

# Watching Others go to Work

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In a meeting with my friend [Jennifer McCrea](#), she described standing on the subway and experiencing an overwhelming sense of people being captives of their routines and their contexts.

Montaigne wrote about a very similar idea, in his late essay “Of husbanding your will”:

Men give themselves for hire. Their faculties are not for them, they are for those to whom they enslave themselves; their tenants are at home inside, not they. This common humor I do not like. We must husband the freedom of our soul and mortgage it only on the right occasions; which are very small in number, if we judge sanely. See the people who have been taught to let themselves be seized and carried away: they do so everywhere, in little things as in big, in what does not touch them as in what does; they push in indiscriminately wherever there is business and involvement, and are without life when they are without tumultuous agitation.

Perhaps.

But train the glance a little more finely, at each soul. As in Philip Levine’s poem:

## **What Work Is**

We stand in the rain in a long line  
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.  
You know what work is – if you’re  
old enough to read this you know what  
work is, although you may not do it.  
Forget you. This is about waiting,  
shifting from one foot to another.

Feeling the light rain falling like mist  
into your hair, blurring your vision  
until you think you see your own brother  
ahead of you, maybe ten places.  
You rub your glasses with your fingers,  
and of course it's someone else's brother,  
narrower across the shoulders than  
yours but with the same sad slouch, the grain  
that does not hide the stubbornness,  
the sad refusal to give in to  
rain, to the hours wasted waiting,  
to the knowledge that somewhere ahead  
a man is waiting who will say, "No,  
we're not hiring today," for any  
reason he wants. You love your brother,  
now suddenly you can hardly stand  
the love flooding you for your brother,  
who's not beside you or behind or  
ahead because he's home trying to  
sleep off a miserable night shift  
at Cadillac so he can get up  
before noon to study his German.  
Works eight hours a night so he can sing  
Wagner, the opera you hate most,  
the worst music ever invented.  
How long has it been since you told him  
you loved him, held his wide shoulders,  
opened your eyes wide and said those words,  
and maybe kissed his cheek? You've never  
done something so simple, so obvious,  
not because you're too young or too dumb,  
not because you're jealous or even mean  
or incapable of crying in  
the presence of another man, no,  
just because you don't know what work is.

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Image by Tiffany Franke - <http://tiffanyfranke.tumblr.com>