

Waiting to Punch the Clock



Poems by Don Winter & Curtis Hayes

Waiting to Punch the Clock

Don Winter

Curtis Hayes

Waiting to Punch the Clock

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By Don Winter

- *Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef*
- *Saturday Night Desperate*

By Curtis Hayes

- *Bottleneck Slide*
- *I Am Jesse James*

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Introduction

One for Toad

You begin to see that his poems
walk the balance beam
of his obsessions.

That they don't simply talk to avoid
what's going on.

That while yours may want
to solve the problems of the universe
his want to see Chicago.

That they like to joke
& all the jokes are practical.

That they dream of brothels,
gather choirs from losses,
describe things as they are.
That they spent a night or two in jail.

That if you had a choice
between buying a book of them
& getting your raincoat cleaned,
they would tell you
to clean your raincoat.

Don Winter
July 2005

I grew up in a working-class family, so I guess you could say I write from what I know.—Andrea Arnold

Growing up in a particular neighborhood, growing up in a working-class family, not having much money, all of those things fire you and can give you an edge, can give you an anger.—Gary Oldman

I
Don't Kid Yourself

where we grew up

a mail truck circles like a lost dog
a bathroom door *men* lies flat on the ground
a sewer line tied off like an umbilical cord
a pregnant woman sells herself
kids with alphabets
of scars roll worn tires down the street
a man stands
under the busted neon turns a coin
in his pocket

A Toast

After they chained the factory gates,
dad drove truck for non-union
restaurants, 6:30 to 6:30,
no overtime pay, no pension.
Days off he watched my sister & me
while mom cleaned up
at sleep cheap. Mortgage kicking their asses.
Car held together

with duct tape & mirrors.
He busted two ribs
getting out of the rig.
A week on the couch
feeling like a truck backed
onto his chest.
One night, having sent us
to Grandma's, they beat down

the Xeroxed days
with wine & a motel bed.
Watched late shows. Drank.
Puked in the toilet.
Before they checked out
they toasted each other
& touched
empty glasses to their lips.

Hit & Run

Dad pivots as if to catch
the bitch or bastard. No one.
Mom said there'd be days
like this, but he always said
an eye for an eye,
you break it you bought it, no son
of mine, do as I say
not as I do, what kind of fairy
throws a ball underhanded anyway.
His face bulges like the creek
he dammed with mud: it worked
okay at first, but water started
sneaking through, he couldn't hold it back,
& what a mess. After that
when he said you're up
shit creek, he knew he knew that water,
without a paddle he'd trade
now for a baseball bat to beat
the sonofabitch blind, someone out there
thinking he's got away with this, someone,
by fucking Christ, is going to pay.

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.”

Tattoo

You asks her what's wrong,
Nothing, she says, but you both know
better. Behind her eyes that are
right on the edge of a good time
drunk, she's still in love
with her ex. You try to make
the car radio work & she
gets two beers from the cooler
in the trunk. The front door opens
& the poor fuck who bought the bar
a round with his disability check
stumbles out. If it were just a matter
of buying her a few beers,
or telling her a lie
about the money you made last year,
you'd drive her two miles down the road
to the Dorchester Motel. You change stations
& she lets out a low belch. On her bicep
her ex stiff-armed
against a howitzer,
cigarette in mouth, not knowing where
his shells are landing.

Grandpa's Barn

spent years
falling down. Wind had keys
to the house, where nights
he coughed up the war
in the trenches
of his sleep. Mornings he spit
Mail Pouch onto the porch,
which made Grandma curse
loud enough to shame
a snake. Fields rained
to his touch,
then browned. His neck turned
to red corduroy, hands to old
harness leather. Dust danced
on the skeleton
of the wind. When he fell
in the field she buried him
in that place trees took over
& let go.

One Life to Another

“Stick the hook there,”
Grandpa 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.
Grampa 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.

Pest Control

It's my fault.
I left the grease pit
open. Back line crawls

with them. Hit with Raid, they back-
flip, scratch the air,
or try to burrow

under bun racks, hide in mops.
"Son of a bitch" I spit,
bugged out on spray.

"You're not supposed to like
your job," boss says. "That's why
we pay you." I shuffled

in line with the rest
when they shuttered Dodge Main.
Months of being angry

at fuck knows who or what. I sweep
many as I can, living
& dead, out the back

door & let it
slam. More crawl out.
Drunk at the creek,

I catch catfish,
leave them in the rowboat
to swim in the rain.

Dry Creek Bed

After a whole week
of maggots the stink is gone
from the dead catfish.

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.

His Liver

outlived doctor's expectations
by fifteen years. Dying in the hospital
he had me smuggle in
some beer & pour it
into the beaker
left for a urine sample.
Then he waited
for the nurse to walk in
before he drank it.

Old Time Religion

Dad stayed home,
drank & read until numb
enough for sleep. I helped
set out the folding chairs, wheel
the organ down the ramp
of the U-Haul. Everywhere hands
worked fans in that tent,
& the preacher, hair slicked back
with lard, stepped up to warn
the world might end
that night. "Who would be saved
must file to God's alter," he yelled
above the feedback & mom,
babbling amens into the organ music,
quaked down the sawdust aisle.
"Oh Jesus, touch this sister
who accepts in faith
the things we cannot know."
She knew dad's love
was terrible, hardly better
than none at all. She howled her faith
at stars. Rid of the devil,
she left dad for good
each week, but he said "Where else
can you go?" Supper he'd shake
his newspaper into obedience.

Knife's Edge Ballet

You poor dumb bastards.
That one you're talking about,
there, at the end of the stage,
she was beautiful once,
before the kids, the welfare
hotels. Guys like you watched
the house lights go down,
then come up like the rush
of blood you're feeling now,
& the ring of the spotlight
slipped over her, & she danced to them,
& I guess they were arrogant
or naïve enough to think things
might turn out. She showed her tits
to half the wasted punks of Hamtramck,
the strobes all over her body like hands.
But who finally gives a shit?
The lights become a walled
park you'd die
to get out of.
Now, before coming out to dance
the memory of guys like you flicks
open like a switchblade
& she meths herself past
forgetting. & that's all you need
to know, you poor dumb bastards,
next time you snicker as you stick
your dollars where your eyes
have been, & she whispers back
you're gonna get fucked, sure,
but I swear you'll never get laid.

Two Hamtramck Sunsets

I.

the whole town is
a fly on a screen door
waiting for weather

on the sidewalk
a sleeping turtle
in the weight of heat

sticky black top
stink of river bottom
bird shit indigo on balustrades

a girl with beefy thighs
wipes sweat off her red face
then disappears into vespers

in the distance
where hills are clouds
lightning, but no rain

II.

two cigarettes
smoke the air

a man & woman nod
each other daft

pointing at whatever
it is, dead, on the sidewalk

smoke drifting
past the Dodge Main sign

the sun stubs itself out
in the hills

Life Through a Windshield

Nights, it's Hamtramck to Coker,
past trees that hang
wrinkled as innertubes
from the junkyard fence. Then onto
the interstate, where he measures
the hours by hunger
& piss stops. He carries out
burger bags to his rig,
eats double-fisted, steers
with his knees. He squawks
*Exit 58's got cheese steaks
& clean shitters. & lot lizards
who can suck the sea to sleep.*
If anyone's listening, that is.
He tears the filters off
his Kools before he puts the fire
to them. Every truck stop,
rest area & factory memorized
from Hamtramck to Coker. His eyes
seeing so much of so little
of life through a windshield.

Left Behind

Three Sunday suits
hang empty of him.

Shreds of yellowed lace
like cataracts in the darkened windows.

In the yard, bees
swarm, the ball pulling
down the branch.

At the top of the pasture hill
two mares, head-to-head,
shadows against the rising moon

II
SPLINTERS AND STICKS

KOSHER MEAT

Before the lumber mill
Larry had worked in a
slaughterhouse.

Not the kind that we
had to endure every day,
a real, pig-sticking
killing floor.

I had read somewhere that those crews
were mostly made-up
of ex-cons and vegetarians.
He said that he had to get out,
that everyone there were
out of their minds.

“The pigs knew what was happening.
We did cows over on the other side.
There was a separate kosher line
and that was worse.”

A horn blew
signaling the end of morning break.

“Was there a rabbi in there to bless it all?”

He laughed

“Fuck no. They had a reel-to-reel tape
next to the conveyer.

We had to listen to a loop
of the bastard droning his prayers.
All day long.”

I nodded, unsurprised.

“That doesn’t seem honest.”

He looked out across the yard
into miles of concrete and asphalt.

“It was worse than the animals.
Fucking lunatic asylum.”

We went in
took our places behind the saws,
the planers.

We started to feed them,
listened to the scream
as they bit into the wood
and there was no one there
to bless any of us.

INSECTS

The new girl was working the counter.
I'd seen her name on a timecard in the rack,
Pagan Wilsey,
a strange name to my 15-year-old mind.
It sounded mysterious, a little bit evil.
but she was just a sullen girl,
teenaged, pock-marked
and white trash just like me.

Her street clothes were almost worse
than the brown and yellow zip-ups
we were forced to wear by the Burger Planet
corporate chiefs.
That thick and stylish polyester
efficiently sealed in the heat and the sweat
as we fried potatoes in bubbling oil,
rolled hot dogs
and mashed hamburger flat on a scorching iron grill
lit orange by the warming lamps
that divided the front area from the back of that
greasy pit.

Every time she walked in to start a shift
(after walking to work because
no one working there could afford a car)
every time,
it looked like she'd been crying
right up to the minute she stepped through
the daily-special grease painted glass door.

A few weeks in, I was manning the grill until close.
A chubby kid named Chemo was fryin' fries
and grazing on onion rings
when he thought no one was watching.

Pagan was up front at the register.
We were only an hour away from locking up
when four high school football players
came in from the parking lot.

I took a few steps back from the grill,
out of the blazing light from those heat lamps
and eyeballed them from the relative dark.
it was typical teen jock bullshit-
talking loud, shoving each other and
scanning the dining room for
someone's ass to kick.

The first three were rude and abrupt with Pagan
as they each ordered their cheeseburgers.
She was used to being treated like she was
something to be stepped on.
It was number four that really let her have it.

“Man... workin’ here ain’t too good for the ole’ complexion, is it?”
His buddies chortled from plastic benches behind him.
He was a handsome kid, big, sandy-haired and
muscular from all his afternoons practicing
passes and plays while
we watched cars shuffle through the drive-thru
and felt searing meat spit back at us.
“Your boyfriend oughta get you some Clearasil. You got
a boyfriend, pretty?”
His three buddies yukked it up from behind.
One yelled out “Do it! Ask her out!”
She stood silently, staring down at the register.
There was a large “B” sewn onto his letterman’s jacket.
“Wassa matter? I say something wrong?”
She just stared at the numbers on the keys.
He became bored, to him,
she was no longer even worth humiliating.
“Just gimme a couple of fucking chili dogs.”
Silently, she tapped the machine and took the money.

Chemo and me watched the athlete
thump down next to his teammates.
I pulled a couple of buns from the steamer and dropped in the
dogs.
There was a pot of simmering chili on a warmer
next to the grill.
I paused,
Chemo looked at me knowingly.
“Fuck him. Spit on ‘em. I will.”
I looked over at Pagan.
She couldn’t face us.
She pretended to dig for something in her purse under
the counter
but she was just trying to find a place to hide.

There was a forgotten window
at the back of the place that was never cleaned.
Chemo followed me there.
Watching me scoop up
a handful of withered black flies from the sill,
he nodded his head
“Yes.”
I sprinkled all two-dozen of them
onto those hot dogs.
after ladling on the chili they were just more bumps in
the slop.
I wrapped them neatly in wax paper and sent them out.

Chemo hated them
because they were blue-eyed All-American
football players,
not thankful for their luck-
not even aware of their luck.
I hated them because I knew that same luck
would carry them places that would be denied to me.

We stood back behind the heat lamps,
sipped Cokes from plastic cups

and watched that cocky prick
devour both dogs
with gusto.

CHILI CHEESE FRIES

She had been quiet all night
the movie had been predictable
and now
as we sat on concrete benches
speckled and polished to look like stone
I joined her in silence

The economy had tanked
my job had vaporized
and I knew
that she wanted to talk about
where we were going
as a couple

It was hot and humid
cars rolled by on Pico
with their windows down
air-conditioning long gone

I watched the traffic, trying to
figure out how to scratch through another week
while she was trying to picture
a future
and I was picking at
a basket of chili cheese fries
like it was the last meal we'd ever eat together
and it was.

COUNTY FAIR

A dose of Americana
seemed like just the thing
to help us push away
the fatigue
of the weekly grind.
We walk in through
a wide arch
lit by flashing bulbs
and all around
there is music and sparkle.
We pause at the prized pig
baby goats
blue ribbons
and the barking of the midway.
We ride the sky cars
sip lemon Ices
sloshed with vodka
poured from a plastic flask.
Ahead is the chaos
of the tilt-a-whirl
and the calliope
calling us
to the carousel's painted lions
palominos and sea horses
we answer, happily
in the grip of the mysterious music.

At closing time
we climb into the car
cracking the windows
against the dense summer air.
Just ahead, a dented Buick
sputters and dies in the narrow lane,
drivers jamming in around him
no one allowing him to push clear.
Curses ring out from behind

fogged windshields
then the futility of honking horns.
I had hoped
to put off reality
until Monday morning.
I grip the steering wheel
she stirs on the seat beside me
we don't speak.
Behind us
the dazzle of the lights
up ahead
the coming week
my old Thunderbird
lost somewhere in the crush.

DREAMLAND

The heatwave has been burning
for a week now
and two days ago
my 12-year-old refrigerator
decided to start acting up.
I can hardly blame it,
but why in the middle
of the hottest week
in an already overheated year.
I'll forgive a lot-
disloyal women and
unreliable friends
are to be expected in this life,
but when I can't get frozen ice
for a Gin and Tonic,
my whole world
turns
sideways.

The muggy, damp air is
wrong for this desert
and there has been what
newsreaders call, an "Earthquake Cluster"
rumbling under L.A.
Most are almost too small to notice
but there has also been
a few real shakers.
Next door, one of the two Mexican families
living in the small,
single-family bungalow
are sitting out back
under a peeling patio cover.
These houses were built before
air-conditioning was expected
or even considered.
A thin wooden fence divides our worlds.

Their kids squeal and play ball,
unfazed by the heat,
and voices speak Spanish in low tones.

I'm outside as well
feeling for the cool breeze of
the impending dusk.

I live alone.

eat alone.

drink alone.

dream alone.

There is an excessive number of flies
buzzing close by
and the usual late afternoon hummingbirds
are nowhere to be seen
even though the Red Pentas
stand open and inviting.

The newsreaders say not to worry.

The experts say

that though we are overdue for the

Big One,

this string of small shakers

does not portend a major quake.

We are told that we are experiencing
an odd, but not unheard of, occurrence.

The possibility
that half of the fucking state
could roll off the continental shelf
into the blue Pacific
is not a concern
for me,
my neighbors,
or anyone dying slowly
on the gridlocked freeways.
The sun burns.

The experts lob opinions.

The kids next door squeal
and the ice does not freeze.
I eat chips and salsa for dinner
worrying more about
how I'm going to pay
for a new refrigerator
than educated guesses
about plate tectonics,
or wasting my life
alone
in this sundrenched
dreamland.

THERE ARE NO RICH BEVERLY HILLS WOMEN

It was quitting time at the boat dealership.
I'd been installing outdrives all afternoon
and I was ready for the week to end,
mentally preparing for a weekend of
liquor and languor.
As I gathered my sweatshirt and toolbag,
I was planning the smoothest way
to punch the timeclock and ghost my way out
to avoid the usual calls for after-work beer
with the other riggers.
My excuses were wearing thin
and they were starting to get the message.
I had almost made it to my car,
when Jeremy, a boat washer just out of high school,
blocked me before I could get the door open.
"Hey man, did you see that guy in the BMW?"
We were right on the Coast Highway
there were lots of BMW's.
"No."
"He pulled over and started talking to me."
Jeremy was a handsome kid.
He usually worked shirtless in the coastal sun.
"He told me he was an agent-"
"And he's gonna make you a star."
"No, not that kind. He knows a bunch of rich
Beverly Hills women who pay young guys for sex."
"He told you that."
"Yeah. Dude, he wants me to meet him at
The Sand Dollar Motel. Tonight. Like, now.
He has notebooks with photos of the women.
The only thing is,
he has to take some naked pictures of me.
To show the women.
He says that I could make a lot of money."
I stared at him.
He held a scraped-up skateboard covered in decals

even though he drove an old Datsun wagon to work.

He could tell I wasn't convinced.

"He said some of them are widows, because, you know, they marry dudes that are way older than them and some of them, their husbands just won't fuck 'em anymore."

I shook my head, rolled my keys over in my hand.

"Sounds legit."

"Yeah, man. And he said that if I had any good-looking friends that they could get in on it too!"

There was traffic waiting for me
and I just wanted to get on my couch
with the TV on
and a take-out meatball sandwich in my lap.
I looked at the kid.

He was wearing a Billabong tee shirt
and had a trucker hat skewed nearly sideways.

"Listen Jeremy.

There are no rich Beverly Hills women.

That dude just wants to see you naked."

"No, man."

"This is how it will go. You're gonna show up- where?"

"The Sand Dollar..."

"Yeah. He's gonna snap his naked photos
and then he's gonna peel off a hundred-dollar bill
wave it in front of you
and say he wants to blow you. Got it?"

"I don't think so, man. He seemed for real."

"Look, I don't really care what you do.

Go to the motel. But there won't be any
notebooks full of rich women wanting
to pay for you to fuck them.

There's just gonna be a perv
who spotted you washing boats on PCH."

I could tell that he was mentally
fighting my logic.
“I’m not an idiot, you know.
This could be a chance to make some real money.”
He moved slightly.
I pushed my key in the door lock.
“Let me ask you this.
If you had to, could you kick his ass?”
“Yeah. I guess.”
I got into my car
and left him there standing in the gravel.

Monday, I made it in early.
I was already installing a bait tank
when the kid showed up.
A couple of hours later
he pushed his cleaning cart
past a flybridge fisherman I was working on.
His skateboard hung by its trucks
off of the side of the cart.
Even behind sunglasses
he was avoiding eye contact.
I couldn’t let him pass.
“Did you go?”
The cart wheels were squeaking
the way everything near saltwater squeaks.
Finally he answered,
“No, man. I didn’t go.”
He couldn’t look at me,
just pushed his cart
straight toward the next dirty boat.
It was a hot September
and he kept his shirt on
for whatever was left of our Summer.

BREAK ROOM

For many years I worked terrible jobs
and now that I have a comfortable office
I think of the things I used to do
to avoid other people.
If it was possible,
I would delay my lunch breaks
so that I could get some quiet time.
Funny how you could judge
your value to a company
by how repellent they
kept their break rooms.
In these rooms
there was usually
an ancient television
beaming fuzzy
Bonanza reruns
or Judge Judy rants.
Some had bare and gouged drywall,
and windows-
there was some unwritten rule about
denying the worker bees sunlight
in these small places
and for some mysterious
recurring reason
air conditioning was overlooked
and always
in the process of being routed in.
These rooms were
unfinished and after-thought
just as the higher-ups wanted them to be.

It was in these places that I would
unfold lined paper and scribble.
There was always
a stopwatch ticking in my head
and there was always

a co-worker wandering in
who wanted to know
what I was doing.
Except what they really wanted
was to hide out and watch
two lowlifes argue in a fake
TV courtroom for a few minutes.
Sometimes I'd ignore the question
and sometimes I'd say that
I was working on some poetry
and they would stand over my shoulder.
I could feel them
slowly sounding out the words behind me
and every time-
"What kinda poetry is that?
None of the words rhyme."
and I knew that I would be
quitting soon or
getting fired and that
this would be repeated
over and over again
through whatever
break room I landed in
and the most I could hope for
was a decent TV set
to distract the coworkers,
maybe a small west-facing window
and more words
that don't rhyme.

MY VEGETARIAN SUMMER

I was driving a cabover bobtail
delivering lumber to construction sites
while trying to scratch my way through
an English degree at State.

I had dropped a 12-ton load in Riverside
and was gunning my truck back to L.A.
hoping to beat the traffic that I knew
was already backed up.

It was hot and the a/c was busted
so my windows were down
and the barely working radio was
singing out a lightweight pop tune
that had been decreed the song of summer
by whoever proclaims such things.

I was sweating through my jeans
and crawling at a steady 1 mile-an-hour.
The gridlock dug it's claws in
sucking me to a halt
in the breezeless and joyless area
where Corona meets Chino,
an area known for prisons and cow farms.
Another truck came up beside,
clicker on and needing to merge in.
I decided to professional-courtesy him
and blocked a couple of furious honking commuters
to allow him over.
He gave me a wave and slid in
right in front of me.

There was an old green tarp
stretched over his stakebed and tied down.
I saw that there was some kind of grease
leaking out of the lower edges
and down on to the burning asphalt.
I didn't have time to think about it much

because miracles were in the air that day
and the traffic broke up
into a sweet 40mph cruise.
Up ahead, I could see first one,
then two of his tiedowns come loose
and that tarp whipped around a little bit and then
settled down to drag along one side.
I couldn't signal the driver because
a brown Toyota had slotted itself in between us
and traffic was slowing hard again.

As the tarp whipped up and down
I caught glances of some kind of pink
something
piled up in the back.
The Toyota decided he wanted to try his luck
in a different, nearly-stopped lane
and I watched futility in action
as he poked aggressively from one to the next
gaining nothing.
There was another slow-down
and I crept up on the stakebed
just as we all braked to a stop together.
No one else on the freeway could see it
but my perch up in the cab
gave me a Cinemascope view.
The pink I'd seen was a mound of viscera-
heads and ribcages and femurs.
I knew what a rendering truck was,
I'd just never seen one in L.A.
I'd never seen one at all
and now I got the full shock of it,
what's left of a cow
after all the good parts are carved off.
It was a few seconds before the smell hit
and then we were moving at a crawl again.
I flipped my blinker to get it out of my sight,
and, of course, no one would let me move over.

Maneuvering away
required some aggression on my part
and there were honking horns behind me.
I didn't bother giving anyone the finger.

One of the angry commuters rolled up on my left,
pissed off and ready to scream.
I gave him the do-not-fuck-with-me glare
and he settled right down.
To the right, the rendering trucker gave me a nod
and split off on a northbound connector
to the mystery place where all that gore ends up going
to be boiled down into glue
or sausage muffin whatever.
A couple of years before, I'd worked with
an ex-slaughterhouse guy on a construction job.
He was dulled and doped-up
and they fired him after a week
but he refused to eat meat.

I was a vegetarian all that summer
and on through the fall.
Then, as we all do, I began to forget.
I thought about the atrocity on the freeway
less and less and I went back to my old ways,
burgers and chicken fingers and pepperoni.
That hot afternoon and that grease-dripping truck
faded into just one bad day
in a vast desert of bad days.

SALSA ROJA

I'd been knocked out of work again.
This time it was a virus
instead of a recession
a Wall Street disaster
or the indifference
that low pay cultivates.
At least the words were rolling out
letting me sidestep
the reality of living broke
being on the verge of losing
another woman
another year
another chance.

When the sun dipped low
I dug into my old Frigidaire
found a half-full jar of Picante
named after a Mexican town
but made in a vast Ohio factory
alongside the Rye Crisps and Oreos.
It was a month expired but smelled okay
and there was an opened bag of tortilla chips
somewhere.
I poured a fresh Jack and Coke
and moved to the cocktail table.
Brushing a stack of unpaid and unpayable bills
to the floor with my forearm,
I arranged everything around a yellow legal pad,
scooping the salsa with one hand
and scratching out words with the other.
The crows cawed from the palm trees
as the golden light dimmed
as the moon began its quiet glide
across the night sky
as life
once again
became worth living.

PEARL

It was the Reagan 80's,
the big hair
violent cop
"Greed is Good" decade.
I was in a Long Beach rental
not far from the navy base.
My motorcycle was running rough
I was in the alley around back
hunched down with a wrench,
trying not to be late for work, again.
An old man, bent and scowling
shuffled up.
I was sure he was gonna bitch
about the loud pipe.
He blurted out-
"You shouldn't ride that Jap shit."
I looked up,
he was in shorts and a golf shirt.
"I was at Pearl Harbor when those bastards
came in on us."
"Yeah?"
"Yeah? That's all you got to say?"
He looked lonely,
retired too long with nothing to do.
The timeclock was calling.
I pulled on my jacket
and left him standing there
breathing exhaust.

A week later I was back in the alley,
trying to synch carburetors by sound.
I cut the engine and he was there.
Same shorts. Same shirt.
What was left of a flattop.
"I saw a Sergeant so pissed off he was
shooting a machine gun, alone, from the hip."

I knew it would be a mistake
to show any interest.
He stood there waiting for a response.
I went back to the carbs,
said absently-
“Yeah, I think I saw that in a movie.”
“It was no fucking movie. ‘Lotta boys died that day.
And your smug ass is riding a jap bike.”
He stumbled angrily away,
disappearing between
two apartment buildings.
It was hot,
the end of September
but still summer.

Lorene from next door
stepped into the alley.
“What did Fred want?”
“He’s not happy about my motorcycle.”
She shook her head.
“His daughter married a Japanese man.
He hasn’t seen her in twenty years.
There are grandchildren he’s never met.”
Lorene looked across the alley
to the empty walkway.
I picked up an 8mm wrench.

The sun burned down from above.

THE NEW DEAL

I would fire up my motorcycle at 6:30 every morning.
It was a quick ride
to one of the last working sawmills in Los Angeles
where I would run rough lumber
through a ten-ton planer for nine hours a day.
the machine was an Industrial Age survivor
once painted green, now weathered but still solid,
with the year 1907
cast into the framework in large numerals
by the long-shuttered LA foundry that had created it.

Sticking to surface streets,
I would glide through the morning air
lucky to leave the hell of the choked freeways to others.
My route took me past a bar called
The New Deal Saloon,
ramshackle, sun-bleached
and open for business at 5am.
The front door was always open
and I could usually make out three or four
dark outlines seated at the bar,
lit by a juke in the back of the room.
I felt bad for them,
slumped, broken and smoking discount cigarettes,
still young enough to assume
that they were different than me.
I'd tell myself that they were regular guys
just off a swing shift at one of the South Bay refineries,
except the refineries were miles away
and my route was mostly past
shut-down defense plants
and boarded-up machine shops.
Every morning I'd approach the New Deal and
slow down a little bit to get a look inside,
telling myself that I would never be one of them.
It was obvious that inside that dank room

The New Deal was always the old deal.

At the mill I'd pour a cup of coffee
and start pushing trees.
No one wore work gloves at the saws,
they could catch on a blade
and pull your hand in with it.
The old men at the mill would hold up their hands
as they shuffled by
and with a kind of salute
they'd show off
their missing fingers and disfigurements.
No one had to open their mouth and say
"Be careful, kid."

The New Deal was finally bulldozed into
splinters and sticks.
The gravel parking lot
with its 50 year saturation of piss and puke
is now jammed tight with cheaply built condos.
Soon after, I split from my job at the mill,
with all my fingers intact.

I began drifting from one thing to the next,
working hard,
still hanging on to the great lie
and unaware that the graveyard shifts
and the early morning drinking
were waiting for me
only a few years down the road.

TV SET

My friends
look to the future
from barstools
and small, empty rooms.
Outside, another downturn
another meltdown
their careers, pensions
golden tomorrows
swallowed en-masse
by glossy men in dark suits.
The TV set says to
re-invent
find those bootstraps
it's never too late.

My friends are not foolish.
There is no repairing
what has vanished
there is only the cliff
and the thread.

Days evaporate
soles wear thin
engines cough
and transmissions slip
The only certainty;
that there will
not be an explanation
and the TV noise
will never stop.

VIDEODROME

Eric had endured a homelife
ruled by a furious
and violent father.
He somehow managed to talk his way
into renting a small apartment
even though he was only 16.
It was next to the freeway
in a zero part of town.
The walls were thin white drywall
and every doorknob and kitchen fixture
was the cheapest available.
We spent most nights as teenage pizza cooks,
wasting our precious youth for
thirty cents over minimum wage.

There was a Vietnamese liquor store
around the corner
where they didn't worry about things like
selling alcohol to high school kids.
Thinking we had it figured out,
we bought cheap American beer in cans,
the kind we'd seen our fathers drink.
but there were
no adults in the room
just second-hand furniture
an almost decent stereo system
and a 70's TV set with
one of the new VCR players wired in.

I'd met two girls at the video store,
convinced them to follow me to the apartment.
One of them even looked like Debbie Harry.
Eric was surprised
by my unexpected insta-party.
We put on some music,
poured some beer into glasses

and tried to seem charming.
The two girls kept looking at the room
then at each other
and it wasn't long before
they said they had to leave.
We watched them go out the door
and said nothing.

I looked at my wrists.
there were straight burns
from the edge of the pizza ovens.
They would scar
and for years I was asked
“Were you a wrist-cutter?”
Erik drained his glass, closed his eyes
as if falling asleep,
then jerked himself awake.
He had been up making dough at 6am
and would be doing it again in the morning.
“So, what else did you bring?”
I moved to the kitchenette
and the plain paper bag I had brought in.
“Videodrome.”
“They had it. Bitchin’.”
I slotted it into the player
and popped two fresh ones.

Outside,
the digital age was still a pinprick
hurling toward us through the dark.
We sank into the couch,
the TV tube glowed
and we watched
as flesh and technology
began their slow and torturous flux.

THIS DAY

The old gang rolled in
with wives and girlfriends, burgers
and guacamole,
chili, kabobs and rivers of tequila.
Red dragonflies buzzed overhead, and later
the hummingbirds.

We swam and splashed while
music banged out of frayed and sun-faded speakers
and there was laughter.

When the sun went down
the lanterns and candles came out
and the jokes and music
continued far into the night.

Most of us had little or no work.
According to the TV news
the economy had collapsed
and anxiety
was our constant sleeping companion,
like a stranger sneaking in
between us and our women.

But on this day we were kings.
The Sun blazed.
The Earth spun.
Voices roared out over the water
as the hummingbirds
and dragonflies
watched over us
in awe.

THE SUPER SEVENTIES

I was working on the crew of a forgettable sitcom
on the old NBC Burbank lot.

We had the set rigged and wired
for the day's first couple of pages
and I was ass-down on an apple box sipping coffee.

Jerry the producer appeared out of the dark.
He'd once seen me pull into the parking lot
in my tired '69 Mustang.

He had one like it only it was a rare version,
highly optioned and perfect.

It was uncommon on a set
to see one of the suits small talking
with someone as low on the totem pole
as I was.

Normally the only time we heard from a producer
was when they were screaming about overtime pay.

The other grips in my department knew
he just wanted to talk vintage muscle cars with me again.
It also meant that they would have to look busy
while I shot the shit with the boss.

Sometimes I could feel some resentment.

"I saw a beautiful girl yesterday on the IOI
driving a '66 Corvette roadster. "

"Sweet. I wonder if it was hers."

"Who cares. It was cinematic. Her hair was blowing."

Jerry seemed unusually reflective,
staring out into the dark
and speaking in slow, measured words.

We would soon start shooting.

"You know, I came out from back East to work here in the early seventies.
You used to see girls driving Corvettes all over town.

Jesus, they were all so perfect. You can't imagine it, what it was like.

There were orgies every weekend in the Valley.

It was unbelievable.

Everyone would go and it wasn't just flakey entertainment people."

"Nice."

“No, really. It was just so goddamn matter-of-fact.
You’d just walk by the new receptionist in the office
and say something like ‘Hey, are you going to Eddie’s tomorrow night?’
She’s like 19-20 years old
and everyone knew what was happening
and she’d either say ‘Yeah, I’ll be there’
or ‘No, I have other plans- next time’
and there was no shame and no offence.”
Jerry slowly shook his head.
“Fucking orgies. Jesus.”
I heard the AD call for something.
The guys in my crew were rushing across the set.
“I gotta go.”
Someone was yelling “Hurry up!”
I heard Jerry’s name squawk out on the walkie.
I turned, but he had already vanished
back into the hustle.

CINERAMA

The old Mack Sennett Studio
is still open for business.
I get in here from time to time
to work on car commercials
or music videos.
Below the stages
there are three basement levels
jammed with artifacts
from comedy's golden age
some dating back to the studio's
grand opening in 1912.
Old man Sennett, the slapstick king
built an empire
out of Keystone Cops,
and flying custard pies,
when film shorts were called flickers
and Echo Park
was called Edendale.

The first level below
is crowded with equipment.
We descend a short stairway
to pick through the rental lights and C-stands.
There is the sound of footsteps
and muted voices
from the busy stage overhead.
The walls down here are painted red
and none of us ask why.

The stage managers tell stories
of late-night wraps, interrupted
by unexplained noises,
lights blinking on and off
or clamps and hand tools
falling from a wooden shelf
with a sharp crack.

They talk of voices and movement
just out of view,
and they speak of these occurrences
solemnly.

The second level below
is stacked with hundreds
of rolled canvas backdrops
that once served as
opulent ballrooms
or the shores of the Nile.
We wander down here on our breaks
hoping our walkies remain silent.
It is here that we are told
to be aware.

The cigar-chomping buffoon
in bowler hat, ill-fitting suit
and pancake make-up
may stumble past.
Or we may catch a flash of
a sad-eyed waif
or an immaculate director in jodhpurs
lining up a shot
that will never be captured.

The third level, we are told,
is off limits.

The hours stretch into the night
and I move lights and route electricity,
directed by a voice from behind a camera.
We all stay quiet while another take unwinds.
in some places the old wooden floor
flexes under my weight,
the same boards
where Fatty Arbuckle, Harold Lloyd
and Charlie Chaplin once hit their marks.

Outside

is the nine-dollar glass of beer,
freeway traffic thick enough

to kill your soul

and the homeless,

grinding against each other

under the freeway overpass.

There is vomit on the sidewalks

of what once was called

Edendale.

I work into the night

hoping for something ethereal-

the smell of ancient tobacco,

laughter from the dark,

a faint echo of barrel-house piano.

I hope for magic tonight,

in the old Mack Sennett Studio.

GAS STATION HOT DOG

I'd just spent three days
working a grinder
of a video shoot
for a famous Santa Monica
menswear boutique.
Work had been slow and
when the producer gave
the usual no-budget
low day rate song and dance,
I hesitated.
Shitty pay
always equaled amateur-hour productions.
I looked hard at my empty calendar
and confirmed the dates.

The small crew were all strangers to me
and it seemed that
from the first hour
there was already a social hierarchy at work.
The director was from wealth.
The boutique owners
were from wealth
and they were speaking a secret language
that was phrased with references
to weekends in Saint-Tropez
and shopping sprees
on the Champs-Élysées.
In their store, jackets and blazers sold
for three grand a pop,
falsely torn and weathered denim for
four hundred.
To be hip
there was a stack of plain white
Black Flag logo tee shirts
for one hundred sixty dollars each,
in sizes small to large.

There must have been an assumption
that anyone requiring an XL or XXL
would be shopping elsewhere.
I assumed they were pre-shrunk.

As expected
the daily shot list was ridiculous
and unachievable.
Everything was to be captured in-store
and should a customer appear
we were told to quiet down
and become inconspicuous.

As the days unwound
and the tiny production
fell behind schedule
the director
and the producer
and later the clients
argued and pushed blame around.
Having seen it all before,
me and the camera assistant
remained calm.

When the wrap was finally called
the director shook my hand
and said "Good working with you."
The producer said "Send me your invoice."
Neither of them looked me in the eye.
They were quickly out the door
and into the bistro next door.
I knew they would never call me again.
The camera assistant and I
wrapped the equipment in silence.
The clients watched and argued quietly
from a corner of the store.

It was dark when I stopped for fuel
halfway home with another
45 minutes of traffic to go.
A small note on the pump read,
“Please pay inside.”
I waited in line under sick fluorescent lights.
A rotating snack cooker crowded
the small counter up ahead,
sweating hot dogs and churros.
I was hungry but avoided hot dogs.
As a kid, my mother would boil them
in a pot of water over the stove
and I could never understand
why she wouldn’t cook them properly.
The line moved
and I called the pump number
to a zombie clerk,
dropped a twenty
and moved out the door, thinking
Fluorescents are wrong.
Boiling hot dogs is wrong.

Later, I would fall asleep on the couch
in front of a movie I’d already seen twice.
I dreamed of hot dogs behind glass
rolling around and around
in an endless loop
as a line of dark figures
stood motionless
beneath a weak and dying Sun.

BLUESMAN

I was working in a sawmill five days a week,
living aimless and surly
and my drinking was on the long side of excess.
I was still young, at that point in life where
freedom and foolishness walked
hand in hand.

There were always musicians
hanging around my place,
mostly garage band types
with a few inspired pros in the mix.

Sometimes I'd hit that one tequila shot
that I should've left alone
and find myself onstage at a club
or front and center at a house party,
spilling good booze
and belting out a Muddy Waters or Johnny Cash tune.
I was no vocalist
but I knew enough
to gather whatever soul I could conjure,
growl it out loud for one or two numbers,
then get away from the mic and back to my cocktail
before anyone could decipher
whether it was good or not.
I was empty and filling the black
with whatever I thought would burn.

After four or five of these short party sets
I got it into my head to start a band,
just for kicks.
There was already a big shindig
planned for Labor Day.

I picked ten songs
convinced three ace players
had two drunken practices

and learned the words, bridges, and solos,
one by one.

The day came,
and the house steadily filled up.
By nighttime everyone was lubed and laughing
and jammed in tits-to-elbow.
The records stopped,
the lights went down
the stage was just an open spot in the living room
lit up by a winding string of blue party lights.
While I sipped whiskey in the dark,
trying to look smooth like the bluesman I wasn't,
three high-flying hard-chargers
launched into Freddy King's "Hide Away."

There was head bangin'
hip shakin' and chords bendin'.
I put down my tumbler, stepped out
grabbed the mic and shut my eyes
as the band rolled into Otis Rush's
"Keep Loving Me Baby."
for the next 45 minutes I growled, spit and howled.
I missed notes and stumbled
bopped during solos and never missed a mark.
The crowd shimmied, reeled and romped.
They screamed for more after each song-
John Lee, Albert King, Junior Wells;
my narrow range meant nothing
because the band was high kickin'
and string pickin'
there was bottleneck slide
Booker T glide
and when I looked out
glasses and bottles were raised all the way up,
there was skin and liquor spillin' out,
Air thick with sweat and sex and smoke
and for one night that room

was every dripping-windowed juke joint
that ever shook it's floorboards
and I was a bluesman
an alligator king hoochie-coochie midnight rambler
and when the set was done
two women I didn't know
threw themselves at me in a back bedroom
and I knew
that was what it was all about.

REINVENTION

it's been nearly a decade
since the economy collapsed
and the hot Santa Ana winds
blow malaise
across the desiccated streets of my hometown.
Fallen palms litter the pavement and gutters.
Fires in the foothills
turn the sky orange
and in the .99 Cent Store parking lot
the newly homeless sit low in their cars,
their few possessions stacked
crazily up above the windshield line.
The wind disorients,
injects weirdness into the air
and I'm aware that they're watching me
as I slide a few grocery bags
across the bench seat of my 20 year old pickup.

I catch one, peripherally,
trying to get to me
before I can slam the truck door shut,
a dusty scarecrow staggers closer
wanting a dime, a dollar,
an ear for his ten-second story,
but his legs are too stiff
his timing, too late.
I turn the ignition and back away
denying eye contact.
he shouts something
that I pretend not to hear.

I think of other places
where masses will riot
over a perceived racial slight,
cities will burn
over a minor religious insult

and how sometimes
the only voice of outrage
comes from a shuffling scratch of a man
who's words are lost
in a gusting howl.

We were told
that we just had to reinvent ourselves.
I press on the pedal.
the fallen palm fronds
cracking loudly under my tires
are the only sound I hear.

THE CAW AND THE CLICK

in the company parking lot
the heat
rises from the asphalt
another day
disconnected
another week
burned
another year
adrift

up above
they flash by
black wing and claw
living without
time clocks
property taxes
low-sodium anything
or feeling the brevity
of life on Earth

they call to me
from the power lines and the palms
the caw and the click
flying past the city blocks
toward the desert
every unknown
measured through eyes of black
the sky
the dirt
and the dry fronds
whipping in the breeze

About the Authors

Don Winter went from being owner of Southeast Real Estate to poverty after a 1998 divorce. He then took up the poem, and from 1999-2006 his work appeared in most small press (and many “academic press”) journals. He is the author of critically acclaimed books including *Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef* and *Saturday Night Desperate*. He teaches Labor History, Technical Writing, and Workplace Cooperation for the Indiana building trades; he has also taught at Indiana University and the University of Alabama. He was the owner of Southeast Real Estate for fourteen years.

Curtis Hayes has worked in sawmills, greasy spoons, and as a grip, gaffer, set builder and camera assistant in the film industry. A native of Southern California, he’s been a truck driver, boat rigger and a screenwriter in both television and cinema. As a journalist, he is the author of the Top Ten New York Times Bestseller *I Am Jesse James*. He is a graduate of California State University, Long Beach. His poetry has been featured in Chiron Review, Trailer Park Quarterly, Cultural Weekly and other magazines.



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



Bottleneck Slide tells it straight. In this world, friends die young, fathers disappear, women come and go. Work is physical. Life is hard. And success? It's always just around the corner. These thought-provoking poems bear witness to an examined life; they're rich with metaphor, and the eccentric, down-to-earth characters who populate the landscape are unforgettable.—Alexis Rhone Fancher

Curtis Hayes is a story teller. His words carry you through his poems with an easy, every day rhythm as if you're on a two-day drive filled with eye-grabbing details that add up and uncover emotions that linger with you like the "Bottleneck Slide" on a favorite song's fadeout.—Tony Gloeggler

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