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# *Dolce Far Niente:*

David Tucker's *Late for Work*

Kenneth O. Anderson

## 『無為の楽しみ』

— デーヴィッド・タッカー の詩集 *Late for Work* に関する一考察 —

ケネス・O・アンダスン

詩人デーヴィッド・タッカー (David Tucker) は、ニュージャージー州のピューリッツァー賞を受賞したこともある朝刊紙『スター・レジャー紙』に勤務する記者でもある。彼が詩人として発表した最初の詩集 *Late for Work* には、「とりとめのない空想」や「夢想」, 「無為の楽しみ」を主題とした複数の詩が収録されている。この詩集は、詩人フィリップ・レヴィン (Philip Levine) によって2005年度のキャサリン・バイクレス・ネyson詩作賞 (the 2005 Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize for Poetry) の受賞作品に選ばれ、同賞はミドルベリー・カレッジ (Middlebury College) およびブロード・ローフ作家会議 (Bread Loaf Writers' Conference) によって授与された。本稿は、同詩集に収められた45編の詩の中から8作品を取り上げ、タッカーの詩における主題としての「静寂」と「静穏への細心の注意」に焦点をあて検討することを目的としている。そのうえで、「愛」, 「死」, 「家族」, 「神」, その他多様な主題を扱うタッカーの詩について、新たな研究と解釈の視点と方法を提示する。

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**Key words:** *dolce far niente*, woolgathering, daydreaming, negative capability, evanescence, meter, onomatopoeia, figurative language, personification, motifs

## Late for Work by David Tucker (N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin, 2006)

David Tucker's recent, first book of poems, *Late for Work*, is in large part about woolgathering, daydreaming, *dolce far niente*. It is about the importance of kicking back, of letting the mind wander at will, in order to replenish energy, restore perspective, give rein to the creative impulse, and renew the will to live.

Unlike many poets, however, Tucker does not teach in a university: he is "an assistant managing editor of the New Jersey *Star-Ledger* and was part of the team that won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for

breaking news. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan, he studied with Robert Hayden and Donald Hall” (cover notes for *Late for Work*). *Late for Work* won the 2005 Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize for poetry, chosen by the distinguished poet Philip Levine and awarded by Middlebury College and the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference. Of journalism Tucker has said, “Journalism was an adventure. I liked the instant publication, the quick turnaround, writing something that does have a ripple effect. [But] I didn’t love it as much as I loved poetry” (Smith, 2006). He writes poetry in the morning before he goes off to work as a journalist, “constantly revises, and he says it sometimes takes years for him to finish a poem” (Smith, op. cit.). He has said that “Journalism is about what the facts tell us, poetry is about what the facts don’t tell us” (Joseph, 2008).

Nevertheless, Tucker finds a similarity between poetry and journalism. In an interview with Terry Gross on the National Public Radio show *Fresh Air* (Dvorkin, 2008), Tucker said,

...Keats talks about to write great poetry, you have to avail yourself with something called negative capability, which is the ability to diminish your ego and to cut out everything else and invest yourself in that subject that you’re writing about and almost—so that kind of magic can happen where you become what you’re trying to write about. And I think to an extent, maybe in a humbler sense, really good reporters do the same thing. They are, they may be egomaniacs, but they may be quite vain when they’re away from the newsroom. They may be all sorts of things. But they’re professionals, and when they set about in pursuit of a subject, they’re able to put their egos aside and their loyalty is to that story and to getting everything they can before the deadline.”

What Philip Levine, in his foreword to *Hard Work*, found attractive in the poems is the

peace, a quality I find so rarely in poetry I almost forgot it’s there until I reread Keats’ “To Autumn” or late Yeats or Hardy or Edward Thomas . . . These moments are so rare in the poetry of our current tempestuous years that I forget they are still possible, but when I found such passages in the work of David Tucker I was not so much thrilled as reassured that life was still possible, still warm and satisfying at times for a person of great sensitivity, gentleness, and tact, which are qualities which abound in his new collection of poems (*Hard Work*, ix, x).

It’s this quality I wish to explore in this paper: a peace that is only possible if one takes the time, or makes the time, to take a break from the hectic pace of everyday life and slow down, relax, let the mind wander and, in so doing, put its house into order. I will concentrate on those poems that represent a break from work, a lull in the midst of the storm, what comes out of their musings, and I will quote the complete text of each poem.

## I. The Day Off

My wife and kids were gone, the house  
was empty and light. All morning I read  
Barbara Tuchman's great book  
about the Middle Ages.

A plain gray moth slept  
on the windowsill, waking now and then  
to crawl with the heat of the sun.

The smell of the lilac near the fence  
brushed past me—scent of the French cavalry  
there, then not there. It all went so fast.

The kids came home,  
my wife rushed in talking of dinner,  
and the streetlights switched on.

I put my book down somewhere  
in the years after the Black Death.  
Farms lay abandoned and whole towns  
had disappeared. In an abbey  
by the Seine, the last monk alive left a note,

and the moth on the windsill  
was gone—slipping through a hole  
in the screen and into the night.

In this poem, the speaker has the day off from work, and thus the liberty to spend the day as he pleases. He is also free for the time being of familial responsibilities, which is why the house seems “empty and light”. The emptiness of the house due to the absence of other family members would be

depressing or oppressive if it were permanent, but since it is temporary, it is a welcome respite, a lightening of responsibility. He decides to read and is soon so absorbed in the different time and world of the book he is reading (Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> Century*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1978) that he loses track of time in his own world, only brought back to it from time to time by the sight of a moth on the window, the scent of the lilac outside the open window (which shows us that the time of year is early summer). The scent of the lilac is both of his own time and of the time of the story he is reading, as it is the "scent of the French cavalry / there, then not there. It all went so fast." Time in the book is suspended when he stops reading to concentrate on something else; when he resumes reading, he re-enters the time of the book, which resumes unwinding. In writing the poem after this experience of reading, the poet is able to stand outside himself, observe himself and be aware of himself in time as it flees by, both in his own life and in the book as he is caught up in its story. Both in his own life and in the book, he realizes how fast time passes.

This fleetingness of time and the evanescence of all life on earth, not only his own, is also brought home to him through his awareness of the brevity of the life of the moth who wakes and sleeps on his windowsill and finally disappears "into the night" and his awareness of how quickly life was snuffed out in the Middle Ages by war ("the French cavalry") and disease ("the Black Death", or bubonic plague). He reads how "[f]arms lay abandoned and whole towns / had disappeared." The desolation and isolation of the survivors is demonstrated to the poet by a note left by the only monk to survive of an order who lived in an abbey by the Seine.

Yet this awareness is a blessing in that it heightens his realization of the goodness of family and the wonder of the ordinary when "the kids came home, / my wife rushed in talking of dinner, / and the streetlights switched on." He puts away the book and his contemplation of time to immerse himself in time again, enjoying his wife's conversation, the presence of his children, the comfort of food, and the everyday miracles, so much taken for granted, of such things as the illumination of streetlights.

The awareness of being blessed is possible because he is able to stop working for a while and have a quiet space to sort things out and remind himself of what is important and valuable in life. Wordsworth felt that "The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours; / We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!" Having days off and time to relax and unwind restores our hearts to us, renews our powers, and allows us to reclaim what we have lost.

Philip Levine also noted in his foreword to David Tucker's poems that "The writing is so precise and economical, the language so familiar and ordinary that if you're not reading it closely you can miss

how glorious the achievement is. There is nothing flashy about this collection, it never shouts, Hear me, I'm special, and in that way it does not resemble a good deal of what's passing for poetry these days."

In "The Day Off", the first line is regular iambic tetrameter, but then the meter become irregular. Nevertheless, the cadence of the lines becomes clear with a close reading, especially if one reads the lines aloud. One notices, for example, how the torpor of the moth and its fitful waking to crawl drowsily in the summer heat is echoed in the sounds of the words: "plain gray moth," each word stressed and drawn out; the rise and fall of "waking now and then" duplicating the patterns of sleep; the stresses in "to crawl with the heat of the sun," a line made up of an iamb followed by two anapests, so that "crawl", "heat," and "sun" are all stressed and lingered on, emphasizing the slowness.

Then the pace quickens, to underline how quickly time passes in the real world and also in the experience of being absorbed in reading: the short, soft onomatopoeic softness of "brush"; "scent" rather than "the scent" or "a scent" to indicate how evanescent the scent is; then the one-syllable words "there, then not there. It all went so fast" to indicate the quick passing of each moment. This is then followed by a stanza of almost all one-syllable words, short staccato phrases to depict the interruption of reading and another change of pace: "The kids came home, / my wife rushed in talking of dinner, / and the streetlights switched on."

And there is the interesting figurative language of "I put my book down somewhere / in the years after the Black Death." It is as if the book itself is from long ago and the reader is returning it to the actual time it speaks of, although of course we understand him to be saying that he has stopped reading at a certain place in the book and will continue reading later. And then, in the final sentence, a long-ago incident in the book is related to a brief incident in the present: "the last monk alive left a note, / and the moth on the windowsill / was gone—. . . ." The span of a human life is linked to the brief life span of a moth, and we are made to realize how short they both actually are.

## II. Putting Everything Off

The objectives for the day lean against sagging fences now,  
the shovels and hoes are covered in dew.  
Parking tickets from places barely remembered go  
unpaid another day. Tax forms from years I'm not sure  
I ever lived slip a day closer to being forgotten  
along with letters stamped but never mailed,

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their thoughts obsolete, their news old;  
lone socks and quarters are hiding out in the dust  
under the bed like the strays that won't come in.  
Here are the windows that I once thought of as dirty, but that  
was an old list of things not done, their dirtiness  
is relative now to the other urgent tasks left undone  
and therefore not very dirty anymore. May we always  
have mountains of things that have to be fixed, acres  
of the unfinished. Let us hear as long as we can  
the kitchen faucet that drips all day with its one  
inscrutable syllable, and let us have joyous screen doors  
with a rip in the corner like this, an amusement ride  
the flies dive through, while the moon glowers down  
and the stacks of things not done grow beautifully deep.

This poem is comforting. In its own way it is telling us not to “sweat the small stuff.” It is reminding us that most of the daily things we fret about are not worth fretting about and won't matter if left unattended, will even fade into inconsequence. Furthermore, the poem tells us that this state of affairs is good: “May we always have mountains of things to be fixed, acres / of the unfinished.” It is the light-hearted obverse of Richard Wilbur's plea, “Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry, / Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam / And clear dances done in the sight of heaven” in his famous “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.”

In Tucker's poem, even the objectives themselves, not to mention the speaker of the poem himself, “lean against sagging fences now”: the objectives have become objectified. The shovels and hoes are “covered in dew” because they have not been picked up and used. Parking tickets are neglected, tax forms “from years I'm not sure I ever lived” are not filled out and sent off. The wryness of this last observation suggests both the age of the tax forms (so old that they might almost be from a time before the speaker even existed) and how so much of life is taken up with mundane tasks that make us feel we are not living, but merely existing. The letters left unwritten are of a bygone age, since now almost all letters are e-mailed, and what the old letters say is no longer true or relevant. “Lone socks and quarters” are personified: they are wild cats or dogs who don't trust us to treat them rightly and refuse to come when we beckon. (Few things can be more frustrating than being able to find only one sock when one is already late for work, and how often one seems to find loose change vanished, as if

spirited away by the Borrowers.)

But the speaker of the poem good-humoredly sweeps these things aside as trivial, poking fun at his own rationalization for not taking care of household chores immediately: the dirtiness of his windows, for example, “is relevant to the other urgent tasks left undone / and therefore not very dirty any more.” The drip of the faucet ceases to be irritating and instead becomes “an inscrutable syllable”, as if it were a mantra like “Om” used to get in touch with a higher and more mysterious world. Let the flies come in through the hole in the screen door, he says, since for them it may be like “an amusement ride.” The moon “glowers” down like a superior disapproving of such laxity, but we notice the “glow” in its glower and realize that life is “beautifully deep” and inexhaustible.

What “Putting Everything Off” gives us (along with the title’s nagging reminder to “Never put off tomorrow what you can do today”) is a needed change of perspective, so that we stop worrying for a while and start relaxing again. The ominous disappearance of the moth through the hole in the screen in “The Day Off” has, through this change in perspective, become the “amusement ride” of the flies. Tomorrow has been banished for the moment so that we are able to seize today.

The lines of “Putting Everything Off” are more leisurely than the short, quickly passing lines of “The Day Off.” The lines of “Putting Everything Off” unwind ruminatively; a break is taken from work in order to take stock. The pace slows, as with the use of the semi-colon at the end of the seventh line to mark a pause in a long sentence, followed by another long sentence which covers nearly four lines. The last sentence of the poem is nearly six lines long, an invocation with the parallel phrases “Let us hear” and “Let us have”. The speaker of the poem, like Oscar in *The Odd Couple*, asks for tolerance, for letting things go.

### III. The Crow Life

Stuck inside the house  
with a bad cold,  
I lie in bed and watch the crows

gathering in the top of the locust tree—  
one, then three, now another,  
all jabbering at once.

Arrogant and shining



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deep black in the winter sun,  
they holler: “This is what it’s like,  
you see?”

Sun and treetops and wind  
all day long  
in the crow life.”

Perhaps we could say (à la Wallace Stevens) that this is a fourteenth way of looking at a black bird. In this poem, the speaker anthropomorphizes the crows, a method of focusing his attention on something outside of himself and the misery of his cold. He uses his “negative capability” to imagine what it would be like to be a crow and is heartened by what he sees. Unlike himself, laid low by a cold, the crows actually seem to thrive in the winter cold and even crow about it: “This is what it’s like, / you see? // Sun and treetops and wind / all day long / in the crow life.” It is as if they are saying to him, in his sickness, “Look at us, out in the cold all day, every day, exposed to the elements, but so what? That’s life, and we enjoy it!” Their hardiness makes them arrogant, not only to him, but to each other: each strives to dominate, jabbering and hollering. Like Foghorn Leghorn, they bluster and find it impossible to keep their bluster down to a low roar. And in their arrogance they are beautiful to the speaker, “shining deep black in the winter sun.” The negative connotations of black are transformed into a positive lust for life, come what may. The crows are the bestial version of Shakespeare’s Amiens in *As You Like It*, calling others to join him for a life in the wild where one will see “no enemy / But winter and rough weather.” It is a harsh world, but a world without the malice and guile of the human sphere.

The sounds of the poem help to convey the sense. The fricatives in “stuck” and “cold” and the plosive of the “b” in “bad” suggest how the speaker is both physically and mentally bogged down. The second line of the second stanza imitates the flight of the crows landing on the locust tree: “one, then three, now another”. The crows’ final statement echoes the actual caw of crows—sharp, staccato, aggressive, challenging: “Sun and treetops and wind / all day long / in the crow life.” This is definitely a poem that begs for performance.

#### IV. And This Just In

Those footfalls on the stairs when the night shift went home,

the sunlight fanning through the dinosaur's rib cage,  
the janitor's sneeze—we're asking questions,  
we'd like to know more.

The moth in the clock tower at city hall,  
the 200<sup>th</sup> generation to sleep there—we may banner the story  
across page one. And in Metro we're leading  
with the yawn that traveled city council chambers  
this morning, then slipped into the streets  
and wound through the city. The editorial page  
will decry the unaccountable boredom  
that overtook everyone at three in the afternoon.  
Features praises the slowness of moonlight  
making its way around the house, staying  
an hour in each chair, the inertia  
of calendars not turned since winter.

A watchman humming in the parking lot  
at Broad and Market—we have that—  
with a sidebar on the bronze glass  
of a whiskey bottle cracking into cheap jewels  
under his boots. A boy walking across the ball field  
an hour after the game—we're covering that silence.  
We have reporters working hard, we're getting  
to the bottom of all of it.

In this poem Tucker uses his profession—getting the news out through the medium of a newspaper—to treasure the wonder of the ordinary, superficially humdrum moments that make up so much of our lives. “And This Just In,” of course, is the phrase often heard on television to announce a newsflash. But what are the newsflashes of this poem? They are the stuff of everyday life, the quotidian, the prosaic. They are quiet phenomena: footfalls, the movement of sun- and moonlight, a sneeze, the existence of a moth, a yawn, a mood of boredom descending collectively on a group of newspeople, the seeming slowness of the movement of time, the humming of a guard, the sound of

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glass breaking underfoot, the virtually silent tread of a boy crossing a baseball field. Usually these are the kinds of things we barely notice, unless we have the luxury of a few moments of free time to reflect on them, to ponder, as humans constantly do, on the meaning of existence. We'd all "like to know more."

Once again a moth is compared to a human being: as the speaker of this poem notes that the 200<sup>th</sup> generation of a moth lives in the clock tower at city hall, we place signs at famous places that say "George Washington slept here," search for our ancestors on the Internet, seek to connect ourselves to those who came before us, and prolong our family lines: all part of our fight against being snuffed out of existence. One thinks of Elizabeth Bishop's "man-moth" offering a tear from his eye to the close (and sympathetic) observer, "cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink." The speaker of this poem has also found something cool and thirst-quenching in the everyday existence of those around him.

The yawn that the reporters mention is personified: it "travels" from city council chambers into the streets and throughout the city. It is insidious, spreading its negative social attitude, so that, under its influence, we start taking things for granted, become blasé, jaded, cynical or indifferent. A poem, like the headline about the moth that the reporters "banner" on page one, is a wake-up call, urging us to reawaken our sense of wonder about what we have ignored, lost sight of, or become inured to. The attitude of poetry, its practice, is a stance taken, an exercise undertaken, to banish "unaccountable boredom", to praise moments when nothing happens except a change in our perception. "Slowness" is often disparaged in an age when there is little time to slow down in order to deliberate or savor. Like the "slow food" movement, poetry acts as a brake in a society where, as the Red Queen says, "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place."

Inertia is not seen, in this poem, as something negative (e.g., the sloth of a couch potato), but instead as a positive, a refusal to be dictated to by schedules and calendars, to be more aware of natural time, measured in terms of light and weather, rather than time as measured by watches and clocks, forcing us to take care of business.

Instead of emphasizing what we lack, the speaker of this poem highlights what we have—"A watchman humming in the parking lot / at Broad and Market—we have that." The bronze glass of a broken whiskey bottle may be cheap, but it sparkles like jewels (similarly, in a song by the late John Phillips, "People Like Us," "A Dixie cup becomes a chalice"). A boy crosses a baseball field in silence—but what lies under that silence? What is the boy thinking about, what has he been doing, what is going to happen to him? Any such moment is filled with mystery that can never be completely plumbed, although the reporters are "working hard" to get "to the bottom of all of it." What is "it"?

The mystery of the subconscious? The meaning of life? Is it, as Calloway cynically tells Holly Martins in the film *The Third Man*, death? (“Death is at the bottom of everything, Martins. Leave it to the professionals.”) It is all of these things and more, and, like Holly Martins, it is vital for us not to leave matters to the professionals, but discover them for ourselves.

## V. Blackbirds Leaving

The light hitting the rooftops  
at a certain angle on a certain fall day,  
maybe that was it, or some old map  
to the south lighting up  
in the brain. At any rate,  
there was a sudden quiet in the trees,  
one bolted and then another,  
and they all lifted in unison,  
veering for the north in the shape  
of a black scarf, then turning back  
and swooping over the house  
with a low roar of wings.  
So much silence then. The trees empty,  
a few feathers eddying down,  
a cricket singing in the weeds,  
and there was that feeling  
that soon it would snow.

“Blackbirds Leaving” offers an interesting contrast to “The Crow Life.” Where “The Crow Life” is celebratory and cheering, “Blackbirds Leaving” is downbeat and subdued. Where the crows call out to the speaker in “The Crow Life,” establishing a connection between themselves and him, the blackbirds, oblivious of him and his solitude, suddenly leave for the south, leaving the speaker with a feeling of emptiness and a foreboding of coming cold. But practicing poetry helps here, too. Where poetry helped take the speaker out of himself and the misery of his cold in “The Crow Life”, here poetry helps him face his solitude and describe it instead of letting it get the better of him. Poetry gives speech to silence and distance from what threatens to overwhelm.

What the speaker of this poem first notices is the “sudden quiet in the trees.” It is too quiet, in

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other words; the speaker has noticed the absence of bird chatter. The birds fly off and the only sound left to be heard is that of the cricket, who is a harbinger of winter. It is only after this that the speaker begins to muse on what triggered the migratory instinct that propelled the birds to take flight: it must have been “the light hitting the rooftops / at a certain angle on a certain fall day,” or “some old map / to the south lighting up / in the brain.” The image of instinct as a “map in the brain” is a way of saying that we don’t really know what instinct is or how it works, that instinct is still a great mystery. It is like reading the phrase “road map” in a newspaper and realizing that “road map” is a metaphor devised to help us get a handle on a complex situation, a situation which is fluid, constantly changing, and ultimately beyond our ability to grasp in its entirety, let alone predict its outcome.

Okay, the speaker says to himself, so I can’t really explain what made the birds suddenly decide to leave; “at any rate” I can at least describe the physical act that took place because of it. Just as the crows in “The Crow Life” arrive separately (“one, then three, now another”) but end up “all jabbering at once”, so the blackbirds in this poem initially depart singly (“one bolted and then another”), but almost immediately become a group (“they all lifted in unison”). This unity is something a lonely human can envy, since it is so instinctive, so right, without thought and without language. As Auden said of birds in “Their Lonely Betters,”

...Not one of them was capable of lying,  
There was not one that knew that it was dying  
Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme  
Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters  
Who count some days and long for certain letters;  
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:  
Words are for those with promises to keep.

The fact that the blackbirds in Tucker’s poem head north “in the shape / of a black scarf” suggests a shroud or mourning clothes, while “swooping” and “low roar” suggest attack. The language of the poem starts to shut down: complete sentences give way to phrases bereft of verbs, save for the “singing” of the cricket, who can sing because he is not stricken with feelings of loneliness or approaching death. “So much silence then”: too much silence for the human being in its midst, too much solitude. The speaker notes the physical details around him—the emptiness of the trees (like an abandoned home), the falling feathers, the chirp of the cricket—and his mind works to control

these details, rather than be controlled by them, to make sense of them: “soon it would snow.” There is comfort—even if seems, at the moment, to be cold comfort—in the ability to size up the situation, to “know” it, to fashion something beautiful from it which he can then share with others: his own form of singing.

## VI. A Book Review

There is a chapter on the soothing calm of falling asleep  
in leaky huts at the edge of twelfth-century Cobham barley fields,  
a thousand illustrations of silhouettes  
thrown on the wall by the cave fires of Neanderthal evenings,  
and a long entry on making love to that never-to-be  
equaled sound of rain drumming on a tin roof  
on the American prairie of the 1880s.

Ten thousand pages detail the complex beat  
of wind over broken gutters, of sleet on ancient windows,  
of aging apple branches scratching window screens, of rain  
tapping the forehead. Intricate treatises describe  
fat peasants singing bawdy ballads in the evening hay fields  
of those near-perfect Junes of the early 1600s  
and still another folio examines  
the calligraphy of old friends getting drunk together  
in the Hong Kong rain of 1923. And memories  
of the breezes that came from nowhere,  
arriving when least expected, in the Indian summer  
that lasted five weeks in lower Nashville in 1948,  
are all gathered here, catalogued and exalted  
in that vast book called *Days When Nothing Happens*.

One would really like to have a copy of the imaginary book “reviewed” in this poem, a glowing review of all the “ordinary” moments of life that are so soon forgotten or wrongly dismissed as unimportant unless we deliberately commemorate them in art, a book that would actually, of course, be impossible to compile. The lines of the poem are long and leisurely and convey the peaceful lull

that comes over us in moments of well-being. The moments are from all over the map and take place all over the centuries: human needs, desires and satisfactions are universal and timeless. The village of Cobham in Surrey, England is mentioned, and Neanderthals, who in this poem are just as capable of imagination and sensitivity as modern humans, even though, for us, they often represent the “primitive, uncivilized, uncouth” or “the reactionary” and “extremely conservative” (Oxford English Dictionary definition). Most of the past events of human life are lost to us, but they were of great importance to those who lived them, and were certainly not on days when nothing happens. The sound of rain was one “never-to-be-/ equaled,” the movement of wind, sleet and apple branches was “complex”, and so it is today. Knowledge is encased in “intricate treatises,” examined in folios, “gathered here, catalogued and exalted”—how interesting the inclusion of that final verb, “exalted”, is. For knowledge is never complete and mystery is inherent in all things. Treatises may attempt to describe ancient singing, but can they explain why those Junes were “near-perfect” or make clear everything that lies behind the singing of “bawdy ballads”? Can examining the calligraphy of “old friends getting drunk together / in the Hong Kong rain of 1923” take account of all the variables in such an experience and convey to us exactly what it meant to the parties involved? Even when we experience something directly ourselves, do we totally understand the experience and grasp everything there is to be known about it? Moreover, our memories of our experiences, like the breezes in the Indian summer in Nashville of 1948 mentioned in this poem, come “from nowhere, / arriving when least expected”, and are subject to interpretation and re-evaluation, both by ourselves and others.

Our knowledge is (to quote Elizabeth Bishop again) “historical, flowing, and flown.” Pursuit of knowledge increases our awareness of the mystery and importance of each moment, and art helps us imagine “what the facts don’t tell us.”

## VII. Newsroom Still Life

I love these Saturdays in late August when the city room is quiet  
like the warehouse it once was, and haze pours down  
from the old warehouse windows and yawns roll from one end  
of the big room to the other. I could live in this slow time  
for the rest of my life, walking the long rows of empty desks  
with the news over and done or sitting with my feet up,  
hands clasped behind my head, balanced on the back legs of my chair.

A desk fan whirs in the face of the news clerk dozing on his arm,  
soothed by the clang of the janitor's bucket and the mutter of the cop radio.  
I love the who-cares, who gives a damn mood and the phone ringing  
under a hill of newspapers on the desk of the investigative reporter—  
gone for the weekend. Let it ring. Let silence take over for a while,  
the silence of Vermeer's pitcher, the silence of atomic water heavily dripping.  
A reporter with her boots on her desk, pen in mouth, yammers  
softly on the telephone. The conversation could last  
for days. Now she leans forward and writes in her notebook  
with lazy bemusement. Whatever it is, it can wait and it's too late  
for the final edition anyway. The fat night editor looks out  
from his glass office, chin on hand, eyes closing, about to turn to stone.

The news has stopped  
and we're all stopping along with it. Nothing moves but a few  
pages of yesterday's paper lifting in the breeze from the open window.  
A door squeaks open and someone scuffs down the long stairwell,  
shift over, his whistle fading toward the street.

"Newsroom Still Life," like "And This Just In," is about the slow moments between the main events that fill newspapers. (Other poems in the book about newspaper work are "City Editor Looking for News", "Morning Edition", "Perspective", and "Today's News".) The fact that the room described in "Newsroom Still Life" used to be a warehouse reminds us that old news is dead news, stored away in libraries and forgotten (except by historians), and is often in danger of being lost (see, for example, Nicholson Baker's account of his attempt to save historical newspapers from destruction in his National Book Award-winning book, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (Baker, 2001). But of course what Tucker is concerned with, once again, are not the events that get into the newspapers, but the ones that do not—and yet make up so much of our lives.

As in "And This Just In," yawns are contagious. But rather than feeling let down or oppressed by the "haze" that pours down, the speaker of the poem delights in it: "I could live in this slow time," he says, "for the rest of my life." For it is in the empty moment that one finds time to evaluate one's calling, find it blessed, and call it good. The speaker of "Newsroom Still Life" balances on the back legs of his chair: likewise, he maintains his equilibrium in experiencing and recording the vicissitudes



of life and the news.

Work is often decried for making wage slaves of its workers, but it is a blessing as well. Some amount of order and regularity in life is necessary to maintain stability, and in fact can be comforting (the news clerk finds the familiar sounds of his office “soothing”). Comfort is also found in the shared life of work, in the fellow feeling and mutual understanding that one shares with one’s colleagues. The lull that has descended on the newsroom in this poem, the lull between bouts of intense activity which the newsman characterizes as a “who-cares, who-gives-a-damn mood”, is loved by the newsman not least because he shares it with his coworkers. His mind’s eye takes a photograph of the lull and transforms it into something more: “the silence of Vermeer’s pitcher, the silence of atomic water heavily dripping.” This pairing of “Vermeer’s pitcher” and “the silence of atomic water heavily dripping” is interesting. “Vermeer’s pitcher” refers to a pitcher depicted in Vermeer’s famous painting *The Milkmaid*, in which light from a window falls on a milkmaid pouring milk from the pitcher into a bowl. Atomic water, or heavy water, is, according to the *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia*, “used as a moderator in nuclear power plants, slowing down the fast neutrons so that they can react with the fuel in the reactor”, and increasingly used “in research techniques such as small-angle neutron scattering, in high-resolution nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy of immobilized samples, and in the study of isotope effects” (“Heavy Water”, [www.answers.com](http://www.answers.com)). In Vermeer’s painting, the movement of the milk being poured from the pitcher is completely stilled, frozen in time, so that we who view the painting hundreds of years after it was painted can share in the mystery of Vermeer’s perception. In the case of heavy water, neutrons are being slowed down in order for scientists—and others—to share in their mystery and explore it. Our devotion to these mysteries results in an attitude of reverence toward them—we exalt them as the “days when nothing happens” are exalted in “A Book Review”. Such devotion is spiritual, for, as the poet W. H. Auden said, “[w]henever a man so concentrates his attention--on a landscape, a poem, a geometrical problem, an idol, or the True God--that he completely forgets his own ego and desires, he is praying” (“Prayer”, <http://www.annabelle.net>).

There are sounds in this silence, however—not the negative sounds of Simon and Garfunkel’s “Sounds of Silence,” but the positive ones of human quietude: the soft “yammer” of the reporter who, like the speaker of this poem, is balanced, leaning back “with her boots on her desk”, involved in a conversation that “could last / for days”; the soft breathing of the somnolent night editor, also balanced, “chin on hand” and “about to turn to stone.” This transformation into stone is not a negative one, as with the victims of the Medusa, but positive: the poet is sculpting the figure of the night editor into something lasting, a permanent dream state.

By the end of the poem, the only thing moving is “yesterday’s paper lifting in the breeze from the

open window”. A poem is also written on paper, giving us its own kind of news from both the past and present; but what moves is not the paper, but the poem itself, in our minds. A few final sounds fade away—the squeaking of an open door (as the doors of perception open to receive the poem), the scuffing of shoes down the long stair well, a whistle, as someone leaves, “shift over.” The poet’s shift is over as he ends his poem and it is then up to us who read it to take over and continue the work of the imagination.

The shape and sounds of the poem itself reflect the process of winding down: the dwindling of sound to “the mutter of the / cop radio” and the “atomic water heavily / dripping”; the cessation of activity evidenced by the space before the last stanza and the pronouncement that [t]he news has stopped”. The hiatus between shifts is what is left, a time in which to catch one’s breath, collect one’s thoughts and make beautiful sense of our workaday world.

### VIII. Today’s News

A slow news day, but I did like the obit about the butcher  
who kept the same store for fifty years. People remembered  
when his street was sweetly roaring, aproned  
with flower stalls and fish stands.  
The stock market wandered, spooked by presidential winks,  
by micro-winds and the shadows of earnings. News was stationed  
around the horizon, ready as summer clouds to thunder—  
but it moved off and we covered the committee meeting  
at the back of the statehouse, sat around on our desks,  
then went home early. The birds were still singing,  
the sun just going down. Working these long hours,  
you forget how beautiful the early evening can be,  
the big houses like ships turning into the night,  
their rooms piled high with silence.

This poem closes *Late for Work*, and like so many of the poems in this book (“Kingdoms of Laziness”, “The Day Off”, “The Woman in the Faraway House,” “Putting Everything Off”, “That Day”, “Quilts”, “A Day in October”, “Newsroom Still Life”), appropriately enough, ends with the coming of night. There may be loneliness, pathos, a hint of mortality in thoughts of night, but there is also

beauty and peace, the satisfaction that comes at the end of a day well spent. Irving Berlin may have written, “The butcher, the baker, the grocer, the clerk / Are secretly unhappy men because / The butcher, the baker, the grocer, the clerk / Get paid for what they do but no applause. / They’d gladly bid their dreary jobs goodbye / for anything theatrical...” in his song “There’s No Business Like Show Business”, but for the speaker of this poem, the humble butcher and his like are to be celebrated: what they do for a living is just as meaningful, just as necessary, as show biz or art (and vice versa, of course). People honor him with an obituary: the vividness of their memories of him as a solid and dependable person (“who kept the same store for fifty years”) is in striking contrast to the personified stock market “spooked by presidential winks, / by micro-winds and the shadows of earnings”: the investor in pursuit of insubstantial wealth which is controlled by the powerful for the benefit of the rich at the expense of the poor. The drama of terrible events which is the news lurks on the horizon like an imminent storm, but on this blessed day never materializes, so that the only news to be had is of a dull meeting involving local politics. The newspeople find themselves able to forget about the dire state of the world for a while and able to realize anew the beauty of the ordinary, the mystery of the voyage of life, with all its unexpected turnings, in even the suburbs. The rooms in the houses where these voyages are taking place may be “piled high with silence” because they are inhabited by unsung heroes whose lives are taken for granted and are not felt to be worthy of comment. Art is what gives voice to the voiceless; as Flannery O’Connor said, “Art is a house waiting to be haunted.” Poems are good spirits which haunt the houses of art.

## IX. More Work to be Done

There are many more things that could be said about these and other poems in *Late for Work*. It would be interesting, for example, to compare David Tucker’s “Detective Story”, which Tucker prefaces with the note “after Jane Kenyon’s ‘Happiness’”, to Jane Kenyon’s own poem to see what ties the two poems together, or what sets them apart (incidentally, Jane Kenyon was the student and later wife of Donald Hall, in whose class at the University of Michigan Tucker studied poetry). It would be interesting to contrast Tucker’s “Snowbound” with the 1865 poem of the same title by John Greenleaf Whittier (the earlier poem has a rural setting, while Tucker’s poem is set in an airport). The recurrence of motifs such as yawns, moths, soft sounds, etc., would be interesting to pursue. It would be interesting to follow other paths as well, in the love poems (“The Woman in the Faraway House,” “Oh”, “Talking to Cats While Making Breakfast”, “July Late at Night”) the poems about death (of his father, in “Enough of It”, of his friend Joseph Salerno, in “Indian Summer”, of two little girls killed in a

fire in “Messengers”), about his mother (“That Day”, “Quilts”, “The Men Decide”, “My Mother’s Voices”), his daughter (“The Dancer”), God (“The Way It Works Up There”), and many other things. But for now, *dolce far niente* is enough. It is time to be late for work.

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