

**Cleaning Up  
at the Hamtramck Burger Chef**



**Selected Poems 1999-2006  
Don Winter**



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at the Hamtramck Burger Chef**

**New & Selected Poems  
Don Winter**

Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef  
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Contents

I

One Life to Another..... 7  
past time..... 8  
Things About to Disappear ..... 9  
Dad's Silence..... 10  
No Visitation..... 11  
Grandpa's Field in November ..... 12  
Fishing Near Dark ..... 13  
Dressing Burgers at Wanda's Grill ..... 14  
Song for Someone Gone Away..... 15  
The Dream Home..... 16  
Immero (I Long for You)..... 18  
Bone Lonely ..... 19  
Boarded Up ..... 20

II

The Cashier at Hinky Dinky's Discovers Jesus ..... 22  
Buffing..... 23  
Roofing..... 24  
My Grandfather was a Matewan Miner ..... 25  
Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef ..... 26  
The Grill Cook's Dream..... 27  
Eugene's Drive to Work ..... 28  
Cultural Exchange..... 29  
Eugene Walks Off the Job ..... 30  
Working Late ..... 31  
Saturday Night Desperate..... 32  
At the Tavern..... 33  
The Tacoma Tavern..... 34

### III

Breaking Down .....	36
Raw .....	37
Mom: 1968 .....	38
Dad: 1968 .....	39
Our Town .....	40
Lonesome Town .....	41
Going On.....	42
Strip Bar: Hamtramck .....	44
The Ladies' Man .....	45
At Taylor's Pawn.....	46
haiku .....	47
Unions.....	48
Closing Time .....	49
Outlaw.....	50
The Hamtramck Hotel .....	51

### IV

Press of the Real: Poetry of the Working Class .....	53
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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 20<sup>th</sup> 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](http://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