



## The Iowa Review

Volume 45  
Issue 2 Fall 2015

Article 16

2015

# On Work

Shawn Wen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Wen, Shawn. "On Work." *The Iowa Review* 45.2 (2015): 44-50. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7579>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## On work

In interviews, Marcel Marceau often said that if he had not been an actor, he would have become a painter.

*a dialogue*

The painter in me mocks the actor.  
“We are the same,” the actor cries.  
“We are not,” the painter replies.  
The actor would like to continue the discussion,  
But the painter will not.

The actor can only inhabit his shell.  
His shell        himself        his shell  
It bends  
It folds and stretches  
It takes the shape of whatever  
More putty than flesh  
But it is nonetheless a shell  
Its grooves and ridges deepen with time.

The actor  
Says, “I make the visible invisible.”  
Says, “I make the invisible visible.”  
Will such shape-shifting make the shell stiffen and crack?

My actor does not believe in limits.  
But he knows they are there.  
“We work with what we have,” he says.  
He starves the body, then he nourishes it.  
He folds it up and packs it into a suitcase wherever he goes.  
Then, in the dressing room, he smooths the wrinkles and puts it on.

He kisses the body late at night.  
He caresses it and makes promises.  
*One more try, my actor says to my body.*  
*The little mistakes may have been invisible to you. But I see them.*

One more.  
One more.  
My actor believes in precision.

My painter does not see a wobble as a tumble, though the actor disagrees.  
The painter's hands are filthy, dripping with ink.

My painter's brow sweats and I allow it.  
Sweat won't ruin make-up that took an hour to apply.

He is not careless, exactly.  
He does not need to be militant.  
If the hairs of his brush flay out, if the paint dries in its tube, if the palette  
chinks, if the canvas tears  
He gets another.

Still, my painter is jealous.  
He would often say to whomever,  
*If it were not for the actor, it would have been me.*  
The attention. The accomplishment.

My painter is wrong.  
The actor is jealous, too.  
He wants tools.  
An arsenal of artillery  
Smearing surfaces upon surfaces.  
But the actor's brush is not a brush.  
The actor's brush is his face, his hands, his limbs, and his chest.  
He cannot dabble.  
He can only inhabit.

My painter is a poltergeist.  
He can walk away from the painting.  
When he leaves, he disappears for days.  
Months.  
The world passes by in his absence.

My actor clings.  
Man sticks around.  
Does what I do.  
When I feel thirsty, his hand lifts the glass to my lips.

When I knock into the table, he takes the bruises onstage.

He knows the painter's life is easy.  
To fill canvases  
To add and add and then to add  
Rather than to be and be and be  
To send works out into the world  
And rest.

He thinks of the paintings  
Left to fight on their own

I'm not sorry. *You should be sorry.* I'm not sorry.  
The actor did not take the role of father.  
I am not the best father.  
Two hundred shows a year.

The daughter to the father—  
And where were you, Daddy?  
Being there is enough. I was there.  
Where?  
Elsewhere. Better than dead.  
Not so.  
Better.  
No.

One  
One looks at oneself in the mirror  
Half-dressed  
Undressed  
Pale  
One looks at the circles under one's eyes  
And one cannot imagine white make-up caked upon one's skin  
One cannot imagine that in half a day, one will be onstage  
One puts one's hats in the drawer  
One hates the clutter  
Father son actor painter  
One imagines all the roles one must play  
And one thinks to trade it all in for Bip  
One for all  
Bip  
An exaggeration for all men  
One thinks that the world's audiences got it wrong  
Bip is not comic  
Bip is tragic  
How would Bip perform as one?  
One  
In the mirror  
One  
Without make-up  
One  
Who isn't ready for the day

I am not afraid that the audience will crush me  
Though, sometimes they threaten  
A wall of heat  
Of flesh and breath  
They laugh and cry in unison  
They ask for top form  
I am not scared of little demands  
One man can hold off a thousand  
One baited animal  
In the gladiator stadium  
One can command a crowd

But remember. Time is material. You can feel it. Time erodes your skin, like wind and rain.

Onward from a childhood worshiping the silent films, time has carved a singular trajectory for him. The mime has never been anything but a mime. Seconds and minutes are an arbitrary measure of time. The mime keeps count in heartbeats and breaths.

After decades, he is weathered.