

Hard Labor



Poems by Don Winter & Fred Voss

Hard Labor

Don Winter

Fred Voss

Hard Labor

Copyright © 2016 by Working Stiff Press

Contact Dan Sheridan at dansheridanwsp@yahoo.com.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the authors.

Printed in U.S.A. by Working Stiff Press.

Acknowledgements (Don Winter)

5 AM, New York Quarterly, Slipstream, Nerve Cowboy, Southern Poetry Review, Passages North, Pearl, Plainsongs, Chiron Review

Acknowledgements (Fred Voss)

Mistress Quickly's Bed (U.K.), Cultural Weekly, Nerve Cowboy, Blue Collar Review, Dwang (U.K.)

Cover photo by David Thompson

Contents

Introduction.....	4
Poems by Don Winter--Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef.....	6
Working Late.....	7
The Dream Home	8
Things About to Disappear	9
Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef.....	10
Roofing.....	11
The Tacoma Tavern	12
Buffing.....	13
The Cashier at Hinky Dinky's Discovers Jesus	14
Cultural Exchange	15
Breaking Down	16
Saturday Night Desperate.....	17
At the Tavern.....	18
At Taylor's Pawn.....	19
Raw	20
Lonesome Town	21
The Grill Cook's Dream	22
Eugene's Drive to Work	23
Dressing Burgers at Wanda's Grill.....	24
Going On	25
Marcella's Fantasy House	26
Poems by Fred Voss—STEEL-TOED SOUL.....	28
STEEL-TOED SOUL	29
STEEL COMMUNION	30
STUDYING THE HISTORY IN A STEELCUTTER'S EYE	31
TIMECLOCK SUPERMEN	33
EINSTEIN STICKS OUT HIS TONGUE	35

ROSES MADE OF HOPE37

WHAT IS A HAMMER COMPARED TO THE HEART OF A BROTHER?.....38

I NEEDED A POEM TO LEAP INTO MY BRAIN AND BRING ME A
WOMAN.....39

SOLIDARITY IN HARD TIMES.....40

5-MINUTE TOUGH GUYS.....42

PHOTOGRAPHING MANHOLE COVERS WHILE MURDERING EACH
OTHER44

STICKING OUR HEADS INSIDE THE LION'S JAWS45

BLOWING THE LID OFF THE FACTORY47

HANGING ONTO OUR SELVES48

MILES DAVIS POINTS HIS TRUMPET TOWARD THE SUN50

TRUMPET SOLO FOR TOMORROW51

NEW LIVES ON THE PAGE52

CONCRETE BATTLEFIELD.....54

WEDDING RINGS AND TOMBSTONES56

POEM FOR 900 LIONS57

Introduction

Our Poet Laureate

You begin to see that his poems
aren't fancy. That they aren't long, twisted.
But they speak for those
less capable with words.
Lived labor poems, excluded
from the academic canon.
Because we know, don't we,
that in that canon
"working class" is all costume
& no content.
You begin to see that his poems
recover history
unrecorded & unrecognized
in that canon's middle class
version of life.
You begin to see, don't you,
that our poet laureate
isn't Collins, Kooser, or even Levine,
no matter how much organized
applause they receive.
Our poet laureate is Fred Voss.

Don Winter
July 2016

Verily, poor as we are in democracy how can we give it to the world? A democracy conceived in the military servitude of the masses, in their economic enslavement, and nurtured in their tears and blood, is not democracy at all. It is despotism—a cumulative result of a chain of abuses which, according to that dangerous document, the Declaration of Independence, the people have the right to overthrow.—Emma Goldman

I
Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef

Working Late

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

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

The Dream Home

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

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

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

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

Things About to Disappear

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

Cleaning Up at the Hamtramck Burger Chef

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

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

that is. But most nights the boss
looks right through me. His wife cleans
the salad bar, and yells
at the bits of mustard and dressing.
As if they were to blame
for all this. Most nights I turn up
the radio and sing my own words.
Something about being in this business to stay
alive. Something like that.

Roofing

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

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

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

The Tacoma Tavern

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

Buffing

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

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

Someday right soon, she said,
there's just gonna be
a lil' piece of your ass left.
She was drunk as a hoot owl.
Pabst on tap.
*Your mouth's runnin'
like a whippoorwill's ass
in chokecherry season.*
I picked a cue
and leaned. The eight ball wobbled
like a thrown wheel
and scratched.

The Cashier at Hinky Dinky's Discovers Jesus

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

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 stiff's
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."

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.

Saturday Night Desperate

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

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

At the Tavern

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

At Taylor's Pawn

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

Raw

Playing hooky again,
we carry eggs across French fries
& broken glass frozen on the pavement.
We count three & fire:
one falls short,
three smack the fat chef's face
on the roof.
We tear for the truck.
Mark turns doughnuts, I hang out
the window, hit a guy
wearing a football uniform,
splatter the handicap sign.
We feel tough
as older brothers
learning to say fuck you to authority.
The manager pounds out
after us, punching air
& screaming, but he snaps back
when my egg hits his chest.
Mark fishtails the street.
“One fuck of an arm,
fuck of an arm,”
he spits, turns up the unhinged
music. Pretty soon, someone will kick
our asses for doing shit like this.
I stick my head out
the window again, raw
air rushing into
my eyes and mouth.

Lonesome Town

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

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

The Grill Cook's Dream

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

Eugene's Drive to Work

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

Dressing Burgers at Wanda's Grill

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

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

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

Going On

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

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

of your son singing under the brick arch
of the home you lost,
his voice griefless, the sky endless
blue without credit cards
or betrayal. You tell the woman you have to
be up at 5 for work.
You stand in the frozen rutted mud
of the parking lot, close your eyes.
2 A.M. The birds are chirping.
Already? You think.

Marcella's Fantasy House

Nights at this place
he drank beer after beer.
His gut rolled
like a melon on the felt.
He said he could beat any of us
and mostly he was right. He played us
for quarters so he could feed
his thing for Hank and Willie
on the one juke box.

Paydays he wanted his winnings
in shots, so he could get drunk enough
to visit this redhead dancer
at the stage. He put nearly all
his pay between her breasts, then he kissed
the bruised air, because he knew,
like we did, that was all of her

he was going to have. Then he sat
by himself on a stool
and punched the air, a round against
the guy who stole
his old lady in Tuscaloosa, one against
the foreman we hated at the plant.
Against the no new love
and the no new luck
and every night nothing
he hadn't seen before.

II
STEEL-TOED SOUL

STEEL-TOED SOUL

When I was 12 I wore brown wing-tip shoes
to church
where they said Jesus rose again from the dead
now I wear steel-toed boots
to work in a machine shop where heaven
is a quit-work whistle sending us machinists out the door with paychecks
to be born again under a blue sky
once my 12-year-old neck chafed in summer heat under a starched white collar
as I knelt before the altar and sipped
the blood of Christ in burgundy wine and tasted
his body wafer-thin on my tongue
now
blood flows from my fingers sliced by razor-sharp cutters as I sweat
in torn T-shirt slicing steel into parts so the boss doesn't send me to the street
where I could starve
a bird on a telephone wire
outside the tin door of the factory sings to my 63-year-old soul when once
I held a hymnal as my first beard sprouted on my chin and I sang
about the blessings of God
college
and my clean hands on a scalpel or a law book
or around a university lectern and all the success in the world
lay ahead for me
now I lace up my steel-toed boots
and grip a tool steel wrench in my dirty fist
and think of those brown wing-tip shoes I once wore when Jesus rose
from the dead each Easter
and go on
carving my living out of cutting steel real
as this hard hard world
and finding what blessings I can
in these poems.

STEEL COMMUNION

When I was 12 years old I put on my white shirt
each Sunday
and went to church and felt the body and blood of Christ in white wafer and red wine
on my tongue
now
at 63
I feel the skin of grimy steel blocks in my hands turning my fingerprints
black
as I drop the steel blocks into a vise and cut them on my milling machine
when I was 12 I was told all men were my brothers
in Christ
now
I look across this factory floor past rolling vertical gantry mill slick with oil
and 2-ton drop hammer I hear once crushed a man's skull and see
Ruben from a holy mountain in Guatemala
on his tube bending machine bending steel
the same steel dust on our skin
the same drops of sweat glistening on our backs
and necks
as the time clock ticks
the same muscles
tightening in our fingers and arms and shoulders as we lift
steel
in our ragged torn T-shirts that will never see the inside
of a church
our church
in our hearts
our communion
in our smiles
as we buff and polish the steel we've cut and bent
we do not need to put on a white shirt and kneel before an altar
to feel holy
we do not need to pretend wafer and wine
are body and blood
we have the blood flowing in our veins
and pouring from our cut fingers
the muscles
rippling on our backs
the brotherhood
in our hearts real
as shiny steel.

STUDYING THE HISTORY IN A STEELCUTTER'S EYE

I could have gotten a degree in paleontology
and searched for dinosaur bones in the Gobi Desert
but instead I have searched the eyes of men who make the wheels of cars
we ride
carts we push
wheelchairs we roll toward our last sunsets
I could have put my hands around a university lectern and taught
Chaucer
or The Critique of Pure Reason
but instead I put my hands on valve handles and mixed
the oxygen and gas in a roaring blue cutting torch flame
and cut red-hot bars of steel into the bulldozer teeth
that move mountains
I could have stood at that university lectern with my Ph.D. in English literature and wept
with Ophelia
gone mad like King Lear naked in the rain daring the lightning to strike him
but instead I've watched men run machines for 30 or 40 years
until it seems
as they sit steadfast on their steel stools and their machine spindles turn their profiles
should be carved
into the San Gabriel Mountains rising over this L.A. basin
I could have ridden
a boxcar across the country like I dreamed after I'd dropped out of U.C.L.A.
English graduate school or died
the night my mattress burned up
beneath me
instead I went on
shoving I-ton bars of steel into white-hot blast furnaces to learn
how much soul steelcutters with 8th-grade educations can have
in their eyes
I could have put on a \$2,000 suit and argued cases
in court
or guided a scalpel
into a human heart
instead I learned how a man can turn a wrench
or swing a hammer or square a shiny oxygen valve
for an old man's
last breaths
with as much grace and nobility and art
as Arturo Toscanini
lifting his baton to conduct
Beethoven

instead I lifted this pen for these men
men who will never shape history
but know everything there is to know in this world
about shaping
steel.

TIMECLOCK SUPERMEN

We once
thought we could be The Lone Ranger saving
people's lives and leaving silver bullets as we rode away
heroic with our masks on when we were 4
now we stand at machines
trying to get through another 10-hour day
heroic
if we can keep our chests stuck out like we will never crack
even though we are boring out our 10,000th identical jackhammer casing
and want to scream
we know now at age 59 or 65 we will never be anything but machinists
never leap a tall building in a single bound
shout a #1 punk rock song into a television hit parade microphone
or invent a new kind of wrench
and retire to live the life of a playboy in a dream house on a Hawaiian beach
we are a number
on a time card
a face
interchangeable with millions of others heading down a freeway toward some job
a fist
on a machine handle a heart
beating its 3 billionth beat we are no longer the center of the universe
shouting with joy blowing out a candle at our 1st birthday party but aging machinists
digging
our steel-toed shoes into a concrete floor
in front of an engine lathe or vertical mill straining with everything we have inside us to
make it
through another day
our heroic act
holding a grandson to our chest like he will never have to want for love in this world
our mark
on history going on
setting feeds and speeds and calibrated dials to make the wheels on streetcars
and the rods in car engines
shine
our Lindbergh crossing of the Atlantic
our Babe Ruth trot around the bases
our shot
heard round the world
just making it through that tin door one more day
tying on the leather apron

straightening our backs like no one on earth ever stood taller
sticking out our chins
and smiling one more time like there will never be anything more special and irreplaceable
than a man
doing his best.

EINSTEIN STICKS OUT HIS TONGUE

A poem should be understood by a man
wrestling a roaring shaking jackhammer in his fists
a poem should turn like an axle
cut like a drill
be warm as the first ray of sun falling through a machine shop window onto the arm
of an engine lathe operator after a storm
sit on a table like the jaw
of a T-Rex
leap
into the air and wiggle like the marlin hanging above the sea and pointing its sword
toward the sun
a poem should sit in the palm of the hand like a flower
shine in the eyes and swing with the stride of any man or woman walking down any street
in the world
a poem should be clear
as the hooting of the owl during the total eclipse of the sun
common
as heartbeat necessary
as gravity a poem should roll
like a locomotive squirm
like Houdini the moment before the straightjacket falls
from his back a poem
is a can opener
a stick of dynamite
Van Gogh's paintbrush dipped in yellow oil
it should gleam
like the sweat on the back of the man with his fists on the rake stirring the red-hot
molten steel in the foundry flow
like the blood of the soldier dodging machine gun bullets to keep us
free explode
like Krakatoa hang
in the air like Nureyev stick out its tongue
like Einstein laugh
like the world's greatest pool hustler sinking a shot even he
thought impossible get
up off the canvas just before the referee counts 10 and put up its gloves
and throw another punch a poem
cannot be held in a musty book or captured in a university classroom a poem
is Chaplin's cane Dempsey's fist Cleopatra's naked back it crawls with the snail roars
like the lion grows like the grass waits all-knowing like the dust on the windowsill falls
like the tear from the eye of the bride as she kisses the groom who's just been given a new
heart
by the doctor a poem

does not keep its hands clean a poem
is a steel cutter shoving a filthy 1-ton bar of 4130 steel into the mouth
of a white-hot blast furnace and laughing
because he's still alive.

ROSES MADE OF HOPE

Their happiness blooms like roses
the laugh lines
around Luis's old eyes stretch as he grins
and dances around his machine
his home was the base of a sacred mountain in El Salvador until he fled
death squads
now he sleeps in his van in a parking lot outside
a hardware store
and sends money home to his mother
whistles mariachi songs
as his machine roaring like a locomotive swallows steel round bar and spits out
screws
while Hugo
sticks out his chest and drags steel pans full of 100 pounds of steel collars
200 feet across the concrete floor of this downtown L.A. machine shop working overtime
but not getting paid overtime rate because he has no
papers
he rode the top of a boxcar out of Guatemala
into America
sends money home to mother and sisters living beside a sacred river
he lives somewhere in a room in downtown L.A.
with 6 others
sticks out his chest and drags those pans full of steel collars he's cut
across the potholed floor grinning as he sucks in the sour machine shop air like it is the
air
of pure freedom
men from Russia Nicaragua China Chile rubbing
shoulders laughing
as the time clock ticks away their lives because nothing can kill
their spirit
men who can barely speak English
men thousands of miles from home
men who sit in gravel parking lots at lunch and pull out guitars and play
1,000-year-old songs
or burn incense beneath Buddhas atop their rollaway toolboxes
or tell stories of friends dragged by the KGB out of 3 am beds
to torture cells
then put their arms around each other and proudly speak of brotherhood
and smile
in this land that grows
hope.

WHAT IS A HAMMER COMPARED TO THE HEART OF A BROTHER?

The white machinists lock up their tools
in their toolboxes each night
they etch their names with electric etching guns into their wrenches and calipers
and micrometers and hammers and protractors and lock them away
in their toolboxes each night with latches
and sometimes big heavy padlocks
and even chains
counting drills and chuck keys and cutting taps with an eye always peeled
for thieves
they believe in jail cells electric chairs hellfire
loan nothing
and paste big stickers saying "NO!" to the insides of their toolbox lids
as the Mexican machinists hand each other their tools
with big smiles on their faces
leave their toolbox drawers open and never lock their toolboxes and sing
old socialist songs from the revolution south of the border
old mariachi love songs
their grandparents sing in old East L.A. houses where 4 generations of their family
live together
sharing
everything
what is a wrench compared to the faith they have they will take care
of each other
what is a hammer compared to the heart
of a brother
what is a toolbox full of tools for
the seas
the moon
the rain that makes this earth green if not
us all
as rice is thrown at weddings and children kneel at great grand parents'
deathbeds
and crucifixes shine in the palms of old Mexican ladies ready
for heaven
as Emiliano Zapata's eyes burn
and Che Guevara camps in the hills
and the white machinists grow bitter
clutching their tools as their billionaires lock billions away
in bank vaults and the polar ice caps
melt and the land
they took from the Mexicans burns
in global warming drought
and the Mexicans smile handing each other their tools
and their hearts.

I NEEDED A POEM TO LEAP INTO MY BRAIN AND BRING ME A WOMAN

Nothing is lonelier than working in a factory Saturday night
with no woman
why
do gears turn cutting oils squirt the teeth of saws chew
if not for woman
why do we close micrometer anvil and barrel around block of steel
and measure thickness to one ten thousandth of an inch perfection if not for the beauty
of a woman's eyes
the warmth
of her breasts and arms pressed against us
and I hadn't had a woman in 8 years and the trains
brought the I-ton steel bars
every Saturday night so the rolling overhead crane man could roll them
to my blast furnace so I could hug them and shove them
toward roaring flame but why
do the panthers leap the fiddlers fiddle the fishermen pull fish
from the deep blue sea why
do hammers ring out forklifts lift cutting torches sizzle
shooting blue flame carving red-hot steel into bulldozer teeth that will move
mountains
if not for the curve of the lips
of a woman
and what is lonelier than smokestacks above you belching the orange and blue flames
of molten steel out of a tin roof Saturday night when you haven't had
a woman in 8 years
why do train wheels roll
saxophones point toward the stars butterflies
flap blue wings tightrope walkers teeter rivers
carve canyons shoeshine men crouch over leather last chance dreamers bet it all
and roll the dice
why are we out here on a shop floor Saturday night with hard hats on and backs sweaty
when others
float in Venice gondolas or lean out over Rio de Janeiro cruise ship rails and kiss women
in moonlight
why are wrenches gripped engines gunned battleships launched
pool balls sunk dinosaur bones dug up telescopes focused
if not so a woman can take a man into her arms and show him why
the sun still rises?

SOLIDARITY IN HARD TIMES

One Sunday morning when Frank and Jane are having tea and Frank is feeling especially noble recalling his days in the steel mill he says,

“I used to shove 30 tons of steel a week
into the mouth of a white-hot blast furnace. . . .”

waiting for Jane to nod in awe

and sympathy but Jane recalling her days in the go-go bars says,

“I used to carry 4 pitchers of beer in each hand
all night serving the drunks. . . .”

“The 2-ton drop hammers used to smash down on the concrete floor so hard
it quaked like an earthquake and I could barely walk and my stomach rose
and my heart leaped --”

Frank goes on

waiting for Jane to realize the immense ordeal he has endured and survived

but Jane says, “My legs were so tired after serving beer and go-go dancing
for 10 hours with no break

I had to crawl up the stairs to my bedroom at the end of the night. . . .”

Frank grips his teacup as hard as a sledgehammer and sticks out his jaw and says,

“The drills and the air compressors and the furnaces and the drop hammers
were so loud men who worked that steel mill 20 years shook constantly
in their fingers and jaws. . . .”

but Jane fires back,

“Those rock bands were so loud I couldn’t hear for an hour
after I left work.”

Frank is about to slam his teacup down when he stops

and realizes

Jane’s bosses screamed at her just as much as his bosses ever screamed
at him

he realizes

he’s been stared at by drugged-out knife-carrying biker machinists

but Jane had drunken crazy men leer and flirt with her bikini fringe
for years

he can’t win

and Frank gives up and moves over in bed

and snuggles up to Jane and puts his arm around her

while contentedly sipping hot Earl Grey tea and says,

“We’ve had it pretty rough,”

and smiles.

In America the unions might be busted
and socialism a dirty word
but at least Frank gets to be married
to a beautiful
comrade in arms.

5-MINUTE TOUGH GUYS

The men
from the offices are out on the shop floor 10 minutes before quitting time
watching us
to see if we are putting our tools away 4 or 5 minutes before the clean-up bell rings and
talking
instead of working
and they fold
their arms across their chests and puff out their chests and stick
their jaws out to try to look tough and threaten us but their feet are not sure
on the concrete floor
we
have stood on this floor for decades
planted
our feet rock-solid and sure as we lifted
100-pound vise shoved
1-ton bar of heat-treated filthy steel gritted our teeth and stood firm and felt
white-hot blast furnace flame lick
our lips
the concrete floor is in our bones our groans our shouts
of "Fuck!" to the tin ceiling 70 feet above our midnight
dreams our never-say-die smiles
we have passed out cigars at the birth of our baby boys
on it
stuffed dollar bills into collection boxes for men who have lost fingers to machine blades
on it
laughed until our whole body shook because if we didn't we might go insane
on it
collapsed short of breath from 50 years of hammering and hoisting and aching and
sweating
on it
and gone on
and on
how could those men from the plush-carpeted offices with their soft hands and their soft
souls stand
on it
with feet planted rock-solid and sure like ours
and as they stare at us
trying to look tough their feet fidget on the hard concrete floor and give them away as
they shift their legs and blink their eyes and finally give up
trying to scare us

standing firm and tough and true
on a rock-hard gouged and pitted stained-with-oil-and-sweat-and-human-blood
concrete floor
isn't something you can learn to do in 5 minutes
it takes
a lifetime.

PHOTOGRAPHING MANHOLE COVERS WHILE MURDERING EACH OTHER

As our Computer Numerically Controlled machines whirr
and hum with perfect lightning-fast numbers flashing on their screens guiding
cutters
through steel and titanium and aluminum without our hands once touching the machines
we brood
inside
bored pacing the concrete floor flexing our useless fingers
why has Jaime looked straight through me and not talked to me
for 6 months just because I said one wrong word to him
about his haircut
6 months ago Carl wonders brooding and fuming until he can barely resist marching
to Jaime's machine and punching Jaime in the nose
200 years
of industrial revolution and we can pop emails back and forth across the Atlantic
in seconds
take photographs of manhole covers with cameras on satellites orbiting
in outer space
know exactly how many teeth
a T-Rex had in its head
shave
a block of steel into a motorcycle sidecar yoke without a touch of a finger to anything
but computer keyboard
as we pace around our computer controlled mills and lathes with nothing to do but bore
and torment each other with stale jokes
about how much longer our dicks are than each other's
off-key whistling
of "Born Free" bragging
about women and marlin and mountains we've conquered until
we could scream at the sight of each other as we memorize
each other's gray hairs and tics and mannerisms and prejudices and attitudes until
we want to strangle each other
as we watch You-tube videos on each other's I-pads of motorcyclists with cameras
on their helmets running head-on into trucks at 60 mph
and envy
those stone-age men who spent all day hunting berries and wooly mammoths
using their hands doing something
noble and dignified
and useful.

STICKING OUR HEADS INSIDE THE LION'S JAWS

Jackson Pollock

is in the Clean Room with a straw fedora hat on to hide his bald head and sunglasses
to hide his hangover

his nose

stuck out over the steaming stinking silver vat it figures with his death-wish he'd end up
in elbow-high plastic gloves pulling aircraft parts out of hot bubbling carcinogenic solvent
at lunch break

he stuffs a sandwich down his throat then throws a big canvas down
onto the concrete parking lot in back of the factory

he's dripping

and streaking and throwing and swirling his oils off his brushes he furiously dips into his
cans

of paint and welders and steel cutters and Wheel-a-Brator operators eating burritos and
burgers

are gathering and giggling at him

"What are you afraid of?"

Pollock taunts them hulking and hopping around his canvas splashing paint

"Are you afraid of purple?"

Wild chartreuse lavender dots an ecstasy of yellow

an explosion of red-orange more beautiful

than any rose?"

Pollock's eyes shoot up at the men between his dripping and streaking of colors
as he dances around the canvas

"You're not afraid of a blast furnace that can burn the beard off your face!"

You're not afraid of that table saw that can cut off your hand!

What's so scary about pulling what's inside your heart out

and splashing it across a canvas?

Be a real man!

Be a real man and paint!" he yells

but the men are laughing at him now and grow bored and wander away to bet sports
and look at porn

and I step up to Pollock

"I understand," I say "I'm a poet. Art

is more scary than carcinogenic solvent and razor-sharp cutters

in front of your face any day!"

"Voss," Pollock says, throwing his arm around me

"We're tougher than tool steel chips and stinking solvent and black machine grease,"

and we both take a big swig off his half-pint of Popov vodka

and grin

Pollock's gonna hop a freight and head back to Greenwich Village to invent drip painting
and drive his car drunk into a tree and die

I'm gonna keep my hands on the wheels of my milling machine
a man's gotta survive
if he's gonna be the first poet to spend his life
in a factory.

BLOWING THE LID OFF THE FACTORY

Leaving the machine shop I walk down the concrete aisles of this factory
where engineers
from the offices in their starched white shirts and dress pants
scurry past me like they are far too refined
and elevated with their college degrees and blueprints-on-computer-screens clean-handed
expertise to talk to a grease-smear'd
torn-t-shirt-wearing wrench-monkey machinist
like me
but just once I'd like to stop them and say,
"Did you know that I've read Moby Dick 5 times?
Did you know that I once sat in U.C.L.A.'s fabled Powell Library
and researched and wrote a 20-page paper on T.S. Eliot's ground-breaking
modernist classic long poem "The Wasteland"
for my U.C.L.A. Ph.D. program class in 20th century American literature
Did you know BBC National Radio 4 broadcast 2 programs on my poetry?!"
And you think you're too good to look me in the eye
or say hello to me?!"
But of course
if I did that the men in the offices would probably think
that I was not just a grease-smear'd wrench-monkey
but an unstable
mentally ill fool as well
so I keep my eyes to the concrete aisle under my feet
and walk past them
like I have nothing on my mind but hammers and wrenches
and machine handles and Jennifer Lopez's ass and drinking beer
with my feet up in a lounge chair watching pro football after work
when actually
as those men from the offices look right through me and pass by like I'm not there
I've won
I've slipped through
I've flown under the radar infiltrated
the enemy camp and written a novel
and 3,000 poems about it like an undercover reporter
grabbing the story that will blow the lid off
the hidden world of factory life
forever
and if I ever put my feet up in a lounge chair and get drunk on beer
it won't be to watch pro football
but because
I've won the Nobel Prize.

HANGING ONTO OUR SELVES

We fill egg trays with 30 identical beryllium copper electrical connectors each
stack the trays
until they reach for the machine shop ceiling
we make hundreds
thousands hundreds of thousands of identical beryllium copper electrical connectors
until they come out our ears
and we dream them in midnight dreams and seem to eat them
for breakfast but we
are each so different Merlin
sleeps in his van he parks in the Home Depot parking lot all week
after driving from the high desert over the mountains 90 miles
to work
and sings opera
at his machine until he cries then smiles like some crazy clown saint doing a comical waltz
around his machine as his fingers cut to shreds by the sharp copper connectors drip
stinking cutting oil
Ishmael
keeps swordfish swords propped against his workbench by his toolbox with the pictures
of the thousand pound swordfish he once pulled from the sea
says the sea
is his woman and talks of how he wants to cruise her with a harpoon in his fist a
swordfisherman
once again as soon as he can and we worry
Ishmael will cut off his fingers reaching for electrical connectors next to razor-sharp
cutters
as his eyes glaze over
and beautiful swordfish leap from the sea as he hurls the harpoon
in his mind
those shiny red-brown beryllium copper electrical connectors stack
toward the factory ceiling
each identical to within thousandth-of-an-inch blueprint dimensions
as we
stare across our machines at each other and try to be as different
as we can
Carl
still furious at the 10 years he spent caged in prison for killing a man
with his bare hands on a downtown L.A. street corner staring
at the tin walls as his machine runs until his eyes fill with tears
that never fall
as he balls his fists up and turns those tears into punches
at the air

and me
a million miles away in my mind running as far as I can from the numbing boredom
of a million identical electrical connectors to seize
these poems out of thin air
and set myself free.

MILES DAVIS POINTS HIS TRUMPET TOWARD THE SUN

On a good day
there are still holes for me to drill in aluminum plates
a statue of Victor Hugo stands
in Paris
my wife
is at home making Nirvana Soup that smells like romance and cats
still climb trees as golden oranges hang
in the California sun
sails of boats catch wind train wheels clacking down rails shine
men look in the mirror of their souls and see they are wrong
and amend their ways
as I squirt black machine grease into the steel ways of my machine and they slide
smooth as poetry
one day follows another
earrings hang from ears
Nelson Mandela grips the bars of his Robben Island prison cell and never lets go
of hope
on a good day my great grandson is taking his first step
Van Gogh's yellow sunflowers hang
on Dutch walls
Mars shines red
in the morning sky
and there are still bars of raw 4130 steel for me to cut and shave into squareness true
as the first drop of rain hitting drought-parched
earth
men find their way out of mental hospitals
prisons nightmares they thought
would never end
to stand on the edge of The Grand Canyon and fall to their knees and weep
with joy
on a good day the waves are curling
Marilyn Monroe's white dress is blowing up above her knees
Miles Davis points his trumpet toward the sun
Babe Ruth is in the middle of his 1927 Yankee Stadium home run trot
Einstein's eyes twinkle
like the stars
blind bats darting across the Death Valley floor at midnight know where they are going
Euclid's parallel lines
stretch toward infinity
true as the steel handle of my machine warm in the palm of my hand as I smile
because something started my heart beating
as Sequoia trees still stand
and the Mississippi River Mark Twain steered a steamboat down
still flows.

TRUMPET SOLO FOR TOMORROW

After 38 years in the machine shops I walk my tired bones
across the concrete floor and see
the new-hire lathe man
young
with a bounce in his step and a gleam in his eyes striding toward his engine lathe
like the sky's the limit
after 35 years of unions busted
wages stalled
pensions gone houses lost healthcare crumbling bosses
screaming men
living under cardboard boxes in alleys who once had homes for a minute I am surprised
there are still young men
like this new-hire reaching out to take the steel handles of machines in their palms
and smile
but of course there are
of course
there are still meteors and baby feet taking their first steps and leaps
of joy into the air and mountains to climb and white water rapids
to shoot canoes through and rake angles
on lathe cutting tools to grind to razor-sharp 7-degree perfection and trumpet solos
to bring a tear to the eye and birthday cake candles
to raise a shriek of laughter in a 1-year-old girl
who can stop
the rose opening
the morning glowing
and suddenly my bones don't feel so tired
as long
as there are young men grabbing the handles to machines there is a chance
to change the world
bring back the unions
give the men in cardboard boxes homes
put so much soul into carving a brass hub to a wheelchair wheel on a machine no one
can tell you you are not
a hero
as someone hits the note on a trumpet that will turn all our hearts
to gold
and we all grab the handles to our machines
like just when we thought it was so dark there was no longer a shred of hope
it was really
the crack
of dawn.

NEW LIVES ON THE PAGE

The thunder
of 2-ton drop hammers shaking the concrete steel mill floor under my feet
let me forget
I hadn't written a word in 6 years
the 8-fluted razor-sharp 10-pound tool steel cutter that could explode
in front of my face any moment let
me forget
I couldn't pick up a pen and face
a blank page
other men
forgot WW2 battlefields
prison cells
cold midnight boxcar rides across windy deserts
a fist of a father in their face
the sharp
stomach-turning smell of the black smoke off flaming
red-hot steel dipped into tubs of stinking oil
the shouts
of steel cutters with orange sparks of molten steel shooting up over their shoulders like
nothing
could ever get them down
the ringing of hammers the screaming of drills let the other men forget
wives
who laughed in their face and left them
for other men
sons
who hadn't written one word to them in 10 years
torn knees
that ended their shot at professional football or baseball
torn souls
that landed them raving in mental hospital
cells
they gripped their roaring cutting torches and brighter-than-the-sun welding rods
and swaying 10-ton crane control boxes
and forgot
and went on
like me
standing in front of my milling machine with that razor-sharp cutter turning
in front of my face
if only those men could have begun their lives again
like I did

when I finally picked up this pen
and wrote about them –
or maybe their new lives have already begun
on this page.

CONCRETE BATTLEFIELD

“AFGHANISTAN WAR VETERAN” it says in red letters
on 26-year-old new hire Ishmael’s baseball-style cap
as he lowers his head and the 5-times-magnification-loupe he has stuck into his eye socket
toward the aircraft wing actuator in his palm inspecting
it with outside micrometer for a plus or minus 5 thousandths of an inch
blueprint thickness dimension he must hold
until Carl
yells something from the next machine trying
to joke with Ishmael again
like he does with all the machinists at the machines around him
and Ishmael stiffens
like he’s been shot in the back and drops the wing actuator and pops the loupe
out of his eye socket and strides toward Carl
and yells, “Fuckin’ with me again, huh Carl?!” trying to smile and go along with the joke
but looking like he might strangle Carl
as we all try to laugh like it’s all a joke but the laughter sticks
in our throats
we are all
veterans
us men aging into our 60s who wonder if we will ever be able
to retire
in this crashed economy full of underwater houses and billionaires
filling bank vaults
maybe we haven’t faced enemy fire like Ishmael but we are all
tired to death
and we drop our heads and look at our machines and the parts in our hands
as Carl tries to make another joke but knows instantly it isn’t funny
and wipes the smile off his face and lowers his head
and trembles
as we all hold our breath and look down at the concrete floor and hope no punches are
thrown
or guns pulled
we are all veterans
fighting all our lives as the unions are busted and our wages fall
and someone says, “Carl’s just jokin’, Ishmael,”
and we all lift our heads and try to put on smiles
we are all veterans
with bad backs and arthritic knuckles broken dreams and penniless children lost houses
and torn t-shirts
we haven’t been to Afghanistan
but we’ve been inside these tin walls for 35 or 40 years
and finally Ishmael laughs
a long tired laugh happy he didn’t explode
as we all join in

and the peace returns
we are all shell-shocked by this war
some of us on battlefields
others
on concrete floors.

WEDDING RINGS AND TOMBSTONES

We carved the stones
for cathedrals when men believed God was as real
as a redwood tree
we hammered the red-hot rivets
into bridges spanning wild rivers after Nietzsche said
God was dead
we made frames
for stretchers carrying men off bloody battlefields
bomb bay doors
dropping bombs that burn women alive
in hospital beds
we cut
steel holders for candles burning above the head of a mother praying the operation
will save her daughter's sight feet
of 8th-story hotel bathtubs where opera divas
bathe hinges
for cell doors that close on men who must wait
for the electric chair combs
to shape the curl across the forehead of the movie star who will soon cry as she holds
the best actress Oscar
world wars come and go
Atlantic City casinos
rise and fall newsreels show the blinking eyes of starved-to-skin-and-bone
Auschwitz survivors Neil Armstrong
sinks a boot into moon dust as we make
bedsprings and scalpels
trumpet mouthpieces and bulldozer teeth
a frying pan for Greta Garbo's
scrambled eggs and a cattle prod
for a torturer Alexander the Great
cries because he has no more worlds to conquer Hitler
shoots himself in his bunker and people still
need screwdrivers
and hairbrushes and we pick up our hammers
our wrenches our chisels as the sun rises
at 6:31 am and the sweat
on our backs is still sweat and people
still need bowls and wheels
and kettledrums
the next baby to be born may be the man
to stop global warming or push
the button beginning World War 3
but the world will still need us to make wedding rings
and tombstones.

POEM FOR 900 LIONS

I stand at my machine
the numbers from the computer
flash on the control panel screen hanging by a metal arm in front of my face
once
men stood around campfires before Facebook TVs radios newspapers cameras books and
told
stories
once cutters chewed through steel in front of my face
as I turned machine handles with my hands
and felt the vibrations of the shuddering steel run up my arm
into my bones
now the computer automatically sends the cutter through the steel as my arms and hands
hang limp
we picked up
a rock chipped it into a chisel carved a wheel raised a pyramid built
a city turned on a lightbulb kept a factory running
24/7 cut down the rain forests poisoned
the sea melted the polar icecaps
and my machine runs smoothly turning out fighter jet bomb bay door handles one after
another
and they say more advanced computers are coming that will wipe out millions upon
millions
more jobs for no other reason than
they can
as the newspapers and the books disappear and people forget
who Shakespeare and Melville were
once
grabbing onto the handle of a pre-WW2 machine and pushing a cutter through steel
with every muscle in my body saved
my life
now my hands hang limp at my sides
and there are only 900 lions left on this earth
and I look at the computer numbers flashing across the control panel screen beside my
face
and wonder what we've gained
as the bomb bay door handles stack up on my workbench and I wish
I could turn them into bowls of soup to feed the homeless
what have we gained
from this opposable thumb that has picked up dinosaur bones and roses and telegrams

and hand grenades and paintbrushes
and the 6 am break whistle screams from the tin ceiling above my head
and I wander to the tin door to look out at the last star twinkling in the sky
and just like men did 200 million years ago
wonder why
we are here.

About the Authors

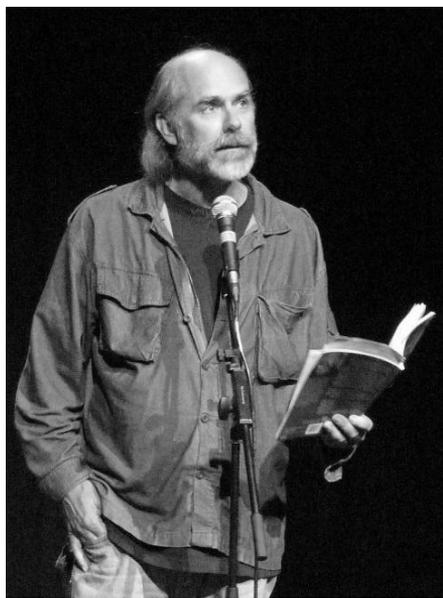
Don Winter, b. 1958, went from being owner of Southeast Real Estate to poverty after a 1998 divorce. He then took up the poem, and from 1999-2006 his work appeared in most small press (and many “academic press”) journals. He is the author of critically acclaimed books and chapbooks including *Things About to Disappear* and *No Way Out But In*. Todd Moore calls *Saturday Night Desperate* “as good as poetry gets.” From 2006 through the present, Winter has been an Instructor of Technical Writing, Labor History, Workplace Cooperation, and Reading/Composition for Ivy Tech Community College, Indiana University, and unions. He won the 2012-13 Associate Faculty Award for Excellence in Instruction. The author may be contacted at donwinter8@gmail.com and P.O. Box 1265, Niles, Michigan 49120.

Fred Voss, a machinist for 32 years, has had three collections of poetry published by the U.K.’s *Bloodaxe Books*. His latest, *HAMMERS AND HEARTS OF THE GODS*, was selected a Book of the Year 2009 by *The Morning Star*, and is published by Pearl Editions in the United States. He is regularly published in magazines such as *Poetry Review* (London), *Ambit* (London), *Atlanta Review*, *Blue Collar Review*, *Nerve Cowboy* and *Pearl*, and has twice been the subject of feature programs about his poetry on National BBC Radio 4. I In 2012 he and his wife the poet Joan Jobe Smith were featured at The Humber Mouth Literature Festival in Hull, England. In 2015 World Parade Books published his first novel, *MAKING AMERICA STRONG*.



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

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



Your writings about working at the machines, well, I liked them, understood them, sure.—Charles Bukowski

Voss is the real thing. Reading him I was struck by how awful the world of the machine shops is. His 1990's shops are portrayed as far worse than my 1950's shops, the atmosphere more violent, combative and insane. Of course, our whole country has grown more violent, combative, and insane.—Phillip Levine