within it,
for any number of reasons,
good and bad.*

Mostly bad.

Contents:

Work Dream	2
That Place	3
Milk and Honey	4
Cloud Nine	5
Gypsy Heart	6
Death to Typists	7
Work Zoo	8
Office Party	9
Unsettled	10
At the Council of Kings	11
A Report from Utopia	12
Damned	13
Work Colours	14
A Frustrating Situation	15
Corporate Anatomy	16
How I See Me Through Its Eyes	17
Head with Downcast Eyes	18
Burdened	19
Where Now?	20
Salvation	21
Forever April	22
Joy's Odd Dominion	23
Circle Line	24
A Thing Worth Saying	25

Work Dream

Last night I dreamed I went to work.

I walked the streets I always walk, took the trains I always take,
but strangely, stopped at some station along the way,
opened a pair of doors on the wrong side of the tracks.
Standing next to that dark gap,
ornery but proud,
I was excited by the dirt and danger lurking there.
The others shot irritated, furtive glances,
yet somehow I managed to forget about it
until the warning buzz of imminent departure
reminded me to close the doors.
I woke and went to work.

When the train stopped at Rathaus Steglitz
the doors would not open.
We passengers stood there in the white plastic light
wondering what was going on. Outside it was still dark. Outside,
beyond the train's windows, humans on the platform pooled
at doors, fish expecting food, but nothing happened.

It was a blip in our routine, a moment of halted nothingness
where nobody was scared they were trapped in a train,
where no one was worried they might be late for work,
where everyone stood stock still,
waiting patiently for the tiny green lights to blink on.

The air had slowed to ink, and we, paused bits,
were suspended in it, until at last
the driver roused and brought us
back to life with a flick of his wrist.

That Place

But this is the place you left to find
the place which
a while ago
looked too distant
for you to comprehend.

Now there's the next one
tripping you up,
seducing you with
its mix of hope
and promise of life less pain.

Please don't fall in love again –

those windows and screens,
damp mattresses, basements
and aeroplanes you dream
never took you anywhere new, never will –
there is no 'there'
just this place now, here

stuck fast to that
unknowable
intolerable
dyed in the wool
you.

With that he was off.

Milk and Honey

Today he is
a cow coming home

in from the wide pasture
to rid himself of the white weight.

He sees hooves cleave wet soil,
press green blades

down and in,
down and through,

feels his mucus mouth
bounce with each sodden step,

beats flies from his rump
with dung-encrusted tail,

thinks: is this the land to home me?
is this the round to hold me?

Cloud Nine

Today he is airborne,
flying through nimbus,
punching brief patterns in clouds.

Height soaring in his stomach,
high-held hands cut a smooth arc.
He casts his eye over distant horizons
that lie in touching distance
there, on the bowed and sparkling waters.

But he knows he is wasting his time;

there is everywhere a tent tighter than sky
whose air-thin surface cannot be pierced.
The leaden touch of it will be enough...

In buildings we do our best work.

Gypsy Heart

Leaning out gingerly,
not trusting my hold on the globed earth beneath,
I breathe in the winds of this newest place,
still but a shimmering horizon
of aeroplane lights and city dreams.
Villas beckon.

Leaning further still –
my toes' grip improved a notch or two –
my mouth accepts a strange flock of words.
They settle nicely. It is not a clutter
yet. Things are getting better.

But this far out the obvious is easy to miss;
that my straining is in fact straining
(because my feet are still back home),
that I am slowly tipping over,
that my toes are uprooting...

There is a kick of dust as my world cracks.
I fall to my knees
a sudden alien among strange debris,
neither here nor there.
Standing is no easy task. Everyone is watching.

Apparently this mess
is evidence of some success,
but my heart whispers on.

Death to Typists

I thought pruning scissors would be the right tool for the job

because your fingers look like carrots –
saggy carrots with pointy tips is more precise –
thick-stemmed, wobble-skinned, saggy, pointy-tipped, colourless
carrots if I get really anal –
so removing them with pruning scissors seems appropriate
don't you think?

There you sit, bashing away at that plastic keyboard,
the rapid clicking noises of your work as soothing to me
as the frantic chatter of mad chickens.

I shoot a look your way
hoping the act might freeze you to permanent inactivity
but must accept your fat, heavy forefingers
pumping like pistons
are capable of eternity.

In all honesty,
death is too good for them –
the crooked fuckers –
but is the only solution that comes to mind.

So hold still
this won't take a minute –

then I can recover my composure
and get back to work.

Work Zoo

Sickness transforms.
A light cold ignored, weathered tougher
in winter winds, blooms
into a brilliant cough, a lion-cough,
a roaring, window-rattling king of coughs.
My bicycle-riding colleague
has this trick down.

Did I say lion?
I meant hippopotamus. He throws
his meaty head back
to his neck's point of fattest resistance,
cracks his mouth wide and barks,
hurls huge gravelly flecks high above his effort,
spattering the white ceiling
shotgun style. It would be wondrous,
only

I'm not watching the show on TV.
I'm the poor beast in the next cage along.

I like the guy. Don't get me wrong.
But when you're cage-neighbours
with a creature like that,
what's like got to do with it? Were I not
the rare gerbil species I appear to be
I would pulp him.

Office Party

Her eyes narrowed on the dawn
as a mist drifted down
and the steeped night strained
to be magical. Berlin

was a kiss I could not place on lips I could not know,
red, loose and talking. The sloped angles
of women and men leaning in their drink,
afloat on misperception,

stained the dulled hugs.

Unsettled

There is green in the black.

Getting it out is the tricky part –
truth's front shines, flips its face

from colour to colour, catching light
now this way, now that. Night seeds

both clarity and doubt, but you cannot tell
one from the other – they weave themselves together.

Sleep-murmurs rouse you, their cotton
mumblings laid slowly bare – you become

naked skin pink and cold, fevered
by the brutal air – a child unaccustomed

there is black in the green

to the real wind.

At The Council of Kings

Assembled in two far flung halls,
they connected by some net of ether,
a giant screen and vast array of wires –
techno-wizardry in short
beyond our ken – we sat. I amongst them
again, not as king but lieutenant
in a noble war, pitched hard
into the delivery of peace, scarred
by one night's deep battle, alert,
informed of the enemy's movement,
ready for my masters' demands.

The mood was defiant: ribald wags
raised barked laughs from all present,
but soon the screen shimmered to life
making known to us our allies in their hall,
and the mood grew grim.
I sharpened my wits, pricked my strained
senses to their maximum, attended keenly
The Gathering of the Facts,
for such they were: times, figures, names
of those who had brought on the error
that led to crisis.

The Kings grunted, nodded and noted.
Beyond the window's glass the sky's blue
belied the darkening storm within. And look there,
birds chattering in the branches of a tree,
so nearby yet far, far removed from our concerns.
"Herr Russell?" O cursed mind! O lame
daydreamer! O lax idler, ill-fated timer
of my own luck! "Würden Sie die Frage
bitte wiederholen?" I asked, and listened
closely this time. Shaken,
I managed but one syllable in reply:

"Ja," and was wrong. A foot soldier,
asleep through the hours of battle, piped up
and cut me down. His spiteful corrections
bit and undid me. No King turned my way
thereafter, none sought me out to whisper
in my ear. After further minutes in that vat
of acidic anonymity it was done. I left
in the press of others happy with their work,
while I mulled my mortal contribution.
What use all this? I mean what's the point?
I don't know why I bother really.

A Report from Utopia

Work distracts mind from the wires
that are hooked through our skin.
I caught a glimpse in the mirror-screen
(with my head turned painfully back).

It's horrible; there's a wire tacked
into each elbow, skewered through shoulder,
hip and knee, each piano-taut. Hooked
too is the neck, though the head is free.

We are puppets trapped in an endless white.
Our pose – a broken swastika where
each limb hangs down – is graphic
of futility. The movement allowed is limited

in the extreme, though some find it fine.
The wires stretch on and on,
disappearing into the flat infinity. We can
only learn this: ignorance is bliss.

Damned

When rain whips round wind's airy limbs,
and bowed backs, stilled, quietly take the lot,
when our windows buckle on rivulets of light
and I gaze out through rippling prisms

at horses, cows, and sheep, knowing all
must wait where the grey clouds found them
their blunt feet sunk in a cold morass of slime,
slick coats jewelled with running drops, I feel

happy inside.

But five days of grind, those glued to two
that wait on five more, dulled by my new voice
of foreign tongue, blind in a mess of noise
(of which this is but one garbled truth),

meeek, fussy, politic, aloof, and tamed
by promptings I'm too dumb to ignore,
miles from the mind that could douse my fear
and ignite my heart, I doubt. I am damned

to be Toby.

Work Colours

The greys of the clouds above the trees
outside the window here at work, have overrun the world.
Dark and light greys
slowly tumble into each other –
a confused and muffled billowing,
a soft, victorious eternity of grey.

From the image on your computer screen
shine the various blues of the Caribbean sky
and sea, the sky teased with delicate clouds.
A pale gold island boasts three palms,
each laden with hairy fruit. A white ship
sails away from you, away across the deeply
inviting waters. You know you'll never go.

You get up to go to the loo, walk again
across the browned carpet. You return and rest
your arms on the green-and-purple-flecked desk,
position your fingers, and type again.
They tap lightly at the keys.

You have nothing to do but earn money.

A Frustrating Situation

or curious perhaps

that I draw from other sources –
as hot water draws flavour from tea –
colour, mood, intent,
that I am so absorbent, so easily led.

How shall I steep you in me, how
fill your air with my voice
if there is no such thing?

How can I bring out
untainted
the pure content of my inmost heart
when I am sponge through and through?

Corporate Anatomy

I don't understand, even when I try.
The entity that owns my labour is somehow less
that the sum of its parts, has a soul

that's everything to everyone, then fog
when you zero in. No one agrees,
except something somewhere's being tugged

down a profit-lined road where profit
disappears. It controls thousands of lives
and futures and histories, clumped

together in a group of discordant voices
struggling their separate ways,
each dreaming of some different thing.

This high ambition to stay ambitious,
this email, spread sheet, flow chart
and newsletter spawning cloud –

my stubby crutch, my faceless god – muddies
as it moves
forward

in lumps of coarse intent.

How I See Me Through Its Eyes

An internal component that does not irritate over much.

A set of costs it could do without.

A production unit that produces units of production measured in computer uptime.

A voice at the end of a telephone number.

Desk-space/floor-space. One orthopaedic chair.

One monitor/one computer using.

Training course requesting.

A male, middle-aged, married Brit.

A foreign surname oddly spelled.

Organic. Replaceable. Average number of days' yearly sick-leave regularly achieved.

Steuerklasse III.

Worker ID 333000049.

Ein unauffälliges Teil.

Head with Downcast Eyes

A black brow. An unseen gaze. The face angled just so,
chin in, nose a harsh line kinked in revulsion
pointing down. Eyes lost in their own
shadow. Here no hand for form or effect, no arm, no chest,
just a suddenly ending neck.

I can't change my view to take in those eyes,
cannot wrench the head from its port,
cannot pull its dark aside,
can indeed take no other note
than imagine, down there where it looks, only mess.

Down there a mired orgy slipping somewhere.
Down there scrabbling worry of the day-to-day.
And as the muck dehydrates, the stench concentrates
down there.

Burdened

Today he is a very old man.

In the night his teeth softened away,
like sugar-coated chocolates
melted on his tongue. His morning grin
into the bathroom mirror
was a shock of gum. He watched

as hair blanched and fell away,
spiderless webs in a thick wind.
Some night-time crick or angle
stiffens his gait, makes for posture
compensations ugly and unstraight.

Work all chore. The desk, the chair,
the monitor – clinker, chaff, rust.
But the smile he just won't see,
the one from me, small but real,
is everywhere, even hidden

like a kiss in his lips.

Where Now?

The warped skin of the cracking hull,
and the wind-dried, almost-smiling mouth

curl slowly further in
distortion. Heavy battles

for joy and its recovery toll.
The world drifting off. No time

for thought, fight instead with rash
and dulling urgency things

that must be fought. Failure preys
on the unwary, the ill-prepared,

the hesitant. North, south, east, west
circle a globe of thrashing waters

unperturbed. Stripped down micro-truths
divide, corrode. Cohesion piece by piece

undone, underpinnings one by one removed,
uncertainty unconsidered and I'm guilty too –

belligerent, brick-minded guilty.
Sullen-tongued mumbling, inward.

Laze around powerless and milk it.
Commit the lot to the dustbin, forget

everything I just said; the clouds break
a crack of blue...

There *is* enough light.

Salvation

A monstrous edifice collapses
crushes all matter to a last cough
of powdered stone
and pulverised granite.

I – homebound on a stopped train –
reeling from that tipped mountain-weight
lean my left shoulder against
the small glass dividing wall

but do not fall back nor faint
out of the open doors
do not close my eyes nor pall
nor peel away nor pass

out to float off along
gravity's insistent pull
down into the black now pooling
at my ear ...

None of which really happens –
it's way too romantic – but I,
nevertheless, suddenly
know what to do.

Forever April

Minute 1: wake up feeling glum.

Minute 2: do the morning things I do.

Minute 3: hope as dry as clinkered scree.

Minute 4: ablution autonomic.

Minute 5: I don't know of any tonic.

Minute 20: on the street in grey-aired doldrums.

15 minutes leg-work to the station.

Minute 35: sealed and trundling on the train

for not quite 1 hour,

not quite 1 hour not quite in pain.

Minute 80: trudging up from the underground. Blossoms! –

a wildness of lit chance on sudden blues

and pink flaked shells – wave from a nearby tree,

reminding in routine you can also be free.

Joy's Odd Dominion

Your pattern is nutty. You chuck a spanner
with forethought in my works and I know
neither why nor under what banner.
You lash out at random, hide your face so

your plans stay hidden, revel in my deep
consternation, a sprite mercurial
and amoral. But I'll never escape
your airy grip; life would be banal,

or pyrrhic – what other has the charm
to do me wrong yet be so healing,
emit care and cool like they're one feeling?

When I resist, you pile it on, unarm
my defences, break me down, work, work
till I bleed, your cruel, unflinching magic.

Circle Line

First thing, idle and humming, still emerging from sleep, I activate the universe. It swims into view, swirls in the bathroom mirror, trails behind me as I walk down the hall, clings to the hairs on my legs, tangles in the dust on the floor, sticks to the dishes in the sink.

Outside it's snowing words. Inside the clicking shut of my mouth cuts the hour in two. Time to wake up.

I clean my teeth, mentally prepare to suck down, force down the fibre of another day, to cut my feet on the slippery plain and later shake gently in the muscles of my wife, in bed again, back at nine, just in time to get up and go to work, zooming in on that clouded urge, staring at the dusty black reflection of my face staring at me, reading the words in the roundness of my eyes and the no smoking signs.

I recognise a colleague, but don't even stop to say hello, just keep right on moving, jamming the door open and picking a path between the crowd and the wall, me amongst them, amongst me, threading their fingers through my arms, breathing in the strands of my hair. We are a snapshot, a group photograph in an underground church, hundreds of legs treading grapes. Our brightly lit heads look up, flow out, tributaries disappearing, sediment settling, then nothing.

I settle on my seat, wrapped in the need to shock, and put on weight for eight hours. Leaving behind a layer of skin, which I drop like a sack into the waste-paper bin, I step back into the flow, bob along, pick at the folds of my frown with dirty fingers, and smile refusals at free newspapers. It is the other heels I read. The soles of their shoes, the handles of their bags and if, if there is something to be said, why do I not say it?

Suddenly the bronze key is in the lock and I am again the everyday hello of my mouth which meets that of my wife's, halfway down the hall with the TV talking to my right. I sit down, futon tired and float downstream, waking up in bed beside her. I touch her once, idle and humming, still emerging from sleep, and activate the universe.

A Thing Worth Saying

As ever, the words chosen chime like these,
like perfect fruit tastes, like a true bell rings.
They are decked, too, with complexities,
deft with their interwoven threads, their inward

spirallings. They boast capacities of which
they are unaware: to touch, eyelash-light,
the smallest speck of the subatomic world;
or to open wide and gulp down everything

in sight. If you seek hard for their wisdom,
it will not show, though if you wait, it might.
For they have tricked themselves out of their place
rippling with intent, trailing mission-parts

they cannot know. For my part, I'll not bruise,
nor lay my hands nearby, but with patient,
averted eye, simply allow the flow,
and hope, in time, you'll be amazed, as am I.