Writing Exercises
by Dave Johnson

The Work Poem
One of the toughest tasks for educators teaching young writers is to get them to see that poetry is everywhere in our lives. Most early poems consist of young loves, heartaches, break-ups, and make-ups. The “site” of the Work Poem is a good place to engage young writers to focus on a specific subject matter and to encourage them to explore the language that surrounds the jobs and work they do daily. Some of my best students in the Cooper Union Saturday/Outreach Program wrote about their extracurricular jobs in nursing homes, offices, night clubs, their everyday chores, the tasks of the visual artist, and about the job of being a student.

As an introduction to the Work Poem, in a recent class, we read these poems by Susan Eisenberg, from her book *Pioneering: Poems from the Construction Site*, H.R. Press, 1998.

Transients
Walking onto job sites lugging toolbox gear and a lunch to be eaten at morning coffee we make home by conversation gathered around some appliance hauled back for the dumpster; settling in – even on a long job – with only our place on a bench and a nail hook we’ve driven in ourselves.

Gaping earth to steel to trim – the decks of players get shuffled and reshuffled.

Hard times: almost anything traded to avoid layoff.

We discussed how Susan describes with clarity and detail certain moments in her day. She uses the language of the job itself. And then we read “Did She Tell You About Running Pipe?” Afterwards we discussed her role as a woman on the construction site and how she relates the issue of gender in the workplace to a larger communal context.

Did She Tell You About Running Pipe?
Racks of them slicing the vault air spinning leaping kicking their powerfully rounded thighs in perfect unison like an ensemble of Russian dancers soaring robustly across a long stage. Muscular limbs synchronized dive into switchgear thrust up through concrete!

Woman whose hands for millenniums shaped dough into bread shaped clay into pots shaped plant fiber into cloth apprenticed to Vulcan Himself practiced all His secrets - now she runs pipe and lights the Heavens with laughter

After reading this poem we discussed our own various jobs, past or present, and how they relate to our lives as a whole. Does our work define us? Are we doing it just for the money? What is the role of work in our society? How does our chosen work compare to what we want from our lives? We then took up the challenge of writing our own Work Poems. Here are a few examples from students in the Cooper Union Saturday/Outreach Program. Ormon Long wrote about his job working with animals in a pet store.

Chaos in the Store
Many different voices all at once shouting, I need my water changed. Where are my Kiddies-n-Bits? They're bothering me. Where’s my mother?

Events in a loop. The frogs jumping the newspaper being used, the little rabbit abused, tortured ones in cages, singing their hearts out, enraged. I can't take it anymore. Please release me,

The pain is overwhelming. Let ‘em out! Let ‘em out! Let ‘em out!

Jermaine Bland wrote about washing clothes.

Long Morning at the Laundromat
stressful separating colors, different textiles, using detergents for these different colors and watching for hours the clothes spinning around like a wheel of a train.

And Katie Baldassaro penned “The Cost.”

The Cost
Two AM on a Tuesday night, coffee rings on an index finger mocking The ones on my eyes, with a single flourescent, I work, staring blankly into a screen programming, manipulating, calculating, recalculating, rubbing away the carpal tunnel, intricately designing the codes, the numbers, the beautiful structure of the hidden web, so some boob can sell handstitched celebrity pillows to the over seas market.