

BLUE COLLAR SONNETS

By Margaret Menamin

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HARD HATS

God, I love men in hard hats!—cornerstones
of high steel structures, pillars of arenas,
bare to their waists like muscled gods or lean as
creekwater willows, graceful in their bones

as locomotives. Sweating, smoking, swearing,
they move like pistons, counterpoint or tandem,
always in pairs or teams. There's nothing random
about the care they take to look uncaring:

They play the sidewalk crowd like seasoned flirts,
parading nonchalance like autographs,
gauging applause and measuring for laughs.
Their grease rags hang like flags below their shirts.

At five they store their gear and shelve their lives,
go home and watch the sitcoms with their wives.

THE CARPENTER

1

My grandpa's sweat was pungent with black soil
that furrowed in the wrinkles of his shirt,
and sharp fresh sawdust drifted from the dirt
as I inhaled the trademark of his toil.

He was a carpenter. Weekdays he labored
at building houses, farmed on weekends. Sundays
his pulpit was the framework for our Mondays.
He talked to God as if their pastures neighbored.

At night I'd curl against his chest and smell
the history of his day. "Dear Lord," he'd pray,
"we thank you for your helping hand today."
I fell asleep to old hymns, heard him tell

about a carpenter less real to me
who preached along the shores of Galilee.

The women loved to hear him offer grace.
(He called the young ones sister, old ones aunt.)
“Kind, gracious heavenly Father,” he would chant,
rolling the words out in his wondrous bass,

and if he ever knew the sin of pride
perhaps it was on Sunday, when he sang
those fine old anthems in a voice that rang
deep as the river Jordan, and as wide.

But when death called a member of his flock
he’d join the silent men, in pity bound
to work beside them, opening the ground
before he preached to them at two o’clock:

“O brethren, O my sisters, do not weep.
We lay this loved one gently down to sleep.”

THE PLASTERER

My cousin Bill, that beautiful dark child,
pulled from his city haunts to taste the ways
of country in the summer, spent his days
barefoot and laughing and blackberry-wild

at Grandpa's heels, and watched his houses rise.
From the first oak tree felled to the last nail
that pinned the final shingle, each detail
was caught and held by his enchanted eyes.

A plasterer in later years, he could
put flesh on buildings, but it was the bones
of them he loved, the birth, the cornerstones,
the earth-beginnings, and the smell of wood.

So, married to a trade but bound to art,
he fashioned cabinets to ease his heart.

THE MECHANICS

1

On Saturday Mom washed Dad's coveralls,
the final load of laundry for the day.
By then the water, nearer black than gray
and slick with grease from engine overhauls,

broadcast its blend of bleach and gasoline.
I forced his work clothes through the wringer, pinned
them up to dance their freedom in the wind,
and, last of all, we drained the tired machine.

Who would have thought that linty sludge would cut
a deepening ditch as years went by? Come dark,
Dad brought his fiddle out and played "Joe Clark"
or maybe "Irish Washerwoman," but

he'd always play one just for Mom, and she
would always want "The Waltz You Saved For Me."

My uncle did the same work as my dad
for better money and a steady wage,
but he was like a creature in a cage.
On Saturdays he drank up all he had,

trying to make the weekends disappear,
sobering up in time to face his boss
and one more week of bitterness and loss.
He came to see us once or twice a year

and left in half an hour or earlier
although he lived nearby. He'd married young,
an older woman with a crazy tongue,
because his mother hadn't wanted her.

He drank himself to death to spite a life
consumed with longing for his brother's wife.

I never heard my father mention Thor.
He didn't finish school, and hadn't read
the hero-tales that flickered in my head.
He only knew his body welcomed more

electric current than was usual for
the average man. He moved around his shed,
handling wires like so much sewing thread,
not realizing that his fingers bore

the kiss of lightning. When a neighbor wore
his patience thin, he turned to him and said
"here, hold this." And he thought the man fell dead
until he saw him rising from the floor.

He told me that he later went outside
and knelt in shame and gratitude, and cried.

Some days Dad let me go to the garage
where he was patching up a worn-out Nash
for someone who would pay him not in cash
but beans and cabbage. Coaxing some old Dodge

to limp a few more miles, for years he lay
like Michelangelo, his face upturned
to engines leaking motor oil, and learned
not to draw checks on “see you Saturday.”

Long after he hung up his old shop cap
and let computers diagnose the ills
of strange new models, he explored the hills
in his old pickup. Then a worn deathtrap

came at him from the wrong side of a crest
and drove the steering column through his chest.

My father taught my brother how to solve
the mysteries of engine, brake and wheel.
His hands were like a doctor's. He could feel
the sickness in a piston or a valve.

He interned in the Navy, early on,
did surgery on Uncle Sam's machines.
He tinkered with the guts of submarines,
came out and opened shop in Oregon.

He tried to teach his secrets, but the kid
he hired was careless, headstrong as a boar.
One morning Ernie found him on the floor
beneath a Studebaker that had slid

free of its jack and fallen on him there,
leaving a wreck no surgeon could repair.

THE VOLUNTEER

She knew them all by name: the drunkard John;
Joseph O'Reilly, jobless like his brother;
Estelle, whose trade she could not tell her mother;
Thad Robinson, tubercular and wan.

She offered smiles and scriptures, ladled soup,
gave them a place to rest, a bite to eat.
She was their light, their angel of the street,
too young to fear their shivering and croup.

One well-dressed donor often visited
and talked of marriage: "Opal, have me, please,
and leave this wretched street and its disease."
But she smiled quietly and shook her head,

knowing he needed someone strong and steady,
not someone who was coughing blood already.

THE WELL DRILLER

One day he left the massive iron rig,
that towering brontosaurus that he rode
into the ground, and sought another lode
in Colorado. There for years he'd dig

the tungsten mines, but he was dreaming gold.
Day after day he panned the shining ore
and brought up pyrite—fool's gold—nothing more.
At last he gave it up, and came home old

to midwest sandstone, shale and common clay.
He never knew what treasure he had mined:
His wells still serve us, and we yet may find
some withered season, some most desperate day

when men will curse their gold for worthless barter
and kill their brothers for a cup of water.

THE COUSINS

We were the fearless four. I joined the guys—
Sonny and Bug and Tikey—playing hard
at superheroes in the darkened yard
sprinkled with blinking fireflies. We were spies,

digging for diamonds, whispering secret codes,
playing at games that turned to bitter wars,
capturing lightning bugs in Mason jars.
At childhood's end the boys took separate roads

and followed separate yearnings. Sonny stayed
beside his father, drilling wells, and plumbed
the earth until he finally succumbed
to cancer. Bug went west, dug coal and laid

the groundwork for the unions. Tikey died
his father's death, a bottle at his side.

THE GUNSMITH

Born with his father's thirst, and kept from play
with other children by his mother's whim,
he hid from life and, as life hid from him,
he edged around the corners of each day

and got through school somehow. With modeling clay
he taught his hands to shape his body's doom.
Hunched over benches in an ill-lit room,
he carved elaborate gun stocks, took what pay

would buy a drink or two. He found a way
to transform tubes from rusty iron gates
into smooth barrels, and kept urgent dates
with the enchantress whiskey till he lay

damaged and dying, struggling for each breath
while statesmen bought his handwork and his death.

THE SOLDIER

Fresh from the farm, he'd never fired a gun
except to shoot at squirrels. Bulleted
with freckles, he wore trouble on his head.
His hair was like a target in the sun

or fire that draws fire. Not yet twenty-one
when he was drafted, it was Uncle Red
who stared at God in Italy and said
his last Our Father to oblivion.

They sent his coffin home when it was done.
The native soil was hungry for her dead.
His wallet came before him. He had bled
over the *lire* as his body spun,

and there were bloodstains on another piece,
the first-grade photo of his little niece.

THE HOBO

Deep in the vast Missouri's slimy silt
there lies what was a man. He has been dead
these seven decades, and his flesh has fed
huge catfish and a boxcar rider's guilt.

There were no jobs. My uncle slept in trains
that ran along the river in KC
where hoboes gathered. It was here that he
jumped from a car and panic filled his veins

as someone stepped from shadow. It was here
he pulled his gun and dropped the man forever.
Quickly he rolled the body to the river
and watched it sink. He lived in guilt and fear

from that day forward, dreamed of Cain and Abel.
Who was the man? Who missed him at the table?

FAMILY REUNION

We have come here to see the burial ground.
Now on our faces dead remembered men
display their monuments, and once again
I watch my uncles dying. Look around:
We have become our ancestors. We move
reluctantly through predetermined paces,
shocked at the death-heads on each others' faces.
We do not voice our fear; we speak of love.

Here, among trays and tables, children come
laughing like bells, not knowing they will die.
We see the end their faces prophesy,
know they will blossom sweet as fresh wild plum
and then become ourselves. We witness here
the coming and the going of our year.

THE WINDOW WASHER

He trusts tomorrow to a harness strap.
Dangling above the city on a scaffold
he whistles Dixie. Gravity is baffled:
He takes no notice of the dizzy map

spread out below him. Any day it rains
his union grounds him, and on windy days
he doesn't work because the scaffold sways.
Adrenaline like vodka in his veins

shoots him up twenty stories of sheer brick
where he may talk to clouds or throw his words
to passing caravans of northbound birds.
He never glances down. It makes him sick

as, far below, he pictures on the walk
his body circumscribed with yellow chalk.

JACKHAMMER MAN

Nobody has to tell him how he'll die.
His bones are loosening from their joints. The song
about the bones is put together wrong:
The shinbone's disconnected from the thigh

bone, all his bones are scattering like slag,
he vibrates in his sleep. His molars shake
staccato in their sockets when they ache.
But it's a steady job—now there's a gag—

like having hiccups on a trampoline.
He grips the handles with unflinching fists,
feels numbness creeping upward to his wrists,
becomes a rattling part of the machine.

He knows no grave will ever hold his bones.
He'll be an earthquake threatening the stones.

THE WOMAN ON THE CONSTRUCTION CREW

I'd have believed her in a gingham shift
starred with small daisies floating white on blue:
blue as the cornflower eyes she turned on you
merry with mischief, sudden, sweet and swift

as children singing. Pigtails pale as hay
dangled below her helmet when she stepped—
no, *danced*—to where the workers' tools were kept,
picked up a shovel and began her day.

A tiny creature wearing make-believe,
she was adrift inside her coveralls,
not built for digging drains and building walls.
Yet there she was, as self-assured as Eve,

making her way among those sinewy guys,
at ease, at work—with those astonishing eyes.

PLUMBERS

Up to their shins in human nastiness
of every ugly kind, how do they keep
from choking on their vomit when they sleep?
How do they free their nostrils of the mess

and find their appetites at dinner hour?
Do they just wash their hands of all of it,
the hairballs and the condoms and the shit,
and think of lilacs while they're in the shower?

These are the men we call when septic tanks
rebel, when sewer lines regurgitate
their stinking contents. They investigate
our murky underworld for little thanks

beyond their union scale, but when they're through
they know more secrets than the tabloids do.

THE PREACHER

They called the kid the Preacher. He was new,
the latest rookie on a maverick line
that clocked more downtime than the other nine
and shut down every time a rainstorm blew

across the pipeyard. All the linemen said
this freckled farm boy wouldn't last a week;
he wasn't tough enough. He didn't speak
their I-mean-business words. Besides, he read

the Bible on his lunch hour. Still, he stuck
and finally made foreman. One wild night
he lost his temper, pointed at the light
and roared, "Let lightning strike!" And lightning struck.

The linemen, standing in the dark, were awed
and no one laughed when someone whispered, "God!"

THE WAITRESS

“Eggs over easy. Coffee black. No grits.
Hustle your heinie, babe. I’m runnin’ late.”
She dog trots from the kitchen with a plate
and slides it into place. They give her fits,

these truckers with their deadlines and demands.
It’s not the wear and tear, it’s not the pace,
but that they never see she has a face.
She’s a machine. No face, just feet and hands.

There’s one who knows her name. She likes his gab.
“I don’t use sugar in my coffee, Ruth,
so keep your fingers out.” To tell the truth,
she’d like to be there with him in the cab,

go where he’s going, maybe have a chance
to live outside a paperback romance.

THE LONG-HAUL TRUCK DRIVER

Another night with just two hours of sleep.
He hopes the coffee's strong and pea-soup thick;
he's got to stay awake. He's worried sick
about his pregnant wife but has to keep

his rig on schedule. Still, at every exit
he wants to stop and grab a telephone.
What if her water breaks while she's alone?
What if he nods off in the truck and wrecks it?

The waitress brings his mud. Her name is Ruth.
Nice little kid, and Janie-on-the-spot.
She seems to like him, keeps his coffee hot.
(Reminds him of his wife, to tell the truth)

He leaves a whopping tip and heads to Philly.
God, how he wishes he was home with Millie!

THE POLICEMAN

His dad gave him a whistle on a string
when he was four, and from that time he knew
that he would wear a uniform of blue
and walk a beat. It was a little thing

but set him on his path. In other years
the crimes were cleaner—now and then a knife
in some guy's ribs, some fellow shot his wife,
some bad-ass stole a car. But now he hears

of things a decent cop's ashamed to know,
a sewer world of inhumanity;
he looks at things no man should have to see.
He's been shot twice, and has four years to go.

With every car he stops, he thinks the same:
Will this one be the bullet with my name?

NIGHTMARES IN PENN HILLS

1

They say we're sitting on the Renton Mine.
At night I dream of floors that disappear
and coughing skeletons that rise from hell
with opaque lungs as dense as anthracite.

Their coal-black fingers fumble toward the light
and pull me underground as they expel
dark dust from mouths I am afraid to hear.
They threaten me with chits I did not sign.

This subdivision rose from blackened bones.
Its windows drew their light from living dead
whose dwindling breath bought loaves of new white bread,
whose names supported chisellers of stones

that stand up now like faded ledger pages
or old forgotten stubs of weekly wages.

Fretting my windows unrelentingly,
the wind wails Gaelic. The wild dialect
of landlocked seamen saws the open shutters
with low and lyric keening, like the sound

of brave doomed Welshmen whistling underground
in rock-sealed sepulchers. At times it mutters
of backs long bent that cannot rise erect,
of Molly Maguires and ballads of the Sidhe.

I hear new orphans whimpering for nurses
who stretch full length on barriers of grass
and beat the traitor earth. I hear the mass,
too often said and underscored with curses,

and all the bitter midnight aves said
by widows lying comfortless in bed.

THE MOLLY MAGUIRES
John “Blackjack” Kehoe Speaks

Oh yes, our hands were bloody, but in part
from lifting murdered brothers off the ground.
We came to this great promised land and found
that we were beasts of burden, saw the heart

of Ireland being trampled in the mud
by ruthless men who broke us, showed us hell
and left our shriveled bodies where they fell.
I’ll not deny we shed some rich men’s blood.

We wanted schools and doctors, shoes and bread.
We got betrayal, treachery and filth
while villains bribed our priests with tainted wealth
and winked at murderers who blamed their dead

on Mollies. It was perjured oaths alone
that hanged us not for our crimes but their own.

THE QUEECREEK MINERS

They had agreed that if they had to drown
they'd lash themselves together, that to bind
themselves would make it easier to find
their bodies once the water had gone down.

Hoarding their warmth in stagnant, fading air,
they wrote their wills and scribbled their goodbyes,
leaving their last thoughts for the living eyes
of ones whose lives they would no longer share.

So, trapped and freezing in the flooded mine,
they waited. And the nation held its breath,
wanting a miracle but steeled for death,
until the message came: "They're saved—all nine!"

Then came the nightmares, fearful, agonizing:
night after night, the water rising, rising....

THE BUS DRIVER

He gets them all: the winos, loudmouth boys,
end-of-the-line kids who have learned to mark
their place in life with bellow, shriek and bark,
the high school freshmen majoring in noise.

The rebels and illiterates are his—
Hey, cantcha read? Put out that cigarette!—
the doomsday oracle, the shell-shocked vet
who can't remember where his bus stop is,

the drunk who has no fare but snarls and curses.
There are a couple not so troublesome:
a college student who is deaf and dumb,
a quaint old broad who sits and scribbles verses.

Still, he's afraid one day his nerves will break
and he'll just drive the lot into the lake.

THE HIGH WIRE LINEMAN

“It’s not the height, not falling that you dread.”
His voice escaped from somewhere far away.
“It’s wind. That’s what will make the cables sway
and slam ten thousand volts against your head.

“You’ve got to mind the wind. There’s only one
thing worse: a sudden surge. The overload
can cause a weak transformer to explode,
and it’s like falling straight into the sun.

“You wouldn’t want to live—and I can’t name
but one who ever did. They put you in
some kind of bath and peel away your skin
each day for weeks. You don’t come back the same.”

His rolled-up sleeves revealed the scarred terrain
of hell. We never spoke of it again.

THE SNOWPLOW DRIVER

He sees the blizzard as a sneak attack,
a whirling regiment of blinding white
that struck with sudden fury in the night
to blitz the traffic and the almanac.

He's scraped the street for hours. He hits the sack,
exhausted by the frantic predawn fight,
but finds that he can't sleep. The light's too bright.
He wants to close his eyes on solid black

but whiteness burns them like a laser track.
Beneath his lids he sees ballets of light
and ceaseless motion that his storm-scarred sight
will not relinquish. Someone taps his back:

His five-year-old is poking him awake
to see the snowflakes she has learned to make.

LUCK

This guy comes prancing blind along the street,
runs smack into a ladder, spills a can
of paint. The painter hollers, "Watch it, man!"
"I cain't," he says, "they's angels on my feet."

"Look, fella, don't you know that it's bad luck,
to walk beneath a ladder?" And he hoots,
"Hey man, they's angels ridin' on my boots
and right here on the street I found a buck.

"Don't talk me no bad luck, man. I got news
for you and your damn ladder: I got gold
in seven of my teeth and, like I told
you, I got angels dancin' on my shoes.

"Man, just last night I won a five-buck bet.
Hell, I got luck that I ain't opened yet."

WALLACE SAUNDERS REMEMBERS CASEY JONES

Sometimes at night I hear him. Plain as day
I hear his whistle. Everybody knew
when it was Casey's engine coming through—
that long, low wail that rose and died away.

He liked to blow that whistle, no mistake.
I was his wiper, kept his engine clean,
and I was proud of him and that machine.
Sometimes at night I'm lying here awake

and hear him bearing down. I know that squall
before he hits the saw-by, picture him
hollering to the fireman—that was Sim—
to jump. Then comes the crash, and then.... That's all.

But it's not over. He keeps coming back,
trying to beat the devil on that track.

JOHN HENRY

He did it for the men because he knew
damn well that if the steam drill won the bet
they'd every man of them be paid and let
go on the dole. He did it for the crew.

The solemn men stood idle as they brought
the monster to Big Bend. Now, shaker, ready!
*Lord, give me arms of iron and keep them steady,
and let me die before I quit*, he thought.

He swung two hammers. Sparks like falling comets
flew from his blows, *a-right! a-left! a-right!*
in deafening cadence. When he'd won the fight
he dropped, too spent to cough, too weak to vomit,

his heart too overcome by pain and pride,
and, Lord, he laid his hammer down and died.

THE FIREFIGHTER

From his first box of crayons he chose red
and wore it to a useless lump before
the others, loved the hats the firemen wore,
the blur of color as the engines sped,

the screaming sirens. He was like Ulysses,
drawn to a fatal calling, but no tide
pulled him from this destruction. Here inside
collapsing walls, where flames like licking kisses

vie for his skin, he dimly hears a shout
drift up to him from some green world below,
some paradise he moved in, long ago:
We got the kids out, Mike. Get out, get out!

His mouth twists in a prayer. The flames advance,
reach out like arms inviting him to dance.

THE STREET SWEEPER

Leaves, cigarette butts, candy wrappers, gum
are tithes he gathers as the daylight ventures
over the grimy city. Someone's dentures
once greeted him, and once a human thumb.

He sweeps the sidewalk with a steady stare.
The gallimaufry of debris and litter
shifts with the seasons. When the wind is bitter
torn unfamiliar broadsides migrate there.

One foggy morning, dingy cold and dim,
beneath a hedge he found a newborn child
abandoned like a kitten in the wild.
The morning papers called it Tiny Tim.

God bless us every one, and God protect us
from *homo*, whether *sapiens* or *erectus*.

THE END

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The Carpenter (Sonnet 1)
The Mechanics (Sonnets 1 and 4)
Family Reunion
The Quecreek Miners
(*The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*)

The Well Driller
The Woman on the Construction Crew
The High Wire Lineman
(*Panhandler*)

The Window Washer
Jackhammer Man
Plumbers
Wallace Saunders Remembers Casey Jones
The Firefighter
(*Iambs & Trochees*)

John Henry
(*The Lyric*)

“The Carpenter” through “Family Reunion” are about my family. “The Woman on the Construction Crew,” “The Preacher,” “The Quecreek Miners” and “The High Wire Lineman” are based on true incidents. The remainder of the sonnets are my interpretations of the lives and work of people I have seen in the Pittsburgh area.

—M.M.