

Introduction

Helen Potrebenko's poem "Job Interview" opens this special *Working for a Living* issue with a simple, and all-important, question: "Can I Sing?" In fact, more than asking the prospective employer's permission to sing on the job, she demands the right to do so. Her vows of submissiveness to low wages and poor working conditions are tongue-in-cheek; the attentive employer would be well forewarned that this is one woman who will be difficult to exploit. Not only does she insist on singing about beauty, quality of life, and loving, she sings of picket lines and self-assertion. Potrebenko's poem, like much of the writing in this issue, is a challenge to silence, apathy, and acquiescence to injustice.

In many respects, simply writing about the work we do is a challenge – to ourselves and the world around us. It is hard to step back from routines that engulf us daily, see beyond the details, and reach the broader implications for our lives and society. And for many women, just breaking out of silence, any silence – never mind the imposed 'give thanks not criticism to thy employer' – can be extremely difficult.

As well, in the literary world, it has been a challenge to have the subject of daily work recognized as a legitimate one for art. Fortunately, this is changing. There is an increasing amount of writing about work in journals, anthologies, and individual collections of poetry and fiction. Yet only a couple of years ago, in preparing a talk on the politics of women's poetry on this theme, I was astonished by the number of poems I'd collected. I hadn't, until then, realized there were so many women dealing with work in their creative writing – largely, I think, because this writing was (and still is) scattered throughout a wide variety of publications. Out of that 'discovery' came the idea for this edition of *Room of One's Own*.

Work is integral to all our lives; we spend at *least* half our waking hours at it. While we all need to feel productive and useful, far too many jobs are unfulfilling; far too many workplaces imprison workers in hierarchies, regulations, and attitudes that restrict rather than encourage growth and potential. Freedom at work is an anomaly, job satisfaction rare. While women and men certainly face similar problems and triumphs in their work, there are issues specific to women in the workplace, as there are outside it. These range from sexual harassment, to double and triple workloads, to pay inequity; and they are instrumental in depriving women of the rewards they should reap from their work.

How we are treated at work directly affects and reflects our place in society, what rights we are accorded, what ones denied. At the same time this treatment both creates and perpetuates discrimination. Becoming conscious of and writing about the worlds of our work can be a vehicle for seeing through and beyond the claims of 'equal opportunity,' 'democracy,' and 'justice' in our social, political, and economic system.

A broad definition of work was used in choosing material for this issue. Of course I included unpaid as well as paid work: what women do in the home and as volunteers in political and community activities. Little was received on political work, however, and nothing on community work – this surprising, because women have always taken on the bulk of it. Also included were retirement and unemployment, both integrally connected to the work theme. In putting together this collection one objective was to represent as wide a range of occupations, and of women's experiences in them, as possible. Most of what came in (and there was a *lot*) dealt with what traditionally has been considered 'women's work,' reflecting the fact that the majority of women

are ghettoized into lower paid, lower status occupations, and challenging the imposition of these conditions on women workers. Despite extensive advertising, very little or nothing at all was received from most areas of the Maritimes and the North, from women of colour, Native women, women with disabilities, 'illegal' immigrants, or lesbians, for example. The collection, therefore, is not definitive, but it is broad-ranging and exciting.

The pieces here are grouped mainly according to occupation or workplace. They include, for example, mothers, carpenters, waitresses and office workers. There are two reasons for choosing to organize the issue in this way. One is to present side by side, wherever possible, more than a single experience of a particular job or area of work. These juxtapositions can be revealing – note for instance the section on medical work where Louise Simon writes as a nurse in "Women's Chronic Ward," Julia Shelley as a hospital cleaning woman in "The Last Day of the First Week," and Kirsten Emmott as a doctor in "Shamanic Journey."

The other reason is to emphasize what I think the writings convey: that concerns specific to women's lives transcend particular occupations. In our workplaces we confront violence against women (Nancy Chater's "waitress in linguiform," Jean duGal's "Brushing and Weeding"); sexual harassment (Sue Silvermarie's "Gotta Keep It"); wage inequity (Shelley's "The Last Day...," Potrebenko's "Could Someone Please Tell Me What's Going on Here?"); and the effect of workplace hazards on the bearing of children (Anne Burke's "The List of Things," Claire-Leah Wright's "Bellma's Company"). There is the issue of women and mothering. Kate Braid's "These Hips," for instance, challenges one stereotype – that, as a woman, she is 'made' to have babies; Anne Miles' "Back to Work Blues" confronts a conflicting assumption – that as a mother she would 'of course' want to escape the 'boredom' and/or demands of childraising and get into the paid workforce. Leila, in Greta Hofmann Nemiroff's "Lettuce," speaks from the perspective of a woman who is aging, as does Anne E. Tener's narrator in "Ruby's Education."

When women write about their work, they frequently talk about more than one job within one story or one poem, reflecting their double and triple workloads (Carol Tarlen's "Today," Joanna Beyers' "It's the City," Nancy Robertson's "Interview"). They confront the issue of how major components of their work, such as tension managing and homemaking, are taken for granted and left unacknowledged (Dymphny Koenig-Clement's "Madonna," Nemiroff's "Lettuce," Bette Hagman's "The Interview"). And women write about writing from the specific perspective of breaking silences, often in terms of the struggle to slot this in and around their other jobs (Jean Rysstad's "Singing in the Dark," Sheila Dalton's "Tests").

Many selections reveal the lack of respect or appreciation for the work, and the person doing it, by others: 'higher-ups,' fellow workers, or those who receive services. An issue of critical importance to feminists is that women, as well as men, denigrate traditional 'women's work.' The supervisor who harasses women workers, or who adopts anti-worker company policies toward them, is too frequently female; the clerk eager to advance at the expense of the woman at the next desk is quite likely a woman; the member of the public who treats the woman service-worker as if she is invisible is all too often female (see Cynthia Flood's "How President Kennedy Showed Me that the Working Class Must Take the Power," Cynthea Masson's "Trivial Pursuits," and Alissa Levine's "Waitress").

A major objective in nearly all the writing received was to affirm the worth of the work women do, the skills required to do it and the women themselves – especially in jobs labelled 'unskilled.' Judith Stuart's "Canning Herstory" and Beth Jankola's "Fishing Village Blues," in the opening section on work in the home, are good examples of this, as is duGal's "Brushing and Weeding." When women write about job satisfaction and/or pride in their work, it is often as a result of struggling against adverse conditions (Braid's "'Girl' on the Crew," Monique Lamoix' "The Radio Hop," Tener's "Ruby's Education").

shove at negative attitudes, pitting their own awareness of the value of their work against the assumptions of those who refuse to acknowledge its worth (Marianne Milton's "I'm Leaving," Shelley's "The Last Day...", Hagman's "The Interview").

Contributors have raised other issues not specific to women. Burnout, a lost strike, and the effects of government cutbacks in education, for instance, are explored and illuminated in Nemiroff's "Lettuce," And the rarely tackled situation of the worker moving to management, with the false expectation that she can improve the workers' conditions from 'up there,' is subject matter for Nora D. Randall's "Marlene and the Chicken Yard."

A good deal of the writing is angry and defiant – for instance Tarlen's "Today," Silvermarie's "Federal Offence," Pam Tranfield's "Manual Action #1." Some selections are humorous (Braid's "Girl' on the Crew," Hagman's "The Interview"); others are despondent (J. A. Hamilton's "food bank," Simon's "Women's Chronic Ward"). Still others are anecdotal, like Roberta Olenick's "Field Trip" and Beyers' "Small Pleasures." And some are more broadly analytical, such as Emmott's "Shamanic Journey," which assesses the 'making' of a doctor, or Susan Ioannou's "Mrs. Minton Returns," which confronts the contradictions within and between us and recognizes the personal transformations necessary to achieve change. Complementing this theme in Ioannou's and others' writing are contributions alike Flood's and Randall's stories, which show the need for collection action.

Finally, whether descriptive, analytical, or anecdotal; humorous, furious, or despondent; lyrical or experimental; much of the writing here demands change, whether to individual attitudes or to the broader social, political, and economic system within which we live. The collection as a whole, and each piece, works toward quality in living. I once heard someone use the phrase "singing our complaints" to describe much of today's writing. That certainly could be said of most of the material in this issue, and this is one of its strengths. Women have been taught for so long to 'suffer in silence.' It is always a struggle to reject the dictum, a triumph when we do. The question we all face, in its various implications, is indeed: 'Can We Sing?'

— *Sandy Shreve*
Guest Editor

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