

**Cleaning Up
at the Hamtramck Burger Chef**



**Selected Poems 1999-2006
Don Winter**

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**New & Selected Poems
Don Winter**

Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef
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Printed in U.S.A. by Working Stiff Press.

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741 Broadway Street #1265

Niles, Michigan 49120

Acknowledgements

Abbey, Birmingham Poetry Review, Barbaric Yawp, Bogg, Bombay Gin, Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review, Brown Bottle, Chance Magazine, Chiron Review, Cincinnati Poetry Review, Coal City Review, Controlled Burn, 5 AM, Hiram Poetry Review, Karamu, Lilliput, London Magazine, Nerve Cowboy, New York Quarterly, Oyez Review, One Trick Pony, Passages North, Pearl, Plainsongs, Poetry NZ, Portland Review, Quercus Review, Seeds of Fire: Poetry from the Other USA, Skidrow Penthouse, Slipstream, Southern Poetry Review, Staplegun, Sulpher River Literary Review, Sycamore Review, Tears in the Fence, The Axe Factory, The Green Hills Literary Lantern, The Long Island Magazine, The Pittsburgh Quarterly, The Quirk, Unwound, Whiskey Island Magazine, and many others Don can't—or won't—remember.

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FOREWORD (first published in *No Way Out but In*)

The first time I read one of Don Winter's poems was in *The New York Quarterly*. It was titled "Saturday Night Desperate," and it caught my eye right away. It was simply about a couple of young guys and a whore. What made that poem work for me was its honesty, and plain use of the English language to move the poem to the powerful conclusion, "when she finished with us, yawned like some cat curled in the last pocket of a threadbare afternoon, the dull book of a dead moth loose in its paws."

This collection of Don's poems reflects, in often stark plain language, his world, and his world is the working-class neighborhoods of dull brown small houses on the outskirts of Detroit, once a place where a man could make an honest wage working for the steel mills or General Motors, but now is a rusted wasteland of unemployment and desperation. Yet Don Winter's poems are not bitter, they are filled with life, short, cut to the chase, cut to the throat, words about how tough life really is if you happen to be among the real people, people who only want to earn a decent living for their sweat and blood. I can identify with Don's world because that is the world I came from. There is no pretense here, none of the staid academic wordplay that has taken over almost all of what is being published today in America in the name of poetry. This is the real American poetry, the American version of an Irish poetry about blue collar working men and women.

Don has that rare gift that very few poets have, the ability to be precise with words, and take brevity to an art form. To me, that is how a poem should be written. Here is one poem in this collection that says it all as far as Don Winter's gift-

At Taylor's Pawn

the price tags dangle—
morgue tickets
on dead men's toes

That poem says more in three lines than a hundred of those fancy word treatises that have been coming out of the university workshops for the last several decades.

Don Winter is one of the few poets I can honestly say I take joy in reading. This collection deserves a serious read. —Gary Goude

The Wooden Indian Motel Blues

2 a.m.

On the tube

the actress says:

“How do you want my tears,
halfway down my cheeks
or all the way down?”

I say,

“How do you want my poem,
halfway down the page
or all the way down?”

I

One Life to Another

“Stick the hook there,”
dad says, rolling
the worm like a booger
in his gun-shell
fingers. I stab it
in the wrong places.
I catch one

fish all day, a bass too
stupid to fight.
Dad drives it home,
a wet sock
in a basket.
It puckers & spits

in the frying pan.
Snagged on rusted
nails, bass heads
yawn, mouths big enough
to swallow a thermos
of whiskey
in one gulp.

past time

in the last pocket
of a sunday afternoon
we found a park
some boys five on one side
seven on the other
were playing baseball
home plate a damp pile
of maple leaves
first base an imaginary place
everyone knew where
& out beyond
a real pond ducks sailed on

the sides called
come on & play ump
& catcher for both sides
so we came on & played
until nobody remembered the score
until we were three against two
five shadows tilting under one evening star

Things About to Disappear

For years the land worked us, planned
our cities like shotgun blasts.
Now it gives up, sinks
between hills. Boarded up factories
litter our rivers. It will do no good
to knit your brow. There's not enough left
in those hills to buy a meal.
What's left are wallets
of lost years, lapels tugged wide
by advice. We're old enough to be
our own fathers. We need a place
to be what we have become.

Dad's Silence

When dad died he'd hardly spoken
to mom for weeks. I heard
the muffled spatters of his need.
He'd start to touch her arm, grunt,
move off to arrange whatnots
on the metal shelf, like jigsaw pieces
of a life he could no longer fit together.
It had been his silence that had hooked her,
so like her father's, though some mornings
she had trouble reading in this new version,
laid down her book & went to check
the macaroni or stir the sauce.
Those final weeks she served him
dinner religiously at noon, ironed
even his underwear,
& when he tilted through the night,
her voice steadied him like a cane. Since he died
the bird feeder has sat empty.
She can't bring herself to fill it
like he used to,
to let the birdsong he created back in.

No Visitation

The train twists through Michigan:
the yellow blur of farmhouses,
ribbon glimpse of rivers.
All night I keep arriving
in someone else's childhood.
And once a year you send
a postcard of his happiness.

Grandpa's Field in November

Needles drift in
a clatter & dry hiss.
Crows fly

among the shrunken
cones. The onion skin
wings of cicadas

razor the air.
A blizzard,
two states away, snowdrifts

in grandpa's voice.
The horizon shrivels
to a thin stick, breaks.

Fishing Near Dark

The wind stiffens between my teeth.
I watch the old men lean
into it, cast their lines
out of the shadows. All afternoon
we fished, caught nothing.
I should turn back
to the cabin. But he breathes
below the surface.
I change bait and I cast.
If I could I'd pull
the water over my head.
Beneath the choking air
I'd wait, know everything that falls
becomes my food at last.

Dressing Burgers at Wanda's Grill

During his 23 years here,
on each one
he curls ketchup
into a mouth,
places two pickles
for eyes, two lines
of mustard for eyebrows.
The onion bits,
he says,
are pimples.

We watch him
leave alone after
work, come in the same
time each morning,
take his break
by himself, always the same
station blaring.

We watch him
finish off
each face with a top hat, mash
the condiments together,
bury each one
in a thin, wax box.
All those little white caskets
on the greasy steel rack.

Song for Someone Gone Away

There are those who've begun
to ghost their lives.
You see them hunched
in grocery lines or on the bus.
They have grins lost somewhere
in the folds of their faces,
with fences of old teeth
broken and leaning.
They have no pocket charms
against oblivion
and they're not going to cry
about it. Maybe they have invited
sadness as a shield
against despair. Like old dogs
they hobble home, push
and pull the sheets, knead and scrape
until they have them right,
then drop down and breath out deeply.

The Dream Home

Traveling north to hunt deer
you take a wrong turn
and stop for directions
at a house you've never seen.
A woman, fat and wholesome,
awaits you on the porch.
She smells like freshly baked bread
and when you ask her for directions
she leads you inside
to a clean, white table,
a cup of black tea.

This is more than you ever imagined before.
A plate, a knife, and a fork are already laid out.
You pretend you're not starving,
take a sip of the hot tea,
place the napkin in your lap.
Three girls, each under 5,
hold their skirts as they walk down the long stairway
into the room. They smile at you,
and you smile back.

After supper the woman asks
if you might tuck the girls in
before you leave. As you tuck each one in
you hum nursery songs
under your chest.

After they're asleep
the woman invites you
to the back porch
to watch the sun go. You do not refuse her
when she opens your red flannel shirt.
You need love like all of us.
This is no dream, you think,
No dream. In the wet grass
you try to match your breathing
to hers.

Immero (I Long for You)

He sat a long time, watching
the lights of the radio tower—
blue flash, blue flash—their sound a thin wire
of grief. There were secrets no longer
worth keeping, wishes gone stale.
Desire is full of endless distances.
All night buses rocked by
with no one aboard.
The house bulged with quiet.
Somewhere back in the lost place,
he was repeating the same replies to her
as she looked out the window in despair.
He was hoping what had never happened before
could happen again.

Bone Lonely

Some nights, I wake with longing
for nothing I can name.

I drink one beer after another,
watch the traffic lights change,
a late bus pass through.

Someone's window goes black.

All the old questions
have their way with me,
like why are life's gains losses,
the greatest romances fleshed
with failure. I keep turning up
the radio: hearts are cheating,
someone is alone, there's blood
in Tulsa. Something like that.

This of course wakes her.

She opens the bedroom door
with a slightly ruined look
at me. I pour myself one
shot of whiskey, look at her,
pour her one and say "so."

Boarded Up

The end has been
happening for years.

The warped boards
are diaries of rain.

Termites comb
years out of wood.

Sparrows, a concert of them,
suspend in the rafters.

Absence remains,
grown tall in a doorway.

Chipped plates fill up
with the moon.

II

The Cashier at Hinky Dinky's Discovers Jesus

You tell me when she found him.
It came sudden like a slammed door. A tent
of blond hair & two eyes of alien
blue, & a mouth that gossiped
us & the customers. She drove us
to church flapping her jaws
about forgiveness. She sized Jesus talk
to fit our sins. Jesus this.
The disciples of Jesus that.
& prophecy. Frogs and snakes
& bloodletting blahblahblah.
We sang songs about
hallelujah, & shooing our past
sins like flies,
& one where you jumped
up & down for Jesus.
She left scraps of scripture
in every nook & cranny of Hinky Dinky's,
in cash drawers & cookie jars & cupboards,
even in a Bible
we swore would explode,
until one day
geewhillikers her heart did.
The good in us ran downhill.
We all stood around at Tintop Tavern,
drinking beer, pushing one another
& cussing.
Us back to good for nothings, wrong
since Genesis.

Buffing

I buffed a floor
at Wanda's Grill & the buffer hit
a slick spot, went gazooming like a kid
spinning to be dizzy & kicked
my balls. But no, I squealed like a hog,
oh goddamn but no. All boss did
was put ice down there real fast
to get the heat out.
He said I might be a eunuch
in at least my right nut
& don't forget to fill out
this accident report. After work,

I went to Tintop Tavern
& said to my girl,
Here sit in my lap.
Nothing would go down nor come up.
She couldn't make it, neither.

Someday right soon, she said,
there's just gonna be
a lil' piece of your ass left.
She was drunk as a hoot owl.
Pabst on tap.
*Your mouth's runnin'
like a whippoorwill's ass
in chokecherry season.*

I picked a cue
& leaned. The eight ball wobbled
like a thrown wheel
& scratched.

Roofing

Mornings we ripped
shingles. When air temp topped
body temp we got buzzed.
We sat & smoked.

“I’d get monkeys
to do your jobs
if I could teach them not to shit
on the roof,” boss yelled.

We laughed like struck
match sticks. Down in the street
sheets just hung there on the line
like movie screens.

My Grandfather was a Matewan Miner

They sit stiff, try to hold
their breath for the shutter. Shadows blend
into their clothes
where hardly a button shows, they are so black.
Coal's turned their faces
into dim candles. Their teeth gone at 30.
With each cough they still mine
the coal in the dark
of their lungs.
They stare down the future.
Dust will frame their dreams.

Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef

Nights at this place
boss lines spray bottles up
across the counter. He says the red's
for shelves, the blue's for toilets,
& the white's only for stainless steel.
His eyebrows frown, but when
that bastard disappears into his office
I spray what I want
onto what I want.

Some nights his wife lifts
her ass onto the counter. She points
out turnover skins I missed.
Looks like she's been slept in
for years. Those nights I time
his trip to the bank so I can chase
her with the white bottle.
& I catch her & squeeze
the little Chef faces stitched
over her breasts. Some nights,

that is. But most nights the boss
looks right through me. His wife cleans
the salad bar & yells
at the bits of mustard & dressing.
As if they were to blame
for all this. One night boss yelled
What are you sittin' around for?
Go home and get yourself
a piece of ass. I turned to him,
I am a piece of ass.
He laughed at that
so I said it louder.

The Grill Cook's Dream

Since she came to Burger Chef
Vera is all he thinks about.
She calls back,
Two double cheese, hold the onions,
& he slides down
that voice onto a sofa
where they sit Frenching, blowing
in each other's ears.
She makes change,
& he makes it under
her sweater, her nipples lilac
in the space heater's flames.
You fucked up, or what? Boss yells
one night when he's already boosted
the radio in his head
to 10, Vera's throat wild with words:
Yeah baby, oh baby, yeah,
her butt wriggling,
her skinny legs jittering
like rubber bands.
I'm fine, he swears,
sweeping buns into a dustpan
& secretly hoping
he & Vera have the whole night ahead.

Eugene's Drive to Work

The hiss of the storm door trails him
to the car. He cranks the engine,
cranks it again. Maybe he *is*
just like his father:
same shift at Hamtramck Auto,
same bottle of whiskey,
same fights.
He backs out of the driveway,
begins to drive, but turns
& returns like a thought.
He thinks of arguments he might have used,
his tongue rolling them out
like dead stars. He looks in at the light
of the bar, watches it fall
from the rearview mirror.
Squirrels, buzzing question marks,
run the bridge that leads to the plant.
He thinks of all the arguments,
of all the times he's wanted to leave,
& he remembers: half a city,
half a shift apart
makes him & his wife friends,
or at least makes them tolerate
crude moments they spend like that.
He remembers by forgetting
everything else. Nightly, boards up his eyes.
Round here traditions are kept
like husbands, like wives.

Cultural Exchange

At coffee break Kento
told Uncle Johnny he could cut
more aluminum cookies
if he'd quit looking
at pussy books.

“Look pal,” Uncle responded,
“to really understand working stiffs
you have to learn the factory howl.”

He howled until his face turned red.

After a few tries Kento
got it down real good.

“Where were your ancestors
on December 7, 1941?”
Uncle asked.

Kento said, “In Japan,
it costs eighty or more bucks
for one pussy book.”

Eugene Walks off the Job

Working the lot,
he unweaves the hose,
spreads the soap. He scrubs until
an oil stain lightens to a dull grey.

Hosing down the foam
he thinks of the cuts
in pay, in hours, of all the times
he's wanted to leave,
weighs these against
his brother laid off in Wyandotte,
his uncle in Coker, factories everywhere
slamming shut like empty cash drawers.

He puts down the hose,
walks past the other parking spots
with names of people he'll never meet.
The guard's seen it
before. He smiles & nods.
Eugene walks out of the lot,
past rows of clipped hedges, past
sprinklers repeating a slow, broken sound.
Yard after yard
dogs bark behind fences.
He won't admit
his greatest fear:
that he'll fling his life
into the distant, grey highway,
past the signals blinking "don't walk."

Working Late

Squared in his spot on line six,
he chalks a number
on the board, locks the chuck.
Fronds curl against his hands
& arms. He keeps nodding off,
even though the roof kicks with rain
& wind turns
on itself in the empty truck docks.

Each piece he lifts
is heavier than the last.
He cleans the finished ones
in the oil soup.
He turns the heat off, sips black coffee,
remembers the guy on graveyard
fell asleep for a moment & woke
to his finger lying on the cement.

Saturday Night Desperate

We talked about it at the time clock
while we waited to punch in,
how it must have been the moon looking half-starved
& the radiator whiskey
brought us to her those Saturday nights,
& how the dog with the bowling ball
head barked from her front porch, back legs braced
to charge, front legs braced to turn
& retreat, & how she came hard
out that door hung from one low
hinge & was on you, smelling
of possum, with slick hair & a cunt
with whiskers stiff enough to grate cheese,
& how she pitched her head back, buttoned
those green eyes & shook out punk

birdcalls under her shower cap, & how
we took turns with her in the outhouse,
the door swung half open, the lime scented life
of the toilet seeping through
the half-moon cut in one wall, & we nodded
each other daft, winked & said she's all that
& a bag of chips, or something like that,
& what we left out was the only
thing true: how she laid back when she finished
with us, yawned like some cat
curled in the pocket of a threadbare afternoon,
the dull book of a dead moth
loose in its paws.

At the Tavern

a man slips
into his seat
with a sigh
like an accordion
folding into its case

The Tacoma Tavern

is drunk with rain.
& our tables are careless
with empty bottles, cigarette ash.
& we run our fevers
up over a hundred
arm wrestling our motorcycle buddies,
drinking pitchers on one breath
for a dollar. & most try to drink enough
to lose their names.
& we make up stories to fit
the bad things. By turns hero & victim.
& the waitress acts vaguely in love
with each man. & the need for touch
is a razor-toting, cuss-tongued bad ass.
& the best sex rises from vacancies:
divorces, failed jobs, incarcerations.
& the closing time door flings open
like a warrant.
& the land tears away from us
& slides off the horizons.

III

Breaking Down

I bought that car for \$50.

To open the door
you had to pound
just below the handle.

When you turned a corner
the dash lights flickered
like a busted marquee.

The rolling noise
that charmed Vera
was a can of Budweiser
under her seat.

Night we split up,
she held my erection
& looked out the window
like someone
with a hand on a doorknob
stopping to say one last thing
before goodbye.

Raw

Playing hooky again,
we carry eggs across French fries
& broken glass frozen on the pavement.
We count three & fire:
one falls short,
three smack the fat chef's face
on the roof.

 We tear for the truck.
Mark turns doughnuts, I hang out
the window, hit a guy
wearing a football uniform,
splatter the handicap sign.
We feel tough
 as older brothers
learning to say fuck you to authority.
The manager pounds out
after us, punching air
& screaming, but he snaps back
when my egg hits his chest.
Mark fishtails the street.
“One fuck of an arm,
fuck of an arm,”
he spits, turns up the unhinged
music. Pretty soon, someone will kick
our asses for doing shit like this.
I stick my head out
the window again, raw
air rushing into
my eyes and mouth.

Mom: 1968

As the supper on the stove
is nearing completion
her fork tests a potato,
breaks a bit of meat.

She salts a green vegetable.

Before the set but unsurrounded table
she stands in an empty house.

She listens for the sound of a car.

Whoever you are
if you come at this time
she will feed you.

Dad: 1968

light slices
the room
in two

we breathe
in the huge
silence

his stare
scrapes
my plate

Our Town

Neighborhoods stacked like boxes.
Billboards look into
our windows, whisper sex and success.
We hold up our fists like commandments.
We offer prayers like hard hats.
Regret rolls
its bullet casings at our feet
& the time clocks
go right on ticking.

Lonesome Town

“Andy stole my cherry
on a toothpick
& swallowed it whole,”
she sd. I was out
of the army a couple weeks,
madly in lust. “Now Andy’s gone,
no one can say where,
otherwise I wouldn’t be dancing
in this shithole.” She smelled
like a dog pound in August, but
she had a wad of bills
the size of a sandwich. Had a snake
tattooed around her ankle,
pierced nipple & that edgy, unreachable
disinterest I couldn’t
get enough of.

Two hundred for the night, two bones
from her dealer later, we jumped
into a Checker cab.
Back in my room,
the dope dropped my head
like a tulip.
She cleaned me out.
“Ants,” she sd.
next day at the club,
“people are ants,”
lifted her feet & stomped
them down. Next morning, I started begging
my way back to my folk’s house
in Bumfuck, USA.

Going On

You drink Pabst & trade
low belches with a woman with platinum
hair & rhinestone earrings. Something or other
is on the tube, either the one
about the soldier dealing cards
to the dead, or the one closer
to home, about suicide & steel mills.
You talk the smallest talk possible,
all the while thinking
how does one face it down, go on
after another bad marriage. 46.

Days you wrestle big sacks
of fertilizer from co-op storage bins
to the beds of pickups.
Nights you watch bad television.
You had hoped to feel better
about paying the support,
but most nights you just feel your sore back,
wonder how long your life
will be in parentheses.
The woman throws her change
onto the bar to see if she'll fuck you
or not, but you're thinking

of your son singing under the brick arch
of the home you lost,
his voice griefless, the sky endless
blue without credit cards
or betrayal. You tell the woman you have to
be up at 5 for work.

You stand in the frozen rutted mud
of the parking lot, close your eyes.
2 A.M. The birds are chirping.
Already? You think.

Strip Bar: Hamtramck

The goddamn of music
was going on.
The dancer came out
dangling money carelessly.
She looked at our faces
as if they were small tips.
God, she was good
when she danced out of her clothes.
Sweetheart, the others called her.
Shorty. Baby. For each of them
she smiled. I envied how
she let the backs of their hands linger
at the very top of her thigh.
When she finally got to me
I stuck a dollar bill
where my eyes had been.
Her face had the alert sleepiness
of a cat's. She smiled
vacantly, moved on to the next dollar.
I drifted into the night air.
The lights on my rig pushed
the dark aside, moved me
towards no house, towards no one waiting.

The Ladies' Man

He's not pretty,
really. Porcupine hair. Knuckles
for eyeballs. But he slays them
with that voice,
a slow bear climbing
a honey tree,
those kisses a barn full
of electric swallows,
that cock
a shot of bourbon
smoothing them out.
Women full of a fool.
Afterwards they roll around
with their wedded husbands,
like dogs gone wild
with fleas.

At Taylor's Pawn

the price tags dangle—
morgue tickets
on dead men's toes

she had a body
that had been a few places—
back from only some

Unions

2 a.m. The moon rises
above Birmingham Steel.
At 20th and Tuscaloosa
men keep warm by a fire
made from fence posts
and garage doors, toss
their empties into the street
where they shatter
like hunks of ice. The men's
faces rearrange themselves
with each look, each thought.
At the plant,
men finish the night's work
schedule before last break,
go downstairs to the storage room
where they can sit in the cool
darkness and wonder how they
managed to screw up their lives
this bad, sip a cold beer
from the cooler Mark slips in
after lunch, hold the bottle
long after it's empty, peeling
the label where it says
GENUINE UNION MADE IN THE USA.

Closing Time

Late November. 3 A.M.
The last bar winking.
I stubbed out
my cigarette and rose
and no one noticed
or called when I passed through
the doorway and into the street.
The blind eyes
of cars. Newspapers bleeding
in a puddle.
Unshaven for days, the smell
of my soon-to-be-ex-wife
lingering, I walked the rut
to the diner, to flies
and doughnuts under glass,
and when the waitress asked
“What are you having?”
I answered “another one
of those nights,”
but I was thinking of my wife,
of how we’d grown too tired
of being ourselves
to try to be married
any longer. I wished I could burn
my memories of her
to ashes. Faces floated
like torn pages
across the diner windows.
Maybe they’d come there
like me, so a little while longer
they wouldn’t have to
enter their lives.

Outlaw

Maybe you've known a guy
half crazy, plain stupid, or just itching to be free,
who tapes *don't try to find me*
to the refrigerator door, & is never
heard from again, not even a phone call
or a post card. He changes from work clothes
into black scuffy boots, blue jeans, dark
t-shirt & a motorcycle jacket, hides his face
under a cowboy hat. He hails loneliness
like a cab, breaks every promise
he ever made to himself.

What balls, the men
at the factory say. *Braver than a suicide*.
But they hope they don't catch
what he has. & he winds up
drifting transient as a dream
not in some Kerouac utopia, but beneath
the random lettering of a broken marquee.
& he stumbles at dusk
to listen to a revivalist swollen
like a tent in trade for a few hours
in a warm bed. He forgets
what's missing in his life,
stops telling himself the lies
we need to make sense, to survive,
& he believes nothing
is always what's left
after a while, & nothing he does or has done
needs to be explained.

The Hamtramck Hotel

shrinks in a desert of parking meters.
And WE NEVER CLOSE pops and blinks like a wounded eye.
And the buckled sidewalk a blood and beer stained belt
of accordion keys. And the prostitutes whistle their one note,
lips thick donuts strawberry glazed.
And the cars lay for years like stunned animals.
And the manager's voice tumbles like dice.
And all the rooms are dark, candle stubs
gasping on the tables. And the walls are stripping
down their paint. And the plumbing has hot flashes.
And Joe's biceps are two pigs wrestling
in a sack. And he belts the punching bag,
fists backfiring like pistons, an engine running down.
And thin walls separate lives.
And you hold back air, clutch your own fists
and wait to hear it—whatever woman moaning
low, the dull thud of the beating.
And you are glad your friends have stopped visiting.
And you turn up the radio
and hold onto the notes, a man diving
from a burning tenement holding to a mattress.
And you sleep between the station breaks.
And a rolling curtain of freight cars blocks out the river.
And the moon climbs
as the stars drip steadily into the streets.

IV

“One of the most trenchant, insightful overviews of American Poetry ever written.” ---*Small Press Review*

**Press of the Real: Poetry of the Working Class
Written in Anchorage, 2006**

Working class *is*. It is the vast majority of us in America “who must live by the sale of [our] labor power, and [who] have no other life sustaining forces” (*Line Break* 12). It is those of us who perform jobs that seem boring, routine, banal, trivial, pointless, who as sociologist George Ritzer points out, “do the same thing every day. It is boring, it is bad, it is dehumanizing, but the green stuff seems to alleviate the boredom, at least once a week” (47). It is the man who worked at the power plant in Jack London’s *John Barleycorn*. It is those who labored in Charles Bukowski’s *Post Office*, “people who were caught in traps...They felt their lives were being wasted. And they were right” (142). It is the man and woman in James Scully’s “Enough.” It is those who suffer jobs destructive to human existence, jobs underscored by the ideology of Frederick Taylor’s *Scientific Management*, which has gained force in recent years, driving the expansion of the post-industrial service and information economy: jobs in consumer services, adjuncting, wholesale, and retail. It is those displaced industrial workers who must endure forced entry into the lowest levels of that service economy: jobs in domestic, food service, clerical, and telemarketing (Coles & Oresick xvii).

In Niles, Michigan, the working class town where I grew up, you were educated (euphemism for “socially

managed”) for docility: conformity to the rules, obedience to authority, and receptivity to rote learning. Spontaneity and creativity were not rewarded. Niles High School produced submissive, malleable adults who were eager for jobs that would set the schedule. A good job meant Clark Equipment Company, or Simplicity Pattern, or National Standard. Work became the fabric of life, providing for a family the work ethic. That work ethic, the working class ethic, prized the functional and the practical. Conversation was direct, sometimes blunt, purposeful, but not reflective, and truthful, but you kept that truth in the family. You learned to laugh to survive; you passed on stories of family and town history, you passed on your values. Often you felt rage, bitterness and denial at being exploited by those you could not even name. You had difficulty in seeing multiple perspectives, but you felt others should be treated fairly, so you stood up for the “little guy.” And at home you made do, you sacrificed, you supported each other. Patriarchy ruled home, ruled the workplace. Often violence exploded in both. Education was fine, as long as you didn’t get too much of it, as long as you didn’t forget “where you came from.”

No, that’s not quite. Resistance to willed amnesia is a myth. You wanted to rise, through the accumulation of money and its power, above who you are and where you began, and then to marginalize, obscure, silence that beginning. But without intergenerational money, upon which middle class society rests, most settled for upwardly mobile versions of themselves predicated upon a pyramid of consumption, formulated not so much on the need for a particular object as the desire to own it to distinguish

themselves socially: the idea that a Mercedes is a status symbol that places you above the one who owns a Volkswagen, even though you may be a paycheck or two away from homelessness. As Linda McCarriston notes:

Analysis of class in America is approached by different thinkers with different standards of measure, but it's safe to say that status—objects, jobs, reputations—is not the same as class. Take Thomas McGrath dying in a single room in Minnesota with a black mitten on the hand that could never get warm after the VA surgery on it, a handful of books around him. He NEVER was middle class. But he was educated, brilliant, and famous. The academy threw him out and McCarthy—which should concern us all today—finished him off. People are called, and call themselves, middle class when they have no safety net beyond the next paycheck, no leisure in which to learn and reflect upon their fate, no job security, no secure medical (and dental, of course). What they have is an education and enculturation in which they've learned to look down their noses at themselves "before," in their past notions of a life

The first lines I wrote, at age 40, evidenced some of the rage, bitterness, and denial I felt in my working class poor life: “For years the land worked us, planned/ our cities like shotgun blasts.” Plain spoken, private lines I wrote sitting on a bar stool in Niles. Here in my first attempt, in many ways brute, “snake brain” writing (I had no critical terminology to describe what I wrote), there is inner will, inner power, and social vision—also that rage—of a worker who realizes he is of a larger group that is, by-and-large- exploited, and who refuses to be silenced, to be extinguished. In the books I’d begun to read, such as *The Branch Will Not Break; To Bedlam and Part Way Back; Not this Pig; Chicago Poems; Ariel; American Primitive; What Thou Lovest Well, Remains American*; I discerned a reticence about the working life. I mean, there were a few Levine work poems, and several of Frost’s. And of course, Sandburg’s, but as Williams observed in a letter to Moore,

Sandburg's "work" poems are a "drift of people, a nameless drift for the most part." Why was it that poems from the position of the working class poor, from that life and that labor being economically exploited, seemed to not be a powerful strand in American Poetry? Why was the voice of a defined social class—whose condition has long been the subject of study by sociologists and political scientists—as absent or misrepresented in American "academic" poetry, as that of African-Americans had been until recently?

There is, and has been, the resistance of the "academic" literary canon to "those below," certainly those of the working class. I believe this resistance arises out of a failure to appreciate, or react against, the class content of the poetry. That there isn't a clearer concept of the "working class" is a big issue. Why can't I justify my working-class poems in the "academic" environment? Largely because the working-class environment and real voice lack the political, social, and economic naming that might make them dynamic. Rarely gathered together as a locus of critique, the elements of a sociological poetics uncover the terms and uses of most "literary theories" as taxonomies of taste and/or group identity, joustings for a higher rung on the status ladder. And there simply is no cogent "working class" theory. The project of trying to place the importance of poetry in my life as a writer of poems becomes problematic as I realize how antipathetic to my poetic the "norm" is, and how few, scattered, and out of print are the theoretical materials I need to defend and articulate it. There is in American "academic" poetry a poetry of the "working class" that is all costume and no

content. Most “working class” work that is acceptable to the digestion of the American “academic” poetry norm is not politically conscious. It’s nostalgic, romantic, soft focus. Anybody can sling dialect and dress his or her speaker in denim or leather or rags. Much of what American “academic” poetry loves as “working class” and “poor” is voyeuristic. So to situate the importance of poetry in my life as a writer of poems is to point to this dominant academic tradition (normalizing discourse) AND the (my) dissident tradition, both ever present and in dialogue, though the “dominant” tradition avails itself of the false prerogative of refusing to talk with its other as equal.

Dominant tradition be damned, I knew when I began to write I wanted to embrace, not exclude, the working class poor in my hometown. I wanted to express and claim my belonging, my sameness to them. I felt that in traveling to the deepest parts of myself, and my experiences in the localisms of Niles, in other words the particulars of my working class experience, I might touch the deepest parts of the working poor in Niles, and elsewhere. My exemplars, McGrath, Scully, Boland, and McCarriston, as well as Charles Bukowski, Phillip Levine, and Gerald Locklin, are radically awake in their writing, something any poet should aspire to, quaky-kneed beginner or experienced connoisseur, with a consciousness fiercely engaged by the particularity of this world, peddling hard as it can to attend to and honor each moment in that relentless flood of disparate sensations, experiences (and memories about sensations and experiences), and ideas which is contemporary life; and they write with an authority of voice rarely achieved by either man or woman. They have

begun, along with writers like Jim Daniels and Fred Voss, to clear a space in American poetics where “forbidden voices” such as mine can exist and persist as an urgent place for utterance of consciousness, to speak for my class as well as myself, a poem of self “made valid for all” (des Pres 164). They have not forgotten their class, in fact have become bards for it, and they have been taken seriously.

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About the Author

Don Winter went from being owner of Southeast Real Estate to poverty after a 1999 divorce. He then took up the poem, with acceptances from *5 AM*, *New York Quarterly*, *Slipstream*, *Pearl*, *Chiron Review*, *Nerve Cowboy*, *Passages North*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *London Magazine*, *Sycamore Review*, *Portland Review*, and close to 500 other journals in the U.S., Canada, England, Ireland, Scotland, Switzerland, and Australia. Taught in several U.S high schools, winner of numerous awards, included in several anthologies, Winter's poems were nominated for fifteen Pushcarts in just eight years.

Winter wrote little after 2006, and in 2009 announced he was “off to find a new path.”

Raymond Hammond, Editor of *The New York Quarterly*, emailed Winter in 2009: “I will miss your work, and in your future, I hope you find the same peace and happiness in life—in whatever you do—as you brought into my world as an editor and writer and reader...and that I mean with all my heart.”

In 2017, he again emailed Winter: “You know NYQ would be the perfect home for a new and selected in the next few years. Just let me know, when or even if, you are ready, and we will talk about it. The offer stands for this or any kind of book of your work--completely understand if you don't take us up on it--just throwing it out there. Hope this finds you well.”

Winter considers his “new and selected,” the book you're now holding, to be too small and frail and human-scale to be published by New York Quarterly Books, despite his immense respect for Hammond.

Since 2006, Winter has taught Labor History, Workplace Cooperation, Technical Writing, and Reading/Composition for building-trade unions, Ivy Tech Community College, and Indiana University.

He has written several new poems. www.donwinterpoetrybooksonline.com



Don Winter reading at the Bowery Poetry Club in NYC.

Don Winter is one of the best poets in the small press. —Small Press Review

Don Winter is one of small press' finest poets. —Chiron Review

In his superb poems, Don Winter writes of the lives most of us really live, lives ignored by the academic poets doing their verbal tricks, lives invisible in our gilded age. Don's poems are the real America, on the ground and in the bars and cafes and burger joints and factories where the people laugh and sing and struggle. The people deserve a great poet to sing of them, and in Don Winter they have found him. —Fred Voss

I remember getting hit once with a baseball bat right in the middle of the back and the force of the blow spun me around toward a girl who was laughing. Sometimes poetry will have that same effect on me. Reading Tom McGrath's Letter to an Imaginary Friend was like that. Don Winter's poetry hits me like that. —Todd Moore

The poems of Don Winter have the same strong realistic qualities I find in my favorite narrative writers, e.g. Hemingway, Bukowski, Updike, Roth and Haslami: recognizable locales, credible characters, sharp dialogue, terse descriptions, and a minimum of authorial intrusion. His collections hold the readers start to finish. Don, thank you for all the good words you've graced the readers of your work with. —Gerald Locklin