

2015

# Woodlawn: A Collection of Working Class Poems

Anthony Travis Shoot

*Eastern Illinois University*

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Woodlawn: A Collection of Working Class Poems

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(TITLE)

BY

Anthony Travis Shoot

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**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Masters of Arts in English

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS


2015

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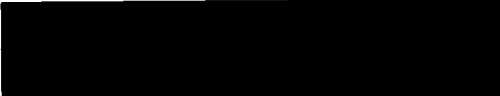
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## *Abstract*

This thesis includes a collection of working-class poems that explore such issues as poverty, work, racism, family, and substance abuse through the lens of class. It also includes a critical introduction that gives a brief overview of the history and current state of working-class studies, specifically poetry. In this thesis I relate the work of contemporary poets such as Jim Daniels and Simon J. Ortiz to my own work, while explaining the themes of contemporary poets compiled in anthologies such as *Working Classics: An Anthology* and *American Working Class Literature*.

*I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my family: Jody, Ian, Molly, and Jad.*

*Without them I would be truly lost.*

I'd like to acknowledge Dr. Olga Abella, Dr. Angela Vietto, and Dr. Robin Murray. They are three amazing professors and I am truly blessed to have had them as a thesis committee.

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Anthony Travis Shoot

July 8th, 2015

Creative Thesis

My poetry centers on the theme of working-class life in Middle America. Though this poetic theme has a strong tradition perhaps first made prominent by Walt Whitman and after him by writers such as Carl Sandburg, Tillie Olsen, Langston Hughes, and Raymond Carver, much of working-class poetry, until the last thirty years, has “largely been left out of the mainstream literary canon” (Coles and Zandy, xix). As Peter Hitchcock opines at the beginning of his essay “They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working Class Representation” (2000), “[m]ost literary critics visibly wince at the mention of working-class representation as a significant component of cultural analysis (‘too sociological,’ ‘too political,’ some may say, while others might offer more interesting but no less dismissive assessments: ‘too realist,’ ‘too easy,’ ‘too coarse,’ or simply ‘too late’) (20).

In spite of historic, critical neglect, working-class poetry has also had its champions. A recent example can be found in working-class poet Philip Levine, who passed away earlier this year. Levine received numerous awards for his poetry, including two National Book Awards for poetry, one in 1980 for *Ashes: Poems New and Old* and one in 1991 for perhaps his most famous collection, *What Work Is*. Levine, who wrote

primarily about working-class life in Detroit, also had the honor of serving as Poet Laureate of the United States for 2011-2012.

In addition to accolades given to Levine, it is an exciting time for what John Russo and Sherry Lee Linkon have dubbed “New Working Class Studies,” and recent scholarship has “focused on working-class life and culture with renewed interest” (Russo and Linkon, 1). Part of this “renewed interest” is that a great deal of working-class poetry has been gathered from small presses such as Larry Smith’s Bottom Dog Press and anthologized by scholars and poets such as Tom Wayman, Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles, and Janet Zandy. In his article “Work Poetry and Working-Class Poetry,” worker-poet Jim Daniels valorizes such anthologists as “heroes” whose “anthologies are more likely to be used in working-class literature courses” as they “have a longer shelf life than any journal” (Russo and Linkon, 115).

One such collection, *Working Classics: Poems on Industrial Life* (1990), edited by Peter Oresick and Nicholas Coles, focuses primarily on factories, mills, mines, and other industrial work. Many of the poems focus on work itself and can thus be considered “work poems.” However, the anthology also contains poems that are set outside of the factory and deal with themes such as retirement, unemployment, and strikes—“working-class poems” nonetheless. In many of these poems, work still looms large. For example, Jim Daniels’s “After Work” shows that even

when the work is done, in his case, at an auto factory, the job is still  
there affecting the interior life of the worker.

On this night of blue moon and damp grass  
I lie bare-backed on the ground  
and hum a children's song.  
The air is cool for this, the midnight of July.  
The grass pins my sticky back.

You, moon, I bet you could  
fill my cheeks with wet snow  
make me forget I ever touched steel  
make me forget even  
that you  
look like a headlight  
moving toward me.

(47)

Similarly, my poem "Vacation" isn't set at work, yet work hovers in the  
background of the poem as a briefly escaped from thing. The vacation is  
only a short moment, a minute's worth of heart beats, a cigarette's worth  
of "shared silence" in which "things are good."

72 beats  
of shared silence  
the orange glow  
of cigarettes in the dark.

I sit at the table,  
watch you move  
across the room—  
your naked body pale blue  
in the streetlight  
that shines through  
the motel window.

The feeling can't  
last—never does  
but, right now,  
things are good.

In “Vacation” the feeling of calm, of freedom “...can’t/last—never does” with the looming return to work and the monotony it brings. In Daniels’s poem, the work intrudes even “After Work,” when the moon appears both as a symbol of hope in forgetting all about the job and a “headlight” that is a reminder of the auto plant that awaits return tomorrow.

But work isn’t always the focus of working-class poetry.

Additionally, many working-class poets revisit the stories of their parents and grandparents in episodes both inside and outside the confines of work. Simon J. Ortiz, for example reflects on a moment shared with his father, a stonemason who spent much of his life working for the Santa Fe railroad. In “My Father’s Song,” collected in Coles and Zandy’s *American Working-Class Literature* (2007), Ortiz recalls finding a nest of mice while on a walk with his father.

Wanting to say things,  
I miss my father tonight.  
His voice, the slight catch,  
the depth from his thin chest,  
the tremble of emotion  
in something he has just said  
to his son, his song:

We planted corn one spring in Acu—  
we planted several times  
but this one particular time  
I remember the soft damp sand  
in my hand.

My father had stopped at one point  
to show me an overturned furrow;  
the plowshare had unearthed  
the burrow of a nest of a mouse  
in the soft moist sand.

Very gently, he scooped tiny pink animals  
into the palm of his hand  
and told me to touch them.  
We took them to the edge  
of the field and put them in the shade  
of a sand moist clod.

I remember the very softness  
of cool and warm sand and tiny alive mice  
and my father saying things.

(707)

That shared and fragile moment is similarly echoed, though by a father,  
not a son, in my poem "Archivists." The poem is also about a shared walk  
and found objects and serves as testimony to the fear and anxiety that  
comes from economic uncertainty.

We walk the tracks  
behind our little house  
to see if the train is there.  
It rarely is,  
but the concrete and  
green-grass sidewalks  
are the point.

We walk along the rails  
four blocks  
so my boy can stop  
to look at leaves  
or bits of trash.

*I gotta check this*, he says,  
picks up bright candy wrappers,  
spiky balls from sweet gum trees,  
and admires the different colors of glass  
of smashed bottles.  
He picks up pebbles from between  
the splintered railroad ties.

*Gotta fix it*, he says,  
prying the stones loose  
from splinters  
or tar

with his two-year-old fingers.

He tells me about the *evergreens*,  
awestruck and grinning—  
*See, Dad, see?*

I am happy  
because of  
his *new, new, new*,  
for that moment  
it takes me away  
from the old, old, old.

The water.

The phone.

The rent.

The groceries.

This life.

He says, *You're not old, you silly daddy.*  
And we stop to see the trash.  
He is happy,  
looking over this  
sad museum.

I have never loved as fearfully as this.

Although there are obvious differences in the poems, the theme of a shared father and son experience and the need for “saying things” runs throughout each poem, making them kindred spirits of sorts.

Another theme that is recurrent and crucial in all of these poems is the need to witness and form a narrative, or as Janet Zandy says of the working-class women writers in her collection *Calling Home* (1990), they are “saying: I am, they were, we can be” (10). This is exactly why I have

written this collection of poems, to testify, to remember, to claim a stake that says “this is how we live” in plain, clear, concise language. The very writing of these poems is a way of reclaiming personhood in a class that frequently has its individuality, choices, economic and otherwise, and identity stripped away by those in power.

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A Midwestern Daydream

At recess  
I used to lay  
on the grass  
watch the cars zoom by  
on the two-lane highway  
in front of my school.

When east and west cars  
would meet,  
I'd close my eyes  
imagine  
silent explosion.

Sometimes I'd open my eyes  
just in time to close them again  
another crash.

Most times  
there was only corn  
swaying in the fields.

Pink Cloud

driving  
with the windows down  
I feel the world  
flame and swell  
inside me  
with the smell of night and grass.

the wind could rip the ribs  
from my chest,  
and I'd keep singing.

I know my heart  
won't beat forever,  
but it feels like it might.

Ginger Ale

The soda at my grandma's was always flat.  
Two-liter bottles tucked away in her fridge  
beside a gallon of milk, some butter, eggs,  
lots of plastic tubs and label-less tin cans with bacon grease.

She saved, reused everything,  
grew up during the First World War,  
raised children during the Great Depression,  
then more throughout World War II,  
Korea, Vietnam—raised my father  
during Beatlemania and the British Invasion.

Twelve children all together, and lost one early,  
a three-year old, Nola, who died of pneumonia.

One day, my daughter  
got into the fridge to get her own drink  
and put the ginger ale back with the cap loose.  
When I poured a glass after work,  
there was no fizz, and I almost cried.  
It took me over twenty years to realize  
that tough old woman had lacked the strength  
to screw the soda cap on tight.

My Favorite Neighbor

Jeff's adopted father, mother, brother  
were all charged with sexually abusing children.

He did some time as well  
when he was young.  
Battery, assault, burglary, drugs,  
and statutory rape.

He built his boys a go-cart track  
in their backyard, takes them  
to wrestling and football practice  
dotes on his adorable dark-skinned daughter.

His boys mow without complaining.  
They offer to help me as well,  
if they see me working ,  
looking frustrated and  
hear me cursing.

Jeff comes over sometimes  
to catch me a buzz,  
barrow a roll of toilet paper,  
or a cigarette.

When we were out of town,  
we asked Jeff to keep  
an eye on our home.  
When neighbor kids  
threw our lawn chairs  
over our fence  
and pulled shingles off our shed,  
Jeff got after them and put our things back.

His oldest boy and our daughter are both 11.  
One Sunday his boy came over,  
wanting to wish her a happy Easter  
and meet us formally.  
She wasn't home,  
but he did impress us.

Migrating

My friends Bobby and Chelsea  
moved to Louisiana,  
and I didn't see them  
before they left,  
didn't stop,  
didn't say, *Good luck*, or  
*Hope things are better*  
*for you down on the bayou.*

They split from the Mid-West  
because  
it's dying here.  
No good jobs.  
Shit customer-service work  
or non-union factory jobs  
through a temp-service  
middle-man that takes a chunk of  
what little pay you get  
of minimum wage.  
Unless you work 10 plus hours  
of overtime a week, you aren't going to make it.  
Mom and pop places  
gray, opaque ghosts of uptown past during the day,  
and six bars with neon lights at night.  
Two weeks ago a bartender got shot in the face at 7 PM  
on a Monday night.  
The guy got less than thirty dollars.

You can't afford a wife, let alone kids.  
With frequent layoffs, little pay,  
and no time to love,  
dead towns are no place to make a life.  
Especially when you have a  
felony battery charge  
to explain during interviews,  
like Bobby.

Chelsea worked at a gas station,

Bobby at a big box pet store  
then 3<sup>rd</sup> shift at a factory  
making garage doors.  
Then he got laid off.  
Right before Thanksgiving,

The money they made selling weed wasn't enough  
to pay the bills, even with Chelsea working full-time.

They called the other day from the Big Easy,  
wanted to know how I was—  
“The same as ever” I said,  
“broke but hoping  
things will look up—  
maybe we can bail too.”

Chelsea laughed, asked where  
I plan to go.  
“Anywhere there's work,  
so long as it's not here—  
no Mid-Western winters,  
the older I get, the more  
I hate this shithole.”  
And I cackled like  
a stupid blackbird.

October 21

Facebook reminded me  
that today is your birthday,  
you crazy, long-legged girl.  
It shook me more than when I heard  
you were working at the carnival,  
or that you made Kevin  
leave you in West Virginia  
so you could hitchhike  
back to Illinois  
when you felt like  
coming home.  
It even jolted me more  
than learning you had  
jumped off that chair,  
your little girl  
in the other room,  
you,  
dangling from the rope  
you had wrapped around  
your neck.

Scottie Mostly Smiles

Scottie mostly smiles,  
nods out when he can,  
hibernates for days  
when he runs out  
of little brown pills.  
He has kind brown eyes  
but hides under the covers  
when there is no more,  
becomes a sweating, sad, twitching,  
inhuman mess  
that knows only pain or  
not pain.

He'll sell you some,  
if you're a friend  
who won't judge him,  
who will share some pills,  
smoke him up  
some "Lupé Mencia,"  
as he calls it.  
He'll laugh and tell jokes between nods,  
eventually passing a joint to someone  
who knows what he knows—  
the fight is fixed,  
but there's no fixing the fight.

So be kind if you see him,  
hobbling on his cane,  
walking through the grocery store  
slowly looking at the breads,  
the milk, the eggs.

Smile at him  
out of pity,  
out of gratefulness  
out of anything at all—  
and because he would help you,  
if he could.



Summer Delivery

Outside the rotting trailer,  
a little girl  
plays  
dirty-faced  
with a broken bicycle.

An old car  
rattles with the “BOOM, BOOM”  
of too much bass—  
I keep walking.

A woman answers the door  
hollering, “Get back, get back,”  
to children and dogs,  
her white sweatshirt  
stained orange in spots,  
Snoopy on the front  
“Joe Christmas”  
across the bottom.

She hands me money  
for the pizza  
plus a dollar.  
Her hands are  
crocodiles.  
The cigarette in her mouth  
burns filter,  
as she mumbles,  
“thanks,”  
Without looking at me.

As I get into my car,  
the little girl  
smiles big  
and waves big,  
runs up to the door  
her mother has already  
closed.

Woodlawn

The houses are small and old,  
under-sized lots too close to one another.  
Front yards tiny and green with grass that needs cut.  
Usually, each yard has one or two big trees,  
an oak or a maple.  
My yard only has a stump.

Lately I've done some exploring.  
Riding my bike through the neighborhood,  
I can smell the inside of people's homes  
on the breeze from the street.

On morning rides it's sausage and eggs.  
Sometimes scented candles and potpourri.  
Other times clean laundry hovers in the air.

And I can hear everything too.

People yelling. A lot.  
Babies crying.  
TVs blaring.  
Classic rock from radios.  
Dogs barking.  
My neighbors.

I've seen a mom sitting on a wooden dining chair  
in the middle of her little yard  
sucking down a cigarette,  
one eye on her toddler playing in the soft grass.

The baby's right leg in a plaster cast.

I saw an obese man parked on his power chair  
tinkering with scattered skeletons  
of a thousand rusty bicycles.  
Some balanced upside-down on the seat and handlebars.  
Some with cracked, flat tires leaning on kickstands.  
Some on their sides, reminding me of dead horses from the Civil War.

The other day, I rode past a teenager  
dragging a 10 year-old through the yard,  
headed toward their backdoor.  
The younger boy was empty-faced,  
eyes not focused, mouth slack,

his arms limp.  
The older boy laughed and said,  
“Get up, you stupid drunk-ass!”  
It was 8:30 in the morning,  
and the sun was shining from a clear, blue sky.

It was Mother’s Day.

I felt I should tell someone,  
but didn’t call the cops,  
didn’t call social services,  
didn’t call anyone.

It seemed too hopeless, like calling an ambulance  
to a corpse.

That’s how this whole neighborhood feels.  
Like it’s all a bit too late.

But when I’m away,  
I miss it.

Newlyweds

At our first job after marriage,  
as phone book reps selling yellow page ads  
and free white page renewals,  
Jody and I being newlyweds  
held hands at break,  
waiting to buy chips or pop tarts  
from vending machines.  
This made someone uncomfortable,  
and they snitched.

We got a lecture about it  
on a bright spring day.  
A pinched up old bat  
gave us a talking to  
that made my guts churn.  
She was rotten.  
A brown banana  
shriveling with anger.

All morning I fussed in my chair,  
fidgety, pissy.  
By ten o' clock I couldn't take it.  
I got up, without permission.  
Left my seat, without permission.  
Walked over to my wife, without permission.  
Took her by the hand, without permission.  
And walked straight out of the building  
into the brightness of that first sunny day.

Vacation

72 beats  
of shared silence  
the orange glow  
of cigarettes in the dark.

I sit at the table,  
watch you move  
across the room—  
your naked body pale blue  
in the streetlight  
that shines through  
the motel window.

The feeling can't  
last—never does  
but, right now,  
things are good.

Disarmed

Sitting at Gill's diner with my wife and little boy  
I hear a table of old farmers  
talking politics.

The red-faced men  
talk and laugh  
over coffee,  
and one says

"Somebody ought'a just shoot that nigger."

Another nods and grins

"I'd do it myself if I was out that way.

Be worth goin' to jail for."

They all laugh.

"How's come he ain't

been made to show his birth certificate?"

asks one old man.

Furrowing his brow, he adds

"An' if he's so smart,

how's come they won't release his IQ papers?"

For a moment

I get hung up on *IQ papers* and *they*,

but then a deep red, weathered, old man snorts,

"You know he wasn't even a real professor?

He was just a speaker, a talker's all he was."

My boy spills his lemonade,

happily pats the mess as the table of men turns,

"Are you being ornery?" one asks.

"Nah, he's too cute to be very ornery," answers another.

"You ain't ornery, are you," adds a laughing, chubby man

with wisps of white

at the edges of his

spotless, red, dome, then, covering his mouth with his hand,

leaning to the man next to him,

mocks a secret out loud, "And would you look at that curly head of hair!"

Then to me, "How old is he? Two?"

"One and a half," I say,

and catch myself smiling.

Archivists

We walk the tracks  
behind our little house  
to see if the train is there.  
It rarely is,  
but the concrete and  
green-grass sidewalks  
are the point.

We walk along the rails  
four blocks  
so my boy can stop  
to look at leaves  
or bits of trash.

*I gotta check this*, he says,  
picks up bright candy wrappers,  
spiky balls from sweet gum trees,  
and admires the different colors of glass  
of smashed bottles.  
He picks up pebbles from between  
the splintered railroad ties.

*Gotta fix it*, he says,  
prying the stones loose  
from splinters  
or tar  
with his two-year-old fingers.

He tells me about the *evergreens*,  
awestruck and grinning—  
*See, Dad, see?*

I am happy  
because of  
his *new, new, new*,  
for that moment  
it takes me away  
from the old, old, old.

The water.

The phone.

The rent.

The groceries.

This life.

He says, *You're not old, you silly daddy.*

And we stop to see the trash.

He is happy,  
looking over this  
sad museum.

I have never loved as fearfully as this.



A Small Victory

I worked part of a winter  
outside in a junkyard  
cutting up trashed wires,  
sawing broken ladders,  
drilling holes  
in coolers.

My supervisor  
was too old  
to really work,  
but not too old  
to walk around  
in the snow  
and scrap  
giving me shit  
all day,  
every day.

“What the fuck  
are you doing  
with those pliers?”

“Do you even know  
what welding cable  
looks like?”

“Who told you  
you could take  
a piss break?”

All the time  
drinking coffee,  
doing absolutely  
no real work.

One morning,  
I'm cutting  
wire on a pallet,  
the shriveled old bastard  
hobbles up to me  
says, “Hey boy,  
careful with that,  
it's liable to fly up  
and smack your cocksucker.”

Laughs.

“Nah,” I say,  
“I don’t think  
you’re standing  
close enough.”

Sore loser—  
sacked me at lunch.

LINK Card Blues

The middle-aged gas station manager  
was always friendly with me,  
asking me how school was going,  
asking about my kids,  
making small talk as she rang me up.

But the moment I pulled out  
our LINK card to buy  
candy and pop  
for our kids,  
a Red Bull  
for my own worn-out self—  
she made  
an ugly  
pinched-up face,  
stopped talking  
except to give my total  
and say  
“PIN.”

Then she adjusted her glasses,  
looked at my balance on the receipt  
to see how many of her tax dollars  
I'd glommed onto.

I still said, “Thanks.  
Have a good one,”  
even smiled, though I could not  
possibly have meant it less.

St. Vincent De Paul

Every first and third Saturday  
Immaculate Conception Church  
takes requests for aid  
to help the poor keep their  
power on, or avoid eviction.

After a week without electricity,  
I plead my case  
to the St. Vincent De Paul Society,  
along with thirty  
other people congregated  
in the church basement.

As I waited for my turn,  
one of the committee members,  
an old, lean woman  
lectured a single parent  
there with her two kids.  
The kids, doing kid things,  
asked questions, looked around,  
squirmed in their seats,  
and the old woman said to the mother,  
“You have to keep those kids quiet  
and seated, or you’ll have to leave.”  
The mom answered,  
“I thought this was a church  
and that kids are welcome.  
If I had known it would be like this,  
I’d have found a sitter.”

When it was my turn,  
I too got paired  
with that sinewy old woman.  
She asked what I needed,  
then in the middle of my explanation  
she motioned me to be still.  
So I made eye contact  
with a woman with sympathetic eyes  
who listened to me,  
told me they could help,  
and gave me a voucher.

I called Ameren a few days later,  
only to find St. Vincent De Paul

had not pledged their donation.

I drove to the parish  
to ask when the money would be  
added to our account  
and rang the buzzer.  
A priest answered the door,  
a little Yorkie playing near his feet.  
“Yes?” he said, clearly annoyed  
and scowling  
as I explained.  
I asked if I could leave my number,  
and he sighed,  
reluctantly writing it down.

The next morning  
a committee member called  
saying that St. Vincent De Paul  
would not be helping us with our bill.  
I made my case again. He said,  
“Well, you’ll just have to wait two weeks  
and come back to the basement.  
Maybe we can help you then.”

Two more weeks without power.  
I went through my spiel again.  
Then he asked,  
“Are you a trustworthy person?”  
I resisted an urge, and answered,  
yes, that I was a student  
with no criminal record.  
He huffed and puffed,  
then said, “Listen—  
I’m giving you my cell number.  
Call to make arrangements  
between 1pm and 4pm.”  
Then with emphasis,  
“You have to promise  
to lose this number,  
I mean destroy it  
when this is over.  
Do you think you can do that?”  
I reassured him  
and wondered the rest of the day  
about St. Vincent  
and his kindness to the poor.

Divorce

I filed for divorce today.  
Basic DOB and so on,  
talking to the wild-haired, old lawyer  
in his modest office on the town square.

I will remember the foggy ache of remorse, the disbelief  
of it all ending.

But mostly I will remember  
returning to our empty home  
and getting lost looking out the kitchen window—  
at the brown and brittle apple tree leaves,  
shivering like junkies in October.

Seedless Grapes

An orange beanbag in the basement  
Benny Hill chasing bikini-clad women in fast motion  
eating oysters on saltines  
the smell of pipe tobacco, but only in the winter  
black dominoes with neon dots  
wind through trees hissing like the ocean, or  
T.V. static  
outgassing plastics—that new car smell  
the sour pop of a seedless grape  
my father's workshop—  
wood, nails, a vise  
yellow shotgun shells with golden tips  
a Christmas tree with blinking lights.

These things cling to me.  
They tangle and swirl.