Woodlawn: A Collection of Working Class Poems

Anthony Travis Shoot

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Date
Woodlawn: A Collection of Working Class Poems

BY

Anthony Travis Shoot

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE
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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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.

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
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.

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.
Works Cited


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 3rd 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 "Lupe 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,
fdgety, 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 1 pm and 4 pm."
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.