



Overtime

Joseph Millar

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Following on the scuffed

boot heels of writers like Philip Levine, James Wright, and Richard Hugo, this poet writes about work. With long, snaky lines and a keen eye for telling detail, these poems both laud and condemn the working class—waitresses, new mothers, carpenters, deck bosses—for what they aspire to and what they do not or cannot aspire to.

These poems spring from experience: Millar himself formerly worked as a telephone installation foreman, and much of the tension in the poems springs from the duality of work literacy and academic literacy. Millar moves fluidly between references to Keats and references to laying cable through Alaska. Readers meet, in poem after poem, a man who works hard, drinks hard, loves his kids, and somehow lost his marriage in the mix.

From the first poem, Millar posits work as release, as a place to hide, a place to become so tired there is no remembering that something might have been done to save the world. It provides a place with only a now—no future to fear, no past to regret. The people of these poems strive to stay present, to move toward overtime, where they have the chance to save up a little cushion against the world, where they needn't go home and think about what is happening to their lives. Millar, however, can't escape himself, his thinking, his pulse towards understanding why he works, how he lives, how to love his children, how to marshal his excess. In "Hansel and Gretel's Father," he writes of providing for his son:

He may never understand this fierce
satisfaction,
watching him eat vegetables at supper,
as though the green stalk fibers and the juice
were entering my own body.
Have some more, I mutter,
the shadow behind me pressing down
into my own dark footprints.

Millar keeps his language simple, the straightforward talk of a man who speaks to inform. His poems resist the urge to tell all, and instead lead readers into a quiet world of the tactile, "the yoked forebones in his skull," "the husks of dead starfish trapped in the mud," "veins branched under the flame-shaped stretch marks." With a voice cracked by hardship and colored by literature, Millar speaks to the working world in poems both wise and tough.

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