

Review of *Overtime*
by Julie Drake
Rain Taxi Review of Books

As the title suggests, *Overtime* contains many work poems. Joseph Millar now earns a living in academia, but before that he spent time working blue-collar jobs such as telephone repairman and commercial fisherman. It is these workers that Millar writes about—the deck boss on a salmon fishing boat, the mechanic at the brake-shop, the drywall crews, and men pulling fiber optic cables in new construction in Silicon Valley. Millar gives these workers a voice that is neither stupid nor terribly street-smart. Instead it is a quotidian voice, an authentic—sometimes putzy—voice that accepts what you gotta do to make a living. It is often contemplative, sometimes tired, but rarely sad. Millar punctuates his work with soft humor—not slapstick, nor cynical, but wry and world-weary: ". . . until I get off work / and collapse on the fake velvet sofa, a double order / of fast food bleeding grease through a bag in my fist. / He hasn't eaten anything green in a week\$" (from "Sole Custody").

Although several poems address paying bills, rent, and taxes, class issues run only as an undercurrent through these poems; Millar's working men do not call for sweeping social change. "Impossible anyone here would strike, / though we're comrades of sorts, / and hungry for something, / listening to rain pound the glass doors / of this palace paid for / by venture capitalists, whose appetite nobody questions" (from "Fiber Optics"). Millar worked blue-collar jobs for over 25 years after receiving an MA, a fact that reflects an all too common American employment plight—that the most educated do not automatically earn the most money and that learning a trade may be the best way to earn a good living. Millar treads much of the same ground as his contemporary Jim Daniels, but Millar's poetry reads as even more authentically average American, since Millar spent so long actually working these jobs and Daniels often writes the stories of his friends and family.

Other poems not about work reflect a wide range of everyday life, as Millar takes the reader on travels from the North Slope oilfields of Alaska to the California coast to the Pennsylvania of his childhood to the East Cleveland projects. This book is an American road trip with rest-stops at single fatherhood, alcoholism, gambling, father-son relationships, love affairs, take-out food, and heart attacks. Millar writes in simple language, in a tell-it-like-is tone. Any of his working buddies could easily understand these poems, and it's a shame that many of them will not read this book, having been raised to think of poetry as indecipherable or fancy.

Each of these narrative poems tell a story, but as the Billy Collins blurb on the back of the book states, "Millar never forgets, as a poet, to tell it line by line." Millar's best poems transcend everyday existence, not by tidily wrapping up the story with a moral message, but by doing the opposite—leaving the reader with glimpses into unfinished stories, as lives truly are. The reader has a feeling of kinship with the characters of these poems. It's as if we were looking in the windows of our neighbors' houses. Millar writes what he knows, and what we know—that life is often a pain in the ass and usually messy, but in spite of that, somehow, we continue to get up in the morning and go to work. As he puts it in "The Wayward Carpenter's Apprentice": "The bottoms of his workshoes want to wander off / by

themselves, and the sweatstains growing cold / under the arms of the orange T-shirt / begin
to dream they can fly."