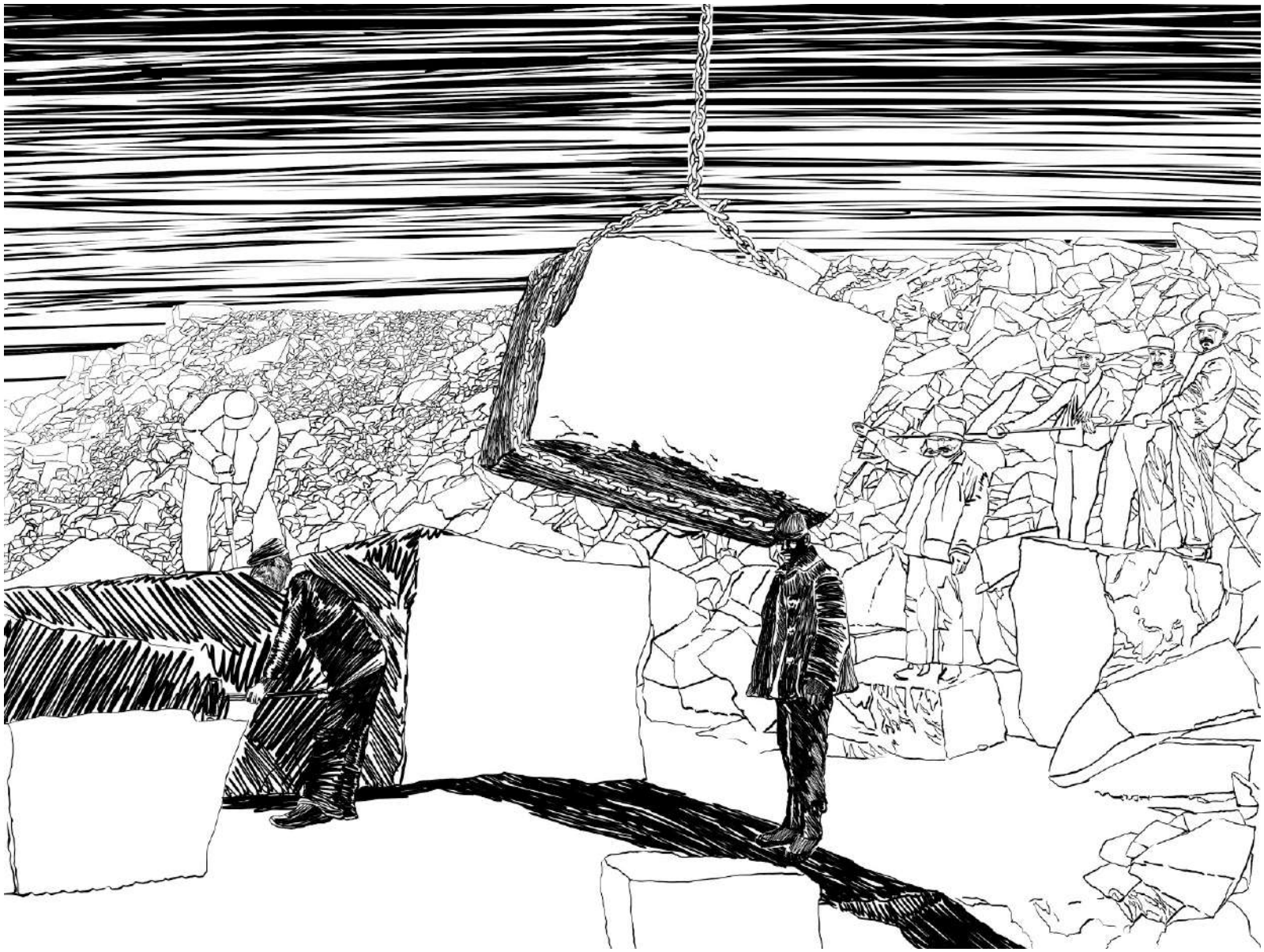


METAMORPHIC

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY LIZ MEDINA

Metamorphic rocks have resided in different geological settings in their journey of becoming what they are. They become their own unique hybrids of the places in which they've lived. They record more than a journey; they record change. Not all rocks are metamorphic -- granite is not a metamorphic rock -- but all kinds of rocks can become one.

"All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided." - Karl Marx

The empty shops, boarded up houses, and smokestacks of Binghamton and Baldwinsville, New York -- most of them silent and statuesque in their new function as memorials of another time -- impressed my childhood mind as enigmas. At one time, they contained and supported lives. Why didn't they anymore? I'd take long, clandestine bike rides out to them, get close to their facades, daring them with my gaze to reveal the calamities they contained; I intuited the present dangers of drugs and violence that grew in their darkness to be natural extensions of the troubles that led to their current state of dereliction. But I never went in. I never uncovered their particular histories. My grandparents used to work behind some of those factory walls. Through their toil, they fed and housed a family, but the work also gave them much pain, which was made known through frequent complaints of achy hands, backs, and feet from standing on concrete floors all day, making the same motions over and over in sync with the machines. But much of their interior lives and feelings were hidden behind a wall of stoicism. In school, I was taught that we are on a one-way journey called progress. The strained optimism of my parents tried to validate this claim. When I found my mom crying late one night after she finished her shift at Burger King, the only job she could find at the time when our family desperately needed the extra money, the idea of progress became a prevarication that sank into the pit of my stomach. I knew a little about how it must have hurt because of the cruel assumptions my peers made about her and, by extension, me -- namely, that we were struggling because we deserved to be. My mother is bright. She won awards for her mathematical abilities in school, but she did not have the privilege of a college education. From then on, I learned to see the contradictions in everything.

When I ended up in Central Vermont eighteen years later, the neat towns nestled in between the mountains appeared as if they magically arose sui generis without the powerful force of industry. After almost six months of unemployment I found myself working as a VISTA - a Volunteer In Service To America. Vermont's Twin Cities, Montpelier and Barre, became my home. I lived most of my life in cities where people always outnumber animals, and perhaps that was true of these small towns as well, but it certainly didn't look like it. Montpelier was the state's capital, at least, giving it importance by default. Barre was much more mysterious and obscure. Up and down main street, you find the standard small town America offerings alongside a smattering of creative outlets and stores that have somehow withstood the test of time: a gas station every several blocks, a dollar general, a couple convenience stores, a mechanic's shop, car parts stores, hardware stores, a diner, and a couple of nicer restaurants and shops that probably mainly serve folks from out of town, cooperative artist's studios and a gallery, a shop for shoe repairs, and a shop for sewing services.

Just driving through Barre, you wouldn't think there is this big hole in the ground nearby that birthed some of the most revered buildings and monuments in history, some of them sitting in Washington, DC: the Smithsonian Institution, Union Station, and the General William Tecumseh Sherman Memorial which is right next to the White House. Or that its granite can be found on almost every battlefield and national cemetery in the nation. Or that it once churned out an enormous amount of money and profits -- enough to make this town into a capital of industry, the Granite Capital of the World. Such auspiciousness drew people from the other side of the ocean, predominantly Italy, Ireland, Scotland, and Spain. The cost of this outward progress was paid in flesh: the quarry owners swallowed young men whole in their pits and sheds. Widowed wives had to hustle to keep their families alive, running shops and restaurants (sometimes out of their own homes), taking in boarders, furtively making grappa and spirits for the wealthier clientele coming in from neighboring Montpelier, bearing the death of their husbands in the constrained silence of hard labor.

Evidence of this history is scattered throughout, even on Main Street: a

restaurant named “The Quarry” and a statue of an Italian stone carver dedicated to all the workers in the industry, for instance. The statute reads as a memorial, but the granite industry is not wholly dead in this town. The traffic whirs by with threatening speed. They are probably commuters travelling between the twin cities -- not heading to the quarry or manufacturing plant. I go against traffic towards Graniteville, where Rock of Ages (now owned by the Canadian company Polycor, Inc, which owns 32 quarries across the North America) still operates a memorial manufacturing plant and a quarry.
Idling at a traffic light, a man holds a cardboard sign that reads “Homeless, need help until SSDI comes in. Every bit helps.” A large, black crow gallantly flies ten feet above me, carrying a large stick in its beak. She or he -- in the society of crows, there aren’t rigidly defined gender roles when it comes to homemaking -- is trying to build a home in which to raise the next generation. Half a mile further down the road, a couple of construction cranes are at work fixing power lines near a subdivision of homes. For us, nesting season never ends.

I continue driving. The sky has been relentlessly gray today. Gray skies have a way of quieting everything around you. Nature pulls a blanket of clouds over us and asks us to rest. But, of course, we cannot. We need to make things, make money, make nests. The crow must do this, must live day by day, but even with all of the extra stuff we make, all this surplus, most of us also live this way. There are only a few branches on the road around us, but, sequestered away in the woods there are a countless number of them.

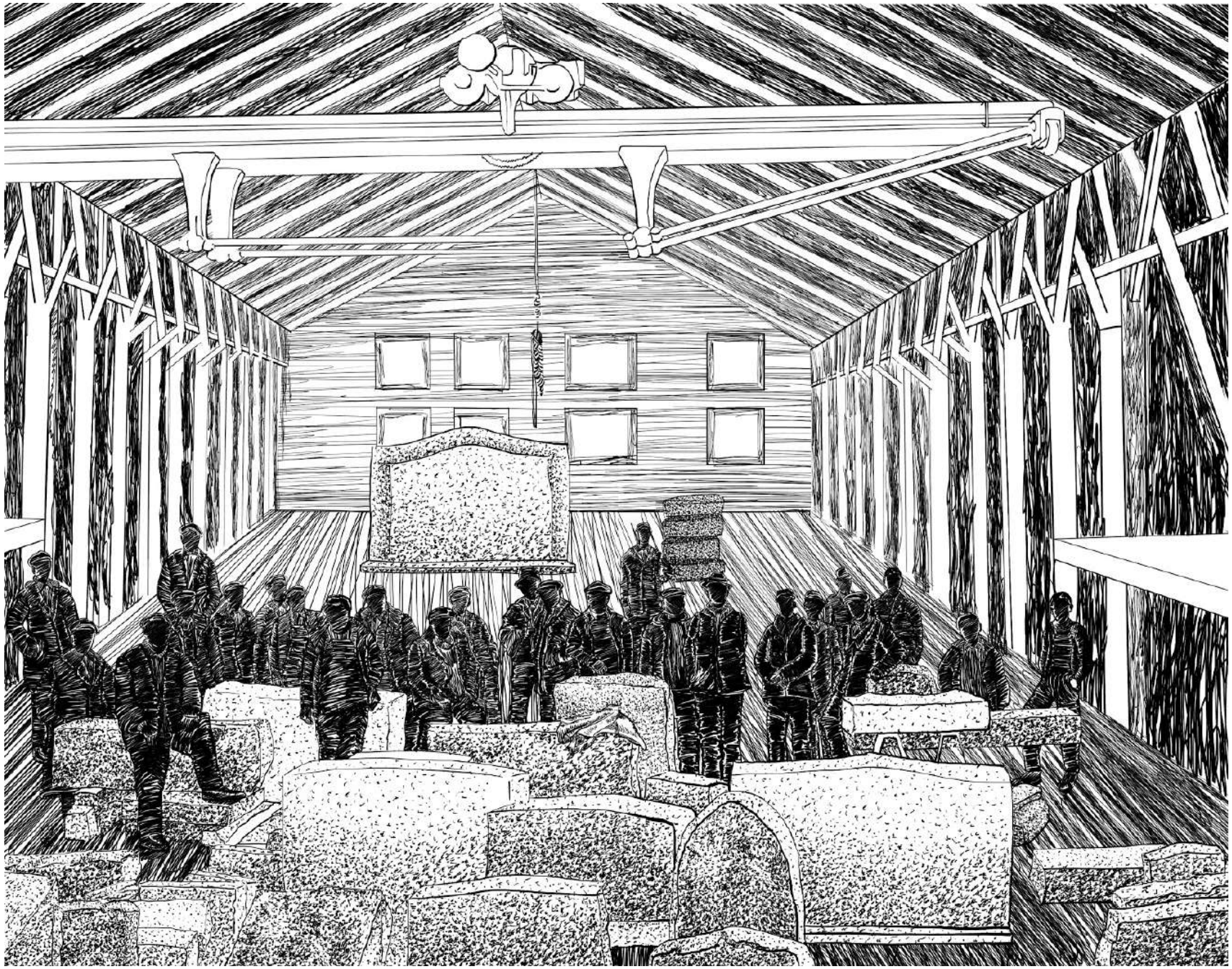
Away from the town, ensconced in a congregation of trees stands a large generic-looking modular building, the Rock of Ages manufacturing plant. The Visiting Center, with its stylish modern-looking architecture of sweeping geometric shapes that are slightly distorted for a postmodern, yet conservative, effect contrasts with the factory, which is like any other in its extreme efficiency of form. Tourism and work. Luxury and functionalism. Consumption and production. Today, I am the tourist, the consumer. Tomorrow, I will work and produce -- not here, but as a secretary of sorts at a small college. I walk up to the Visiting Center first and see through the windows that it’s very dark inside. I give the doors a try. They are locked. No signage, hours, or writing is present on the door. Perhaps I have the wrong entrance? Walking around its circular structure, I step off of the portico made, of course, of granite and onto the green-brown earth that sucks me into its wet body. Another door and a little sidewalk tell me this is the main entrance. It is also locked, but there is a sign this time reading “The Visiting Center will be open starting May 15th. All other visitors are welcome to go to the self-guided factory tour next door.” So that is where I go. An effective sign.

The self-guided tour entrance opens into a small lobby with a video on a loop displayed on a mounted flatscreen TV. Old and new advertisements for Rock of Ages graves, or “memorials”, flank the TV on both sides. In the video, a couple talks to me in terms of “we”. The man and the woman are white, in their 60s, wealthy as indicated by their dress and the fact that they are shopping for grand, ostentatious mausoleums. The mausoleums reach for the grandiosity of the Parthenon, for the height of Greek architecture. They are proud, exuberant -- but lest one think their sumptuous taste be an unflattering sign of egotism, the couple looks at me from the screen and says, “We want a beautiful place for our children to remember us in.” The couple gets a form of immortality -- guaranteed by the Rock of Ages Certificate of Craftsmanship -- and the next generation gets a memory, a heritage, a sense of pride.

Leaving the lobby, I walk up a flight of stairs to the observation deck where I will be able to see the entire factory floor from above. Here I was met again with the monotonous buzzing which I noticed when I was outside but almost forgot in the quiet lobby with the nice couple endlessly shopping for their memorial. In the video, the couple went to the factory floor, too, showing a subdued admiration for the quality and skillfulness of the machines and workers. I carried that feeling with me when I walked up to the observation deck. But for the first several minutes, all I could do was stand stunned. It was the grinding and droning, the tickling of dust in my nostrils, the smells of wood and oil -- of industry acting on the senses.

A wall of pictures, text, and a diagram told me what was going on before me through faded paper and frames than hung crooked and tired on the wall. Over 200,000 square feet spread out below me, crowded

with stones, mammoth ventilation systems, little metal sheds with computer terminals, columns laid on the floor for mausoleums, modest headstones ready for shipment with paperwork strewn across them. In the right-hand corner closest to the observation deck is an area that resembles an artist's studio and, indeed, this is where the few remaining carvers work. Naturally, Rock of Ages wants its visitors to see this area the most clearly. Tucked away far from the purview of the tourist, the slow back a forth motion of a machine above a steel bed tells of an automatic polishing machine. Customers want to see that care -- that a human touch -- is involved in this most solemn of purchases. We want some distance between ourselves and the machines, because it is becoming clearer and clearer with every innovation that they, and not our children, are the future.	



I run my hand along the railing of the observation deck and a thick layer of dust coats my fingers. I am reminded of silicosis and all the lives it took during the industry's heyday. My nose noticed it first but now my eyes do too. I see a coat of dust over everything. From dust to dust, I think, as I also remember that each of these cut pieces of granite below represents a person who has recently died, or will soon, or if they are really good planners, perhaps not for some years. Either way, they stand for dead bodies. Granite is stronger than flesh. It won't perish, but we will.

I only see about five workers on the factory floor, all middle aged or older, for the entire hour that I am on the deck. I take a picture of the factory floor below and one of the workers pretends to take a picture of me in return, holding an imaginary camera in his hands. With this simple gesture, he has asserted himself above the objectification that comes with being put on display. I am glad of this exchange. It signifies that we are both subjects -- not appendages to the processes of production and consumption. At home, I look at an old photograph of stone carvers huddled in a shed, my eye moving over their forms followed by my pen. There are more than thirty men, but I leave some of them out in my drawing to be able to make sense of the scene. The shed itself appears to be a fifth of the size of the finishing floor -- at most -- of the current Rock of Ages manufacturing plant. The pen in my hand is my own seismograph, measuring the force and duration of a moment in a larger process that many of us have come to know everywhere and anywhere: Deindustrialization. Capital mobility comes in waves. While New England -- or the Northeast in general -- is not strongly associated with the term deindustrialization, its first movements were recorded here.

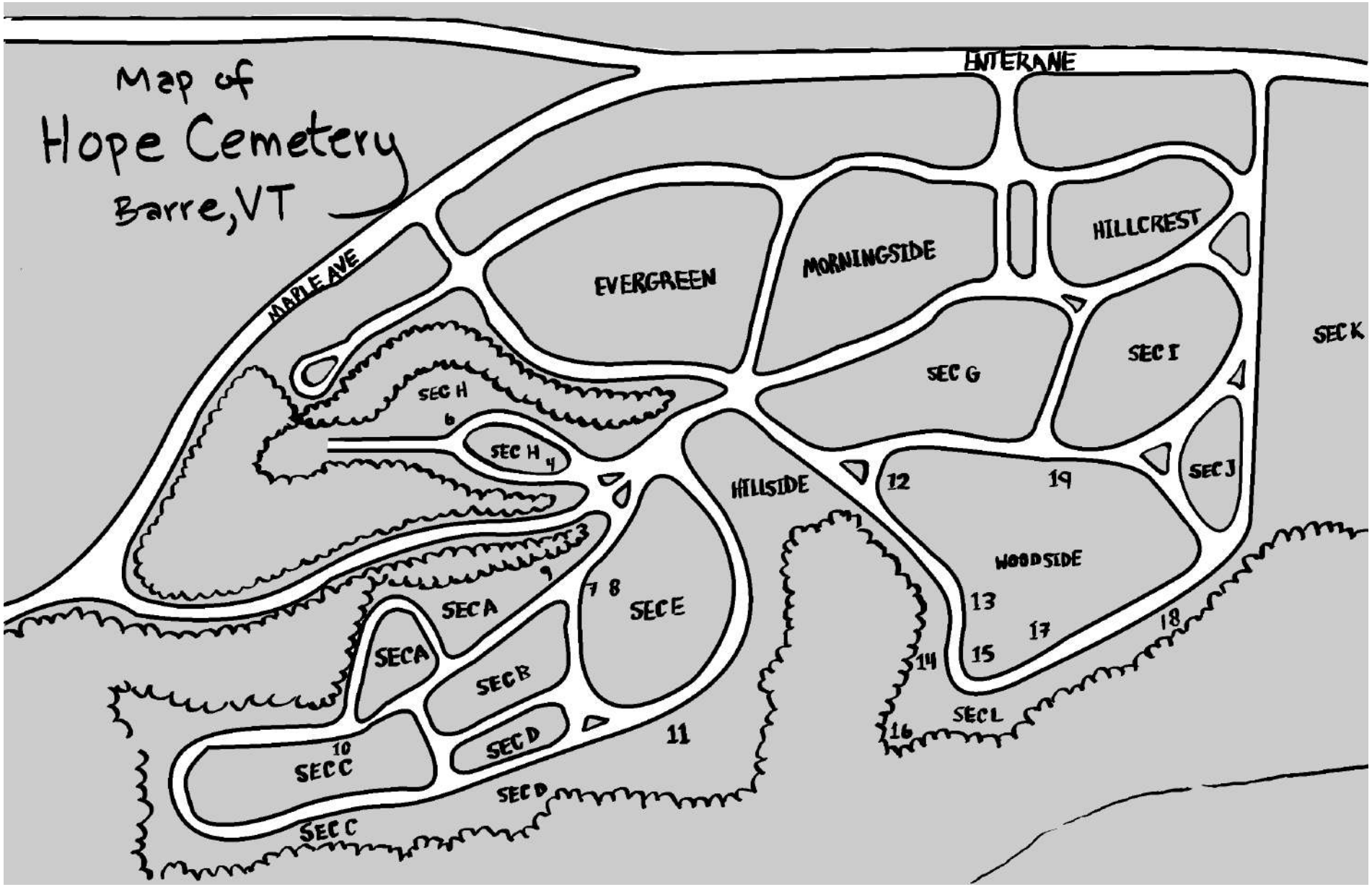
In our collective memory, deindustrialization, that is, rapid job loss in manufacturing, is associated only with certain places where the past is made monumental and legendary, towards which we cast back sanguine glances. We think of the great steel centers: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Youngstown, Ohio; and Gary, Indiana. We think coal country -- of Appalachia, especially West Virginia. We think about the giant auto factories left to rust in Motor City. And the monumental power we give to these places is not only figurative. One of the most unambiguous tributes to the industrial past is the Steelworkers Monument by James A. O'Toole located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Composed of geometric shapes painted bright red that resemble a toy block set, this sculpture looks nostalgically upon an industry known for its hellish working conditions. Our celebration of our industrial past is understandable: generally speaking, the jobs were steadier and better paid than those in the now dominant service sector, where my mom toiled and has been the only kind of work that I have ever known. If you were the correct race (white) and gender (male) there were jobs aplenty that offered a life of outward dignity, ostensibly: lives with white houses and green lawns, cars, security, health, a leisurely retirement. We forget about what happens behind many factory gates, the calculated disregard for our health and safety, the mind numbing monotony wrought by a hyper-efficient division of labor, the autocratic orders under which we are forced to toil.

I didn't grow up in any of these places, and I don't live in any of them now. But my communities are also the economic casualties of deindustrialization -- part of the unspoken collateral damage of a sort of economic Darwinism, buried by so-called economic progress, happening somewhere else for someone else. Their stories are buried. There is, for example, the remains of an old limestone quarry that was turned into a munitions factory by the Semet-Solvay Company during World War I; it lies in the Town of Onondaga, NY, twenty minutes away from my hometown of Baldwinsville, obscured by overgrowth and the passage of time. A friend heard about it and proposed that we go check it out one night after I finished my shift waitressing at a local restaurant. I was sixteen, and I was no longer satisfied to contemplate the surface of things. I knew I needed to go -- I needed to go in. All that is left of the quarry and munitions factory is a towering step tower made of stone that could easily be mistaken for some kind of ancient temple from afar: I was told it was used to store explosive material. Walking up a dirt path under the cover of night, we entered an opening at its base. The pale candlelight glow of the moon was suddenly snuffed out. The tunnels had no windows or slits, just an entrance and an exit. Between the outside and the inside of the building was impenetrable stone. The graffiti, broken bottles, used needles and pipes told of a wounded present, but the history of this site cuts much deeper.

Almost a hundred years ago, a mixing motor overheated and set off all of the TNT produced in the building. It was reported that at least fifty people died in an explosive fire. Uncounted war casualties. The war effort depended on their work; it depended on them ignoring the yellowing of their skin, along with the nausea and vomiting caused by TNT poisoning; it depended on their tired bodies somehow finding enough strength to return the next day. Did the patriotism of their work give them strength when they felt too weak and ill? Did they wish they didn't have to work another day so they could just let their poisoned bodies rest? Did they ever wonder why they had to work like this? After the explosion, did those that remained still believe in the righteousness of their work?

Brutal and dangerous working conditions such as these are now looked at as thing of the past, something that companies in developed countries are now supposedly too enlightened to reproduce in this day and age. But safer working conditions were not simply given to the workers by the benevolence of their bosses. They were won by workers wanting more out of their lives; by wanting that life of dignity that was promised but never really delivered; by wanting to able to fully enjoy life.

The supposed victory of labor over capital -- whose battles took the form of better wages, safer working conditions, and shorter hours -- is really what we celebrate when we look to our industrial past. However, a more expansive view of history shows that progress rarely follows a straight line: it is nonlinear, regionally specific, spasmodic. The social, political, and economic developments of a place move slowly, then dramatically, left then right, up then down. The war between labor and capital is endless: the tactics and the terrain are always shifting.


Map of
Hope Cemetery
Barre, VT
MAPLE AVE
INTERVALE
EVERGREEN
MORNINGSIDE
HILLCREST
SEC K
SEC I
SEC G
SEC H
6
SEC H
4
HILLSIDE
12
19
SEC J
WOODSIDE
13
17
18
14
15
SEC L
16
3
9
7 8
SEC E
SEC A
SEC A
SEC B
SEC D
11
10
SEC C
SEC D
SEC C

I am walking through Hope Cemetery in Barre, Vermont, where the wares of its granite industry mark past lives, some of them being the lives of those who dug those very stones out of the earth and those who sculpted them in miasmas of dust. Each stone is brilliant, capturing even the dim light of an overcast sky. Rocks have always impressed us with their beauty and durability. “Granite is a rock for the ages - a rock that has withstood the test of time. Granite is forever”, reads the Rock of Ages website. Rocks, slivers of the geosphere, do not evoke change as other earth systems do, like the air and water, the atmosphere and hydrosphere respectively. Erosion happens over hundreds of thousands to millions of years. Only disasters (from our perspective) -- resulting from the spontaneous crashing of the earth’s tectonic plates or the violent eruptions of volcanos -- abruptly disabuse us from characterizing this foundation of ours, this foundation of stone, as forever stable. All entities are in flux. Nothing remains still. That ancient truth attributed to Heraclitus is our reality. Metamorphism is happening everywhere and anywhere -- from the great metropolises to the humble cities and towns. The word deindustrialization gives form to a moment in a larger cycle that is always moving. It is not obvious. Evidence lies in our surroundings and experiences. But we cannot understand what it means without a theory to explain how it happens.

With the aid of theory, we can see that the course of history is not random, nor is it the unfolding of fate or destiny. We are all fated to die. We are not fated to be rich or poor; to rule, dominate, and exploit or to follow, submit, and be exploited. For the ancient Greeks, the Moirai, usually represented as a cabal of old women, determined the fate of each person and, therefore, of humanity. We now know the causes of human affairs is much more complex, but that does not mean it is not understandable. Like nature, history moves according to the interaction of forces. Unlike nature, in human society, the composition of those forces and the nature of its individual constituent parts changes over time. We call the current composition Capitalism, and the fundamental constituent parts of its productive forces are the worker and the capitalist.

Capitalism is greater than the sum of its parts -- it is a social relation. The capitalist cannot exist without the worker and the worker cannot exist without the capitalist. This is not to say that this force of co-dependency makes for harmonious relations. I am writing this as the Granite Cutters Association and the United Steelworkers of America are beginning negotiations for their new multi-year contract. Union lawyers, rank and file volunteers, human resources, and management’s lawyers will be taking their place at the table. Their bodies will be tense, wound-up and ready to spring. There is little common interest; this is a battle of self-interest. The contract must be accepted by both parties. Each secretly resents their dependency upon the other. However, not all contract negotiations have this drama: some are as simple as an individual accepting an employer’s offer, which is still nonetheless a contest between worker and capitalist, or the will of the owners filtered down to the hiring manager. The freedom to sell oneself to the highest bidder is what freedom under capitalism means.

The worker is free to sell their ability to work to any buyer available on the market. That is all the worker is able to sell. The very definition of the worker within capitalism is someone who has been deprived of everything they need to produce the things they need to live.

My mother was a worker, taking medical notes as a secretary, then cleaning the soft serve machine at Burger King. My grandma was a worker, lacing and polishing shoes over and over for Endicott Johnson. The young women and men at the munitions plant were workers, filling shells at the munitions plant in Onondaga. How did my mother end up stuffing french fries into bags for impatient customers? Or my grandmother dipping her rag into the pot of polish, shining shoe after shoe? Or the remaining quarry workers spending their time in large holes in the ground? Or the manufacturing and finishing workers at the Rock of Ages manufacturing plant monitoring the computer terminals, repeatedly moving stones from one place to the next on the factory floor? We could read a life like a resume, counting all the little steps that led each person to their current job and situation. Job to job to job to job. But this explanation assumes the naturalness of having a job, as if things were always this way. “That’s just how it is” is like placing a wall between the question and the answer: the only way to get past it is through theory and history. It was not that long ago that people were various kinds of subsistence farmers. Saltwater cascaded down their

bodies under an indifferent sun towards the earth, each drop was a consecration, a prayer for a good harvest. Long ago, my ancestors drew life from the lands of Bohemia and Moravia. Then earth -- the land, the rocks and soil with which their bodies were intimately bound -- was made, piece by piece, into property. More precisely, it was made into the property of others, of the ruling classes: the aristocracy which stole land both at home and abroad by force.

The Winooski River keeps me company for awhile when driving to Barre from Montpellier before it empties out into the Stevens Branch river that meanders along Main Street in Barre. 11,000 years ago, the first people of Vermont moved down into the lands of this state as the last recalcitrant sheets of glacial ice made their retreat. 3,000 years ago, their nomadic ways of living began to give way to more settled forms of living, establishing small villages along rivers in which they would stay during the winter (Guyette, “Native Americans). 400 years ago, the first French settlers came to Vermont. Then the French government, followed by the English after the Seven Years War, began to parcel out land to settlers that did not belong to them, violently forcing the Abenaki and other native tribes off their land. Some of the Frenchmen and Englishmen came of their own accord to make money; they were usually from the upper classes of society. Many French and English forced their excess prison and labor populations out into the New World (Guyette, “The French Settlement”) (Naylor). European women were sent over as breeding chattel (Allen 66-70). Back in France and England, the common folk were losing their lands too through a series of Parliamentary acts, collectively referred to as the Enclosure Acts. While the tribes were forced further and further west and into ghettos of the reservation system, European peasants, who once managed strips of lands called “wastelands” in common that kept them just above starvation, now had no land, no means to their survival. The so-called “wastelands” were turned into private property absorbed by a few landowners under the name of agricultural efficiency. What happened in most areas was rural depopulation, which funneled landless workers into industrializing cities and towns (Capital 885-889) (Federici 68-72). The Scotts, one of the ethnic groups that would later come to Barre, were first pushed from land to beach and then to sea as they progressively lost all their lands to a concentrating aristocracy who turned the lands into sheepwalks, fisheries, and hunting grounds of open fields for the idle rich called “deer forests” (Capital 892-895). Italy’s formation into a nation-state, referred to as the process of unification, legislated land and tax reform that destroyed small landholding peasants, transforming them into landless workers. This violent process of separating people from what they needed in order to survive, which, in the beginning, was mainly the land, was called original accumulation by Karl Marx because it laid the groundwork for the social relation between capital and labor. Their lands enclosed and barred from their use, all the peasants could do was sell their ability to work -- their labor power -- and commodify themselves so that they may receive in return the commodities they need to survive.

Under the economic system we call capitalism, we no longer produce the things we need to survive for our own consumption: most of us have to work for someone else in order to survive. We earn a wage and use this money to then buy the things we need. Earning a wage and then buying food, clothing, housing, medicine, etc seems so natural, but this is not the way we’ve met our needs for most of human history: we were forced into the wage system. Concealing our dependence on those who stole the land and the means of production is the semblance of equality between worker and capitalist in the labor market, that is, the wage system. We sell our ability to labor for others or we starve. This arrangement is presented to us as natural, fair, and just. This is the general condition of labor under capitalism.

That is the story of capitalism’s beginnings, which set up the original class relation between worker and capitalist. But, of course, that is not its ending. It is true that some folks were able to hold onto small holdings of land that were able to produce just enough feed their families. And today, some folks in the United States who have enough money -- or capital -- have their own businesses, work for themselves, or homestead. Still, most people work for someone else and depend on having one employer or another: these are the workers that belong to the working class in the broadest sense. Some working class folks may have nice homes, houses, and feel pretty independent. However, most of us working folks know that the banks really own our homes and cars -- and our sense of independence can change in an instant with the next layoff, as much as it hurts our sense of pride to admit it. Even in times of relative economic stability, there weren’t many years that went by when there wasn’t some casual mention of looming layoffs at the dinner table back in my hometown of Baldwinsville, NY. At the time, I didn’t really know what it meant, but I could tell from the pallid faces, tight lips and furrowed brows that it was bad. I knew it might mean less of everything. We didn’t live extravagantly. As a kid, I preferred to load up on carbs and not much else; I was somewhat of a picky eater. On

those uncertain nights, I made sure to eat all of my food -- even the loathed, sinewy cube steak and serving of canned green beans that sat dead and limp on the plate. Cube steak meant stability: it was a step above hamburger helper, and two steps above boxed Kraft mac and cheese.

When I graduated from college during the Great Recession and was working full time at only one job versus a couple stints here and there, I was told that our hours would have to be “shaved off”. Coming home that evening, I fried a chicken cutlet for dinner and considered the piece of dead bird simmering in the grease. Before it was killed, it sat trapped and powerless in its cage. Everyday holds the threat of termination. I wondered if that was what my parents felt all those years ago. But I was lucky. For some, the threat sinks in like a knife, sharp, maiming, killing -- there’s a possibility of bleeding out. At the time, the unemployment rate was ten percent. A five percent unemployment rate is considered healthy. Even in the best of times, a certain percentage are selected for the slaughter.

Blue light through a screen brings me an image of a balding man in his fifties. He is wearing a bright green shirt, the color of key lime pie. A slight, closed mouth smile intimates a guarded sense of confidence. There is a women to his right; her eyes are wide open, making it hard to tell if she is genuinely smiling. A foot of space is between them. Behind them is a black, granular stone that fills the entire background of the picture; on the stone is an emblazoned metal square with the shape of half a ram's body on it and the word "POLYCOR" underneath it. The man is Patrick Perus. Who is Patrick Perus, and why am I looking at his photo? He is the CEO of Polycor. Over thirty quarries and twelve manufacturing plants belong to Polycor. In 2012, they bought the Rock of Ages quarry and manufacturing plant in Graniteville, VT, southeast of Barre. He is a shareholder and the face of the owners of Polycor. Patrick is capital personified. He and his class stand on accumulated capital, on land and bodies -- the remnants of which can be heard with the utterance of "Winooski" or seen in the worker's graves at Hope Cemetery. He has been handed the mission of making more capital, which essentially means using money to make more money. Things other than money are capital, too: the granite in the ground, the polishing and carving machines, the workers -- anything that is used to make a profit. Under capitalism, everything has its price, everything can be turned into a money-value. Things are turned into capital when they are used to return more value than they originally had. Who he is as an individual -- whether he is a fun-loving man who likes to make music or play games in his spare time -- is superfluous to his class role. In the world of CEOs, he doesn't have the celebrity status of Bill Gates or the late Steve Jobs -- but he still belongs to the same class as them. In fact, Geneviève Robichaud, Director of Marketing, the woman next to him in the photo, could also play the role of the capitalist. And she may be if she is a shareholder, but only insofar as she is able to live mainly off of her shares and had a vested interest in maintaining her class position by begetting more capital. It's not important that certain individuals are capitalists but that there is a capitalist class. Capitalists are the servants of capital in preserving the capitalist class.

The worker is the capitalists' tool in preserving their class. It is the workers who produce the value for a company; it is they who produce the profits. Although the capitalist often sees both the machine and the worker as instruments, the machine is still the product of human labor, even in the case of some ultimate machine that builds other machines. Nature furnishes materials and energy that are fundamental to production but not machines. Therefore, in the last instance, only labor is capable of producing more value than what is received in the form of wages: this extra value is called surplus value.

Each of those five workers on the Rock of Ages factory floor produce surplus value, day after day. They punch in and work their eight hours, but it may only take six, five, four, maybe even just one or two hours with the level of productivity we have in this century, to produce enough value to cover their wages -- that is, make enough money in order to take care of themselves and their families. For the remaining time, they are working gratis for the capitalist: their free labor is the source of profit. The amount of money a worker needs to live and create the next generation of workers is a political question, with those on the right generally trying to push down wages and those on the left to raise them. What does a person need to be able to successfully live and reproduce the next generation of workers? There isn't a definitive answer. In addition to variances in political opinion, it depends on the general level of development within any given society. Wages also depend on levels of collective desire. How much do people value their time? How much do they value pleasure, culture, intellectual and spiritual development? Do they want bread and roses? Here we find that there is also a psycho-social dimension to wages -- a dimension that no machine currently possesses.

Not all workers produce surplus value, but they nonetheless are compelled to not only work for their own maintenance but for the maintenance of the owners of the means of production: this has been true of all class societies, whether capitalist, feudal, or modern or ancient slave societies. Under capitalism, merchant capitalists and financial capitalists take a share of the surplus labor produced by quarry or manufacturing workers at Rock of Ages when they buy in bulk at discounted prices or when they collect interest on any loans made to the factory, for instance. Workers who sell their labor to merchant or financial capitalists preserve that surplus value by also working beyond what is socially necessary for the maintenance of themselves and their

families.

Against the workers' desire for more free time or a better life is the capitalist's insatiable need to preserve and expand their capital. If Polycor, for instance, doesn't maintain a wide enough profit margin compared to other companies -- regardless of the industry -- then Mr. Perus and all the major the shareholders will feel the predator of competition stalking them from behind. While the workers are the weaker prey and will suffer the most, everyone will get maimed. Profit gives Mr. Perus and other capitalists enormous incomes from their share values on top of their outsized salaries, but after they are done double-dipping, the remaining profit becomes capital again. Someone else is always ready to be the next servant to capital should any capitalist fail. It is more than greed that compels capitalists: it is the imperative of competition.

The article in which this photo of Mr. Perus and Ms. Robichaud appears is titled "Polycor, un employeur bien différent" ("Polycor, a very different employer"), published in 2012. What makes the company different is that it is paying out $3,000 to the workers it laid off at one of its factories in Saint-Sébastien, Canada. "All our divisions were profitable, except for that one," Patrick Perus stated. "A quarry of granite does not relocate in China or India, it is necessary to adjust!" (Leduc). The force of competition does not create harmony between capital and labor; it creates discord that transforms everything and everyone it touches. If the workers at the Saint-Sébastien factory were willing to further immiserate themselves by offering their hides for near subsistence levels, as may be the case in a more impoverished country with less labor protections, perhaps they would have been able to hold onto their jobs a bit longer. But, the moment they begin to ask for a little more, the capitalist will be ready to start implementing human replacing mechanization or automation, longer workdays, higher productivity quotas, or a higher division of labor that divides each task into simpler, more efficient tasks that require little skill. Capitalists are always looking for ways to shed as many workers as possible from its payrolls while maintaining the same levels of productivity. Since Polycor is a private company, it is not possible for me to measure its output over the years; but, the company was able to grow and acquire the Rock of Ages quarry and plant in 2016. How frantically the capitalist looks for ways to throw its workers onto the streets depends on how much more cheaply the other capitalist is able to produce, which is significantly determined by the cost of labor.

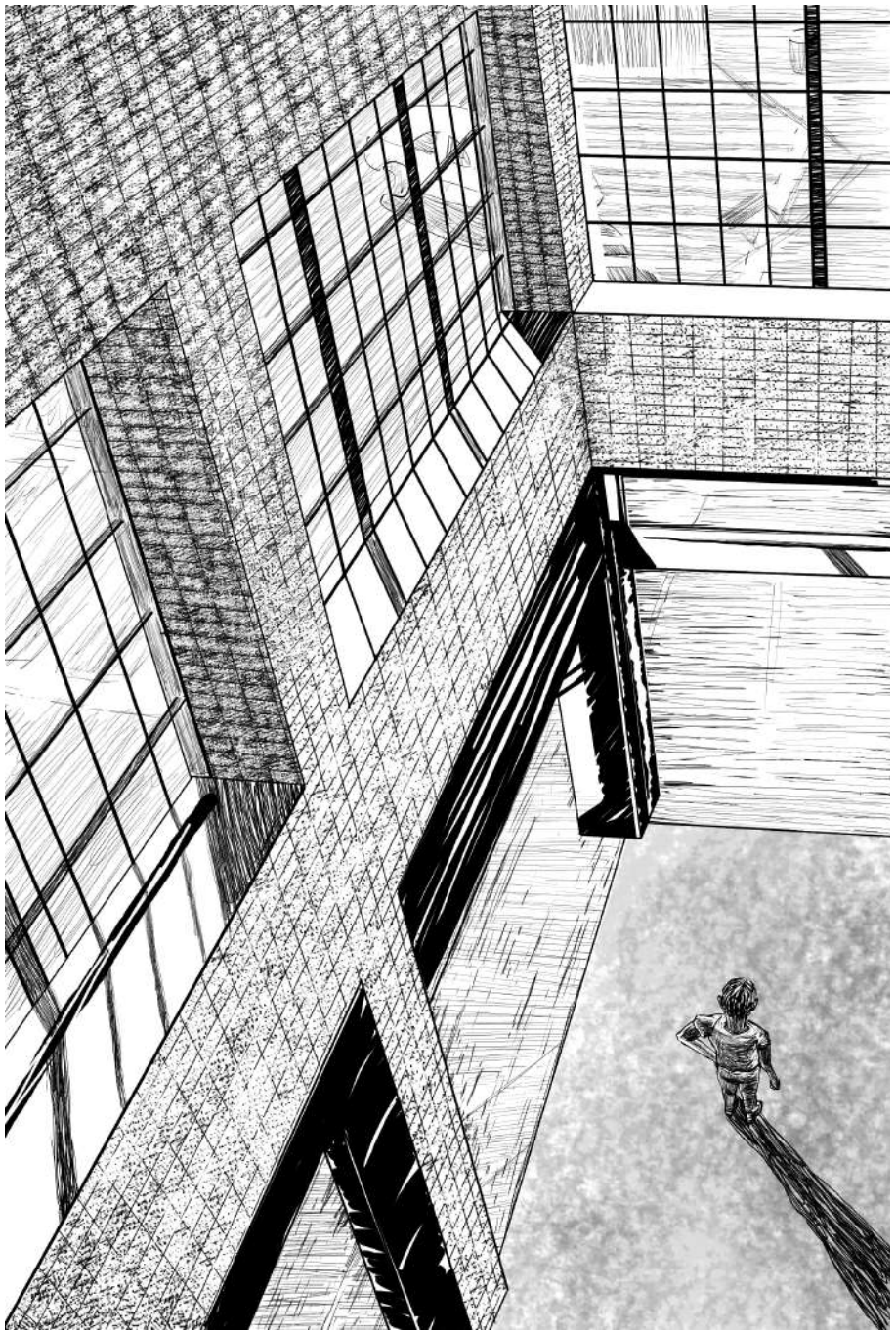
Nonetheless, the compulsion to increase productivity through a combination of organization, intensification, and automation is intrinsic to the logic of capital accumulation -- irrespective to class struggle. To gain a foothold in the market, capitalists need to make their product cheaper. Other options are to find or create new markets through seizing the means of production in non-capitalist societies or advertising aggressively to produce new wants and desires. While the pursuit of these options can give the capitalist an edge, it would still immensely benefit them to cheapen production and thusly ensure a wider profit margin. Therefore, the central compulsion of competition is towards making commodities cheaper by revolutionizing the productive forces: a capitalist enterprise, such as Polycor, may begin this process by, say, introducing computer numerical control (CNC) to some of their machinery. CNC allows for the automation of machine tools that were previously run by human operators and therefore increase productivity -- which eventually leads to layoffs and a shrinking workforce -- and decrease the cost of production. Polycor may enjoy an advantage in the market for a little while, but it won't be long before another natural stone producer fully adapts the technology, and then another, and then another -- until CNC is used by the entire natural stone industry and beyond. Like two tectonic plates moving towards one another by the force of convection produced by magma, capital and labor move against one another by technological revolutions in the productive forces.

Machines and robots dazzle us with their productive capacity. Capitalism is often credited in a positivist light as a catalyst for innovation. However, since we don't start life on equal ground and the drive for market domination leads more often to monopolization or even oligopolization, there is good reason to be skeptical of the liberal economists defence of capitalism's barbaric disregard for life, human and non-human, in the name of innovation. Even if we were to concede this point, workers and the population at large don't have much of a say

in the direction or application of technological development. We are alienated by humanity's own creations. Productive technology is primarily unleashed to serve the capitalists -- not the workers or general populace. Separated from the means of production, the machine takes on the form of an existential threat for workers faced with becoming redundant. But the machine represents more than our fears of obsolescence: it represents the human condition under capitalism. We rage against the machine because it is a symbol of our alienation under capitalism.	*A robot is a machine that has been computerized to carry out more complex tasks autonomously. These tasks are programmed into the robot, or machine, and executed by its Central Processing Unit (CPU). A computer's processor is largely made of silicon. The advanced material of silicon is nothing more than sand -- crushed rocks -- purified of non-silica elements. Silica makes up more than half of the earth's crust, the ground on which we stand.* In 1920, the Czech writer Karel Čapek introduced the word robot in a play titled Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti (Rossum's Universal Robots or R.U.R.). It is etymologically rooted in the word "robota", which means "forced labor". In feudal Bohemia, 'robota' referred to the designated days in which the peasant would be forced by law to work their lord's lands (Agnew). In the play, the robots are made in a factory that produces artificial people -- not made of silicon and wires but of synthetic flesh and blood. The only real difference between R.U.R.'s robots and humans is that the robots were created without souls, making them more pliable to a lifetime conscription of hard labor at the command of the industrialist. Without a soul, their employers need not worry about harming them. The robots are so cheap to make and maintain -- and they aren't really human -- so it matters little if they are worked to death (or, more euphemistically, depreciate quickly) at age twenty, as they do in the play. It is not hard to see how the robots represented the working classes at the time Čapek wrote the play. About a hundred years ago and ten miles away from me, a good number of stone carvers died from the large amounts of silica dust released by the granite on which they worked before they reached middle age; other workers in the granite industry met sudden, violent deaths in the quarry pits. The robots on our horizon now are not yet bioengineered but are agglomerations of sensors and wires encased within an arthropodic metal structure. In the developed world, the capitalist promote their ability to make work safer by taking over dangerous jobs. However, their implementation will likely be slower in the developing world, where workers are poorly paid and treated as less than human: in such places, humans are simply cheaper in the eyes of the capitalist.

Descriptions of the English working class written by Marx and Engels during the mid-nineteenth century would match the brutality of modern day working conditions in a Bangladeshi textile factory or Mexican maquiladora.

From here in idyllic Vermont, it may seem that R.U.R. was more astute than prescient: protective regulations have since made work safer and more humane, and while artificial intelligence is on the horizon, quite a bit more research and development needs to be done before we get there. It is almost comforting to watch videos and read reports of faulty robots and machines. No doubt, we will still get there. However, the more salient point made by Čapek in R.U.R. is that without a soul, the robots cannot have any desires of their own. To have wants for love, community, beauty, knowledge, leisure, or for anything else that can be summoned by the imagination, means that the robots would have to be provided for at a higher standard of living. It means they would require more time to reflect, to get to know themselves and others. The worker under capitalism, as in other class societies, has to suppress their desires and submit their will for whatever portion of the their time -- that is, their life -- that the capitalist has purchased. For most of us, over a third of our entire waking life will be spent at work. During our healthiest years, half of our waking life is spent performing paid work. With the other half, we need to eat, clean, give care, raise a family; if we are lucky, then we may find a couple hours in the day to relax and reflect. It is more than a matter of requiring greater prosperity and time away from work. In the world of R.U.R., to have a soul is to will, to consciously act on the world. Having a soul is not practical -- it is not in the interest of capital that the worker should have a soul. To have a soul is to rebel against domination. Our souls lead us, even in the darkest times, to seek freedom.



Standing on an unforgiving concrete floor, the gravity of which seems to increase with every hour, I look outside at the two trees fighting for their existence amidst the the towering buildings and traffic smog of Chelsea, NYC. If I ignore the breaks between panels of glass, I, like a bird, may imagine that there is no wall, that I am standing outside. My thoughts wander to the financial crisis and what it all means. From there, I drift to thinking about my artistic practice in the context of all this. Before I can go too deep into my thoughts, one of the first customers of the morning walks into the door. He looks hurried and overcaffeinated. The neural paths of my previous thoughts and desires break up and perhaps I will be able to return to them later if I am not too tired. Right now, and for the next eight or more hours, I will have to focus all of my energies on anticipating and satisfying the customers who flit in and out of the glass doors. I will do this tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, until I have a day off in five or six days. To afford a room, some food, and healthcare, this is what I need to do. I have sold my labor to someone else, and I no longer have a say in what I do when I am standing on that hard floor. I will give dozens of tutorials and advice but my words are company words; I do not own the conversation and what I say must stay within certain parameters approved by corporate. I am here to sell devices and render services or “experiences”, but I do not own, control, or direct how I am to do any of these things. At the end of the day, I feel emptied out. I descend into the store’s basement where the employee breakroom and time clock terminals are: Log in with employee ID and password > select “clocking out” > logout. In a desperate rush to get back as much of my own time as possible, I go straight to my locker, which is different everyday (there are simply too many employees and too little break room space to give each employee a locker of their own). If I am not too tired, I remember which tiny little box contains my purse, which I quickly stuff my shirt uniform and nametag into. There is no point putting it away too neatly, as it will be shifted around by security, who have to abide by the store policy and check all employee bags for possibly stolen merchandise at the end of the day. My commute will involve much more walking to and from subway stations. When I get home an hour later, I try to create, to leave the world of necessity, but often all I can muster is passive consumption -- of social media, movies or shows, perhaps a novel. Sometimes, I am back at work in my dreams, repeating the same gestures and phrases -- until I clock out and open my eyes to the impenetrable blackness of my windowless room. Alienation characterizes the human condition under capitalism, and it permeates every aspect of our lives.

There were days when the sun shined so brightly through the large glass windows of the store that it almost felt like I was outside. I was outside -- outside of myself. The mission to sell became my mission. It was easier to be a blank slate, to not consider the protean will of the soul. A polished stone with no marks, no engravings -- ready to be used to hold an alien spirit, ready to hold the spirit of capitalism. But, the spirit will not save me. I am not predestined. I was born into the working class. Most of us will stay in the same class into which we were born (Zuesse). Sitting here reflecting on my time as a computer retail worker, I wonder about the worker who pretended to photograph me on the factory floor: how did he feel, standing there, walking from terminal to terminal? Was he bored? Tired? Challenged? Impassioned? Free...or longing to be?The bee does not need to direct her own conscious thought to build her architectural masterpiece; she follows the pattern of her sisters. The crow only build nests to raise their young; she does not seek to fulfill any sort of need for self-expression in the task. Crows and bees do not contemplate themselves as a species, debating what may constitute the “good life” for their kind. That we do is what makes us human; it is what Marx called our “species being”(Economic and Philosophical 327).

The commodification of people -- of their time, and, by extension, their relationships -- dehumanizes us. It turns us into robots. It turns Gregor Samsa into a bug. Is this how Franz Kafka felt when he was working as an insurance officer -- metamorphosing, trading exoskeleton for flesh with every claim? Did he only return to himself at night, writing about his own ghastly transformations through the eyes of Gregor -- of K.?

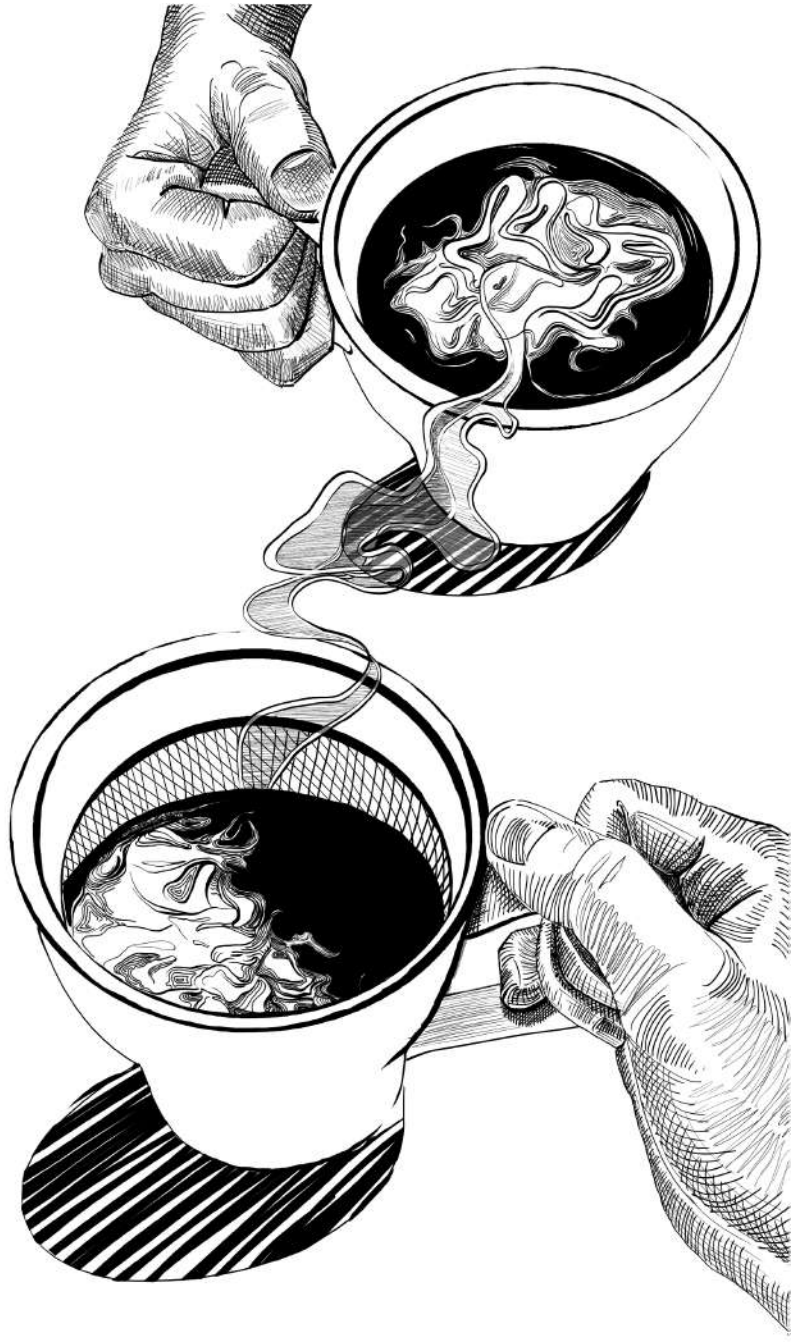
Now, as I did five years ago when I was working at the computer retail outlet, I come home from my shift, and the first thing I do is hang up my bag, then take of my work clothes. Although the job I currently have does not require me to wear a uniform, I repeat the ritual casting off of the day's work clothes: it is my exoskeleton, and, after completing all of the housework, I will no longer need it. Tea bleeds its energy into my cup; I gladly take it to overcome the exhaustion of a day's work. A pen, a screen, piles of books return me to my mouth, my eyes, and my mind: with them, I reconstruct myself. I read. I think. I write these words. I create these images. I return to the world. And I imagine other, possible worlds. Typing at my keyboard, I know this ritual is not mine alone. The world only sees us as workers...robots...insects...because our labor is fragmented and eliminated, through the division of labor and automation, in the race for profits. Capitalist competition necessarily makes our labor cheaper, but it also has the effect of cheapening our lives, our spirit. And we feel it almost every day. Nora Watson, an editor at a large institution publishing health care literature, best summarized this feeling during an interview with renowned oral historian Studs Terkel:

> *Jobs are not big enough for people. It's not just the assembly line worker whose job is too small for his spirit, you know? A job like mine, if you really put your spirit into it, you would sabotage immediately. You don't dare. So you absent your spirit from it. My mind has been so divorced from my job except as a source of income, it's really absurd. (Terkel 613)*

We have ambitions, thoughts, dreams, and desires that transcend our jobs. Our species is a creative one -- the implications of which go beyond our individual aspirations, important as they are. It means we can dramatically change not only ourselves but the world around us. We make our life activity the object of our will and of our consciousness

(Economic and Philosophical 68). We seek to understand ourselves. What do I like? What do we like? What do I want? What do we want? Who am I? Who are we? What does it mean to be human? Why do we live the way we do? How can we improve our lives? What is justice? What is the good life? These are big questions, but they are important and fundamental to real progress. They are not questions to be solved once and for all but to be continually asked and debated.

Moments of great transformation make us ask these questions and reassess preconceived notions. When hard-earned security is eroded; when your job, the foundation of your security, shifts and cracks under your feet; when you are no longer protected from the conflagration of capital accumulation; the illusion of fairness dissipates, and a sense of alienation grows. Words like deindustrialization and postindustrialization try to explain the causes of this experience. In their earliest articulations, they described more of a geographic shift in the loci of industry: for example, deindustrialization in the United States first began in the north, followed by industrialization in south; later on, it was the global movement of manufacturing work from developed to developing nations. Overtime, deindustrialization has shown itself to be more than a phenomenon of displacement. Often overlooked are the intrinsic laws of capitalism that cause the kind of qualitative shifts in productivity leading to thousands of thousands of workers falling into the cracks, into unemployment, and mark the restructuring of work. Deindustrialization is a local and global phenomenon, happening everywhere and anywhere in developed and even developing countries (Rodrik). In developed countries, the cause of deindustrialization is, comparatively, attributed more to productivity gains in manufacturing than geographical displacement and trade; the consequences of which drive people able to find work increasingly into the service sector. The service sector has consistently employed as many workers as the manufacturing sector, even when the latter was nationally at its peak during the postwar years. However, increasing productivity in many kinds of service work has proved to be more difficult, making the number of these jobs more plentiful. It is challenging to automate tasks that require managing people and take place in unpredictable environments. However, the question is not whether or not we will ever be able to (we will) but when.

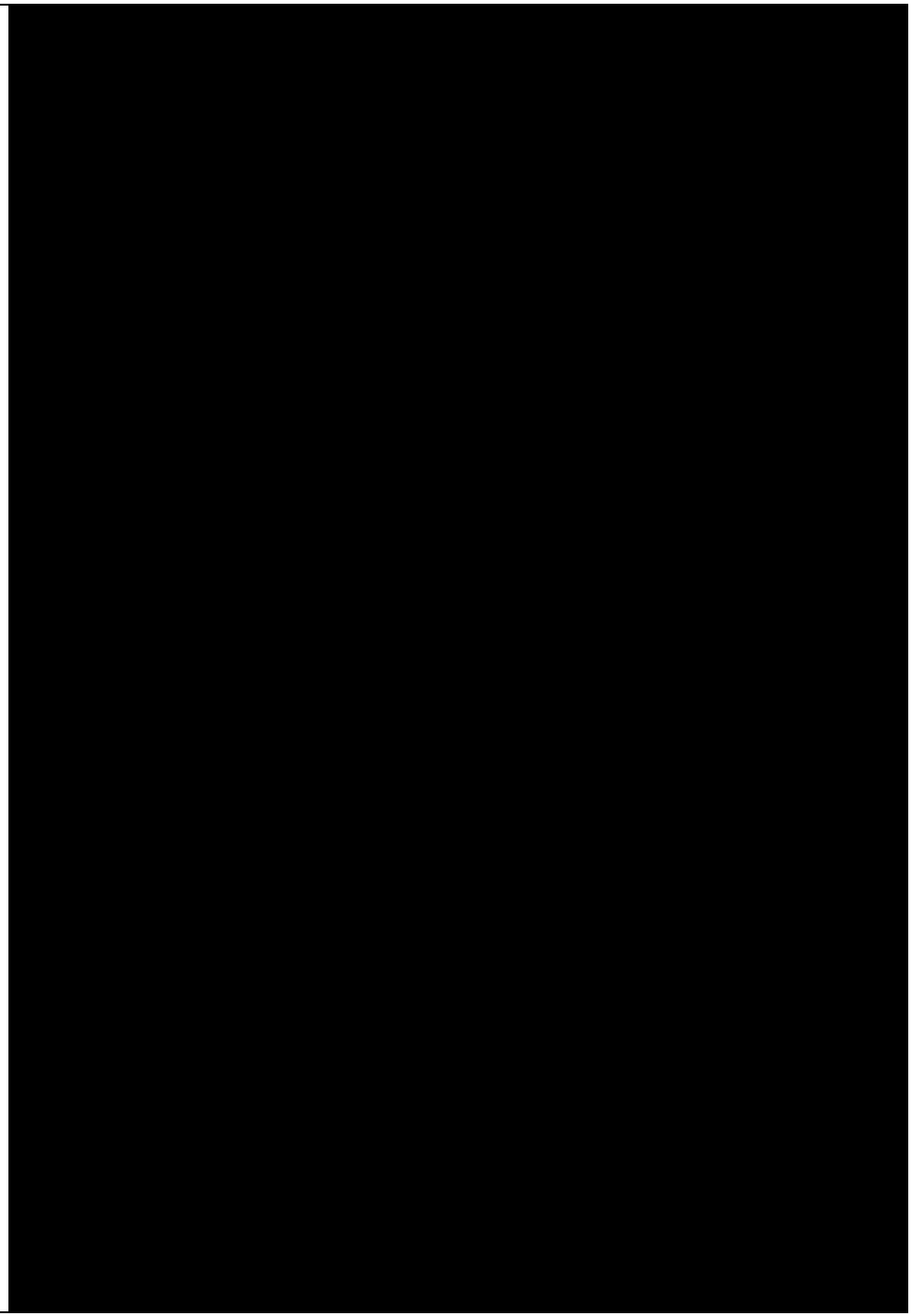


Sitting in the hot and sticky vinyl seats of Stella's Diner in Syracuse, NY, I anxiously stirred my coffee as I looked around the restaurant. At the front of the house, where the customers are greeted and then seated, a woman leaned slightly into the hostess stand, trying to take some pressure off of her feet. One table behind me, a man stentoriously reprimanded his server for bringing him the wrong order, which caused the young woman to become flustered. I remember the heat of her discomfiture slowly coloring her face like spilled wine seeping through a beige carpet. It was as if he, the customer, were waiting for this moment -- for this delicious moment of schadenfreude, for this moment of power. I cringed. It's been more than ten years since my short stint as a restaurant server, but I know what it's like: the micro dehumanizations and humiliations compounded by the low pay, lack of benefits, irregular schedules, and, most of all, the profoundly felt deficit of power as a non-unionized worker. In the United States, servers are paid less than minimum wage, making the need to perform friendliness and servility imperative in order to put gas in your car and food on the table. The young woman apologized profusely and offered a nervous laugh at her own expense. When she turned back towards the kitchen, her smile evaporated from her face. Another smile then fluttered across the room and stopped a few feet in front of me, resting on the face of a middle-aged woman who is placed two steaming plates of food in front of me and my date, Brian. "Here's the shortstack with bacon, and here's the Monte Cristo" she announced cheerily, to which we replied "Thank you". My mind kept drifting away from Brian's recitations of his artistic accomplishments. I had just finished a graduate degree, and, before that, four years of working at a computer retail outlet. The store paid me more than minimum wage, but being in New York City, one could be making triple the minimum wage and still barely meet expenses. Somehow, I subsided at one and a half times the current minimum wage of thirteen dollars an hour. Working with technology gave me a slightly elevated status, but the job had all the same characteristics as all the other service jobs I've had, including waitressing: I was struggling to escape that alienating, low-paid, non-unionized and precarious world. Brian's tales of his ascent into a creative, middle-class career of teaching and making art only reminded me of my own uncertain position: Here I was, at Stella's, back in my hometown after my failed escape attempt via graduate school. Each word made me increasingly aware of my sweaty legs binding to the vinyl seat. The sensation of sinking in became both a physical and mental experience with each year of work recounted.

What lifted me up throughout the years were the beautiful, genuine relationships created at work. There was Andy at a computer retail outlet, the elderly woman whom I assisted with another coworker. Like the seed of a dandelion, she drifted into the store on a warm spring day to initially discuss image manipulation programs, but soon the conversation meandered to her life as an artist. Her images were precious because they were a palimpsest of her past relationships -- people whom she loved who had drifted on to another place. And that particular coworker who had assisted her with me, we became friends whose words became incantations to find our better selves. Friendships are like the heartist of plants and can thrive even in the most hostile conditions: we waited for the slow days when we could drink each other's words, pushing our roots out a little further. But these relationships were tangential to the store's products or brand. The foundation to creating any relationship between people arises from the simple act of bringing people together in a space, whether it be a real or virtual space -- it could have happened at a library, community center, or online as easily as at the store. I was there to sell, and most people were there to buy. The bulk of my relationships were necessarily transactional. In the name of providing good customer service, we had to affect smiles and the warmth of friendship with stranger after stranger: a few we may see again, most, we won't. The bread and butter of service work -- our creativity, our thoughts, and our emotions -- are turned against us as an alien force: we do not smile because we are necessarily happy, but because our jobs require us to do so. Service work is, in part, the commodification of relationships: that real relationships can sometimes form is the exception and not the rule.

Though I barely have the money, I desperately needed a little excursion, but every moment is filled with anxiety about the future when one is unemployed. The dozens of Betty Boop figurines that festoon Stella's diner -- with their arched eyebrows and wide eyes -- seemed to be all looking down on me, surprised at my lack of judgement. My devotion to the humanities is somewhat of an embarrassment to the

working class values I've inherited in which practicality reigns supreme. Who can afford to dream? Most folks will just get their hearts broken if they try. For us, it's best to live one's life in the darkness of a dreamless night.



Lights from the parking lot below broke up the darkness of my room, their pallid light faintly tracing the outlines of my bedroom furniture. I was lying in my bed, trying to fall asleep. Little red segments arranged perpendicularly told me that it was 10:25 pm. Dozing in and out of sleep, I remember, with the help of referring back to an online transcript of the show, hearing a man's voice say:

> *"...I like computers, but for half of my life, the computer wasn't plugged into anything. It was sort of this island. And then it sort of woke up once it got connected to other people."*
> *"Got conscious." laughs the host of the show, whom I recognize as Krista Tippet of On Being. (Dash)*

Pulling myself from the dark place between my sheets, I placed my bare feet on the gray fraying carpet and twirled one of its loose ends with my toe. The sound of the radio interview faded into the background. In the stickiness of a partially-awake mind, I thought about how so much of our own consciousness depends on our connections to other people -- the thoughts, feelings, and ideas they have -- and then about how our daily struggles to live -- to buy shelter, food, transportation, and a little something extra to keep us going, whatever that may be -- unplugged from the stories and struggles of other people, can make us feel alone, powerless, helpless.

I mustered the energy to stand up and go get a glass of water. The hallway to the bathroom was still dark since there are no windows and the light switch was broken, but it didn't matter: I know every inch of my apartment, where the cracks and frays are...and approximately the size of each step of the staircase that led downstairs to the kitchen. Glass of water in hand, I went back upstairs, took a few sips, and looked at my phone to check tomorrow's weather and the to-do list on my calendar. It was Thursday, January 12, 2017. The next day was Friday, pay day. A reminder to pay off some health care bills. One more day of work. Then I refocused on the radio interview:

> *"...is to identify, where does the analog apply? And where is it irrelevant? And that line keeps shifting, especially as we learn more about the behaviors. I think — it always does come down to, what are our values? And what do we care about? And what are the things that we think are meaningful? And then using that as a filter to understand and control and make decisions around these new technologies. But those of us in the tech world have not done ordinary folks any favors around making those decisions because we've adopted this stance that values don't apply. And that's part of the reckoning I'd ask everybody who's not in technology to have, is to raise that flag. At the time when somebody says, 'You've got to try this new app,' 'You've got to use this new tool,' think through, what are the implications of, one, me using this, but two, what if everybody does? I look at — I don't know — just to pick one out of a hat, like, Uber. A lot of people are like, 'Oh, you should try Uber, and it'll get you a car service.'" said the man whose name I still not had gotten because I kept missing Tippet announcing it and names are hard to remember -- especially if you're halfway between consciousness and the subconsciousness of sleep.*

I walked to the bathroom to make sure to avoid waking up in the middle of the night to pee, or, even worse than having one's sleep interrupted, having one those annoying bathroom nightmares where the bathroom is nowhere to be found or isn't working. I return to my room and decide to listen a bit more, despite everything softening into undifferentiated forms around me.

> *"...that Uber has said, 'We're going to bring you in, make you a driver, and have essentially have full control over what your income is and how many fares you get, using an algorithm that's opaque to you,' is terrifying. And then once they got the drivers on board — there are now more Uber drivers in New York City than there are yellow cabs — they said, 'By the way, we're going to replace you all with self-driving cars as fast as we can.' And that's gonna happen. And this is a crash we can see coming. That's the one we know, we anticipate."*

> *"Fortunately, what you're asking people to do is think." Krista Tippet said, ending with that kind of laugh that is somewhere between the delight of revelation and the anxiety of not being*

entirely sure of its implications.

The next evening, I was out the door and on my way to buy groceries at the Walmart Supercenter in Berlin, VT. As usual, I didn't use the self-checkout area, but it was not because I thought my individual choice would save jobs as the man in the On Being interview implied -- it wouldn't. Capital accumulation -- for ever greater profits -- is in the driving seat of technological development and how it is applied. Sure, companies have to pay attention to consumer demand to be successful in the market but only up to a point; and, not to mention, they have powerful marketing tools to shape that very demand. Self-checkout is supposed to be convenient, except when the machines malfunction and subsequently require the tired cashier in charge of monitoring four or more checkout lanes has to come finish checking you out: there is ample room for improvement. Which, is a small reminder to a much larger point, a point not made during the parts of the On Being interview I heard the night before: Work, largely characterized by wage labor under capitalism, is not the most meaningful or important thing we can possibly do with our precious time here on this beautiful planet. The laws of capitalism determine that work must become ever more deskilled and automated to lessen the cost of labor -- and to discipline workers who may dare to ask for more than existence. As we have seen, capitalism has a real interest in taking the human out of work as much as possible, making it dull, simple, transactional, abstracted. For a select, privileged sector of the working class who find themselves in a more rarefied division of labor in which they can apply skill, creativity, and thought and thereby identify with their work, the degradation of work is less strongly felt, if at all. For the rest of us, work is something we have to do, and this compulsion is especially felt in unskilled, low wage work. While there is sometimes a sense of pride, I am not convinced that, given the choice to spend more time with family and friends, taking on new hobbies, playing, learning, and inventing, we would choose to spend eight or more hours five days a week or more scanning and bagging things, or driving strangers around in our cars instead, for instance. Growth in the service sector has allowed the U.S. to keep its working population employed even as workers became more redundant in manufacturing work over time. But it won't be long before the service sector experiences the kind of widespread automation that led to the phenomenon we call deindustrialization. Even if new and different jobs are created to balance future job loss in the service sector, why can't we create a society in which the producers of wealth -- that is, the working classes -- share in the immense productivity gains? Why has the length of the working day and week stayed the same for over eighty years despite rising productivity?(United States Nonfarm). Why can't we shorten the working day and workweek? Maybe then, we could have more time for the kind of work that is big enough for our spirit, whether that be taking care of family and friends, learning about the world, or making art -- perhaps a zine? We could have more freedom than deciding what apps to use, we could decide how to collectively live our lives.

Returning home from the store, I put my bags down with a sigh of relief. One errand down. Even though the weekend stretched before me, I had a lot to do. These days, however, I guard my time more carefully and try not to over exert myself. Our culture's obsession with being busy with work is hard to resist: our lives depend on working hard day after day. On the level of obsession, however, it can seriously harm or kill us, like in the legend John Henry, a steel-driver who set out to prove he was as fast as the new steam-powered hammer that threatened his and his fellow steel-drivers jobs back in the late nineteenth century. A week after I quit my retail job, I had a simple surgery scheduled to remove nasal growths I had accumulated from having an aggravated, allergy-prone nose over the years. Only a week after the surgery, I wound up being readmitted due to a post-surgical infection. On the way the way to the hospital, the world was deforming before me, lights pulsed outward and obliterated sky and ground, words were just sounds. I had a very high fever. At one point, I was pretty sure that I was dying, and, honestly, I was too tired to care. The dark nothingness behind my eyelids promised the erasure of all my pain and trouble. A friend had taken me to the hospital, but they were not allowed to stay. So, alone on a hospital bed, nurses rushed past me but did not stop at my bed. Resigned, I curled up into myself and the world faded away. I pushed myself too hard, trying to sell all my belongings before going to graduate school in London. When you need money, it becomes your only focus: everything comes second, even your health.

Two days later, I woke up. A Catholic Worker came into my room that I shared with another woman and offered to say prayers for us, and we accepted them. A little later, my mom came into my room with books and non-hospital food. It was then that I really appreciated how fortunate I was. I had escaped. I had earned and bought myself time to think, to be creative -- even if only for a year. However, my elation quickly transitioned into despair when the medical bills started coming in. My hospitalization occurred right after I had quit work, and, therefore, I didn't have health insurance. In an instant all my efforts at earning extra money before I left were completely negated -- and then some.

Higher education is a privilege in our society, but it shouldn't be -- at least not one determined by economic ability. I was fortunate enough to have some savings, but we all need time to think, be creative, and build new relationships in our lives; and, higher education is one way of doing so. More than ever, we need time to question, reflect, and discuss how human needs are met or denied under capitalism. We need time to discover our own needs, desires, our spirit, our species being. We need time to ask questions. We need time to dream.

In the late nineteenth century, the Niedringhaus brothers discovered a way to make objects look like granite: they had discovered a brilliant man-made process that appeared natural, durable, timeless. Using this process, these industrialists founded an entire company town in Illinois where workers enameled utensils to give them a finish that looked like granite. Though the town didn't produce real granite, it nonetheless came to be known as Granite City.

Being conscious of the forces that shape our lives that have created the class society in which we are living removes the veneer of naturalness behind which capitalism operates. Class consciousness opens up a transformational process through which we begin to experience how things really are which were previously obfuscated by an ideological acceptance of the way things appear to be. It appears that wages we earn equal the value we create. It appears that waged work is the only real work we do. But appearances aren't reality. Once we have stripped capitalism of its supposed naturalness, we can see that the structure is flimsy, tarnished, and ugly. Then, we can begin to dream of something better.

On Granite Street in Barre, VT, there stands the Old Socialist Party Hall, founded and built in 1900 by Italian immigrants. The workers in Barre's granite industry penetrated the world of appearances and looked at the processes and history that brought them there, and that compelled them to work. Industrial workers in Barre's granite industry questioned the structure of society and their place in it, even while they sustained themselves in comparatively "good jobs". They were the agents of history; they were not content with being its object. They knew that no matter what, workers under capitalism are exploited, alienated, and dominated -- and they fought against this. How did they overcome their alienation and become aware of themselves as a social group, a social power, a class? Perhaps it was easier to see when capital crushed, tore, and maimed bodies; when capital made bodies weak, ill, and unhealthy; when it marked the laborer's commodity status on the flesh. Perhaps it was clear that capitalism was declaring an all out war on them, and they were trying to escape, trying to survive, so they fought forcefully for the eight hour workday, safety devices, benefits to protect themselves and their families, and more. The answers are somewhere between this larger history and how it was lived by the people who created it.

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