AWP Event Outline

Welcome to “‘Life of Labor’ in Letters: Working-Class Storytelling”

A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator, Dustin M. Hoffman, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Event Title: Life of Labor’ in Letters: Working-Class Storytelling

Event Description:
Midwest author Sarah Smarsh said, "You can pay an entire life in labor, it turns out, and have nothing to show for it. Less than nothing, even: debt, injury, abject need.” Five writers, all with Midwestern and working-class ties, share their approach to showcasing this “life in labor” through storytelling. The panelists will discuss why they write these stories and how, and what precious language and poetry can be mined from what has been called gritty, dirty realism.

Event Category: Pedagogy

Event Organizer and Moderator:
Dustin M. Hoffman is the author of the story collections One-Hundred-Knuckled Fist (winner of the 2015 Prairie Schooner Book Prize), No Good for Digging, and the chapbook Secrets of the Wild. His newest collection, Such a Good Man, is forthcoming from University of Wisconsin Press. He painted houses for ten years in Michigan and now teaches creative writing at Winthrop University in South Carolina.
Event Participants:

A co-founder of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop in New York City, **Curtis Chin** served as the non-profits’ first Executive Director. He went on to write for network and cable television before transitioning to social justice documentaries. Chin has screened his films at over 600 venues in twenty countries. He has written for CNN, Bon Appetit, the Detroit Free Press, and the Emancipator/Boston Globe. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Chin has received awards from ABC/Disney Television, New York Foundation for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, and more. His memoir, "Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant" was published by Little, Brown in Fall 2023. His essay in Bon Appetit was also selected for Best Food Writing in America 2023 and he just produced an episode of America's Test Kitchen's podcast, Proof.

A native "Thumbody," from Michigan’s rural Thumb Region, **RS Deeren**’s debut novel in stories, *Enough to Lose*, was published by Wayne State University Press in Fall 2023 and has been named a 2024 Michigan Notable Book by the Library of Michigan. The title story was anthologized in John Freeman’s *Tales of Two Americas: Stories of Inequality in a Divided Nation*. His work also appears in *Joyland, Great Lakes Review, Midwestern Gothic*, and more. Before leaving Michigan, he worked as a line cook, landscaper, lumberjack, and bank teller. He earned MFA from Columbia College Chicago and his PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is an assistant professor of creative writing at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee.

**Toni Jensen** is the author of *Carry: A Memoir of Survival on Stolen Land*, a memoir-in-essays about gun violence, land and Indigenous people’s lives, and a short story collection, *From the Hilltop*. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Literature fellowship in nonfiction and a Sustainable Arts Foundation fellowship, and *Carry* is a *New York Times* Editors’ Choice Book and a Dayton Literary Peace Prize finalist. Her essays have been published in journals such as *Orion, Catapult* and *Ecotone*. She’s an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Arkansas and also teaches in the low residency MFA Program at the Institute of American Indian Arts. She is Métis.

**Joe Milan, Jr.** is a second-generation Korean American who taught in Korea for nine years. He’s the author of the novel *The All-American* (W.W. Norton, 2023) and was the 2019-20 David T.K. Wong Creative Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia. In addition, he has been a Barrick Graduate Fellow and BMI Ph.D.
Fellow at the University of Nevada Las Vegas and a Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA graduate.

His work has appeared in wonderful places like *The Rumpus, Electric Literature, Literary Hub,* and others. He is now an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Waldorf University in Forest City, Iowa. You can read more of his work at [joemilanjr.com](http://joemilanjr.com)

**Opening Moderator Remarks:**
I’m truly honored to have the chance to moderate this panel titled “Life of Labor’ in Letters: Working-Class Storytelling.” Now more than ever—during such a time of political polarization and wealth inequity—literature about working people seems dire. I think we all agree on this panel that literature can fill an important gap in the discussions about class. We can share the full complexity of what it means to be a working person. Rather than glamorize or villainize stereotypes, art demands unflinching compassion and honesty, the full story, from grit and broken bodies and exploitation to hidden wisdom and beauty and bonds sometimes tighter than family. That’s the kind of art we’re invested in and fascinated by.

Each panelist will share a statement about why and how they capture working-class identities.

**Readings and Remarks:**

**Curtis Chin**

Remarks:
Growing up in my family's popular restaurant in Detroit's Chinatown, I loved working in food service, starting as a busboy and slowly graduating up to dishwasher then manager and waiter. I even had a brief stint as a fry cook until I screwed up a few orders. I was perfectly happy to work in the family business for the rest of my life, until a family friend was murdered in a vicious hate crime and the judge only sentenced the killers to $3,000 fine with zero jail time, I realized that I wanted to help tell the story of the people from Chinatown. I also wanted to tell the story of Detroit, a working-class city that is often misunderstood.

Curtis will be reading from his memoir, *Everything I Learned, I Learned in a Chinese Restaurant.*
Remarks:
There is honor in the work people do, like the underpaid jobs usually associated with the working-class: bricklaying, landscaping, factory work, and the countless titles held in the service industry. There is also honor in the unpaid, often unrecognized work usually done by women: housekeeping, mothering, and the emotional labor undertaken for a family not making enough to thrive.

I also want to make clear that the term “working-class” is not a synonym for “white men,” despite the guy reading this. The working-class makes up the largest population in the US, spanning race, gender, geography, citizenship status, and every social intersection. And though class does not supersede these intersections, it heavily informs them and how members of dominant- and capitalist-classes treat those from the working-class. To be clear, the working class is not a rough draft for the upper classes. Working people are people on their own terms, with their own culture.

Readings:

“In the Skin’ of a Working-Class Text”
Leading scholar of working-class literature, Janey Zandy, provides in her foundational essay, “In the Skin of a Worker,” an unexhausted list of characteristics that help identify aspects of a text which make it working-class. Of note, Zandy makes clear that an author’s class origin is not an accurate indicator of whether a text is or is not working-class, stating that with the “appropriate class-conscious leap,” dominant-culture-born writers can write working-class texts (85). Metzgar echoes this, stating that scholars must put in the work to recognize that the working class “[depends] on a cultural disposition different from [dominant cultures],” that hinges on a “culture of being and belonging” (239). When taken in context with Jensen, Metzgar, and Bourdieu, “In the Skin of a Worker” provides a playbook for how predominantly middle-class professional circles can make that “class-conscious leap.” Below, I offer three characteristics that influence working-class writing or its engagement with literary texts.

First, a working-class text gives space for workers to speak for themselves, from within “the skin of the worker,” and doesn’t treat work as a backdrop for the rest of the text (Zandy 2004). Working-class texts foreground work, particularly wage-based, gig, domestic, or semi-legal work that has clear power dynamics influencing the workers. The work’s constraints on an individual’s life, its threat to and toll on the body, and the work’s influence on relationships both interpersonal and institutional between the laborer and authority are pillars of working-class
texts and literary discussion. Christopher and Whitson state that for a text to be working-class, it must reproduce “the conditions of the working class… a pace of activity controlled by machinery, supervisors, or a time clock… the boredom of sameness [and] mindless repetition” (73). Working-class texts depict work not as something an individual does off-page, or something someone watches others do, but as space where a member of the working class is devalued and oppressed (Ibid 74).

Second, many working-class texts highlight a class consciousness of this oppression. They show a “coming into class knowledge” on the part of individual characters who live in a “an economic system of exploited labor” (Zandy 92). This class consciousness becomes the “connective tissue” between the individual and other members of the working class, giving a working-class text a “communal sensibility” (Zandy 90). However, as working-class studies scholar Ben Clarke states, at the individual character level, working-class texts “do not ignore the personal” (361). Rather, they show that systemic inequality dictates how characters interact with setting, other characters, and how they navigate conflict. (361).

Third, in representing the struggles of long hours, the physical threat and toll of manual labor, and the unequal power dynamics that maintain the status quo, working-class texts do not ask for pity. Pity, as Christopher and Whitson argue, leads to assumptions that those in the working class should be lifted or pulled into the middle-class and adopt their ways of being (79). This makes many working-class texts political but that does not mean working-class texts should be construed as mere propaganda or temporary “sociological documentation” (Christopher and Whitson 73).

Reading from within “the skin of a worker,” offers inroads for a more equitable literary landscape that does not use working-class labor or bodies as negative comparisons to “legitimate” middle- or upper-class worldviews.

Reading:

The year 2008 was bad for most people. Normal people. Bank people. People caught somewhere in between felt it harder and for longer than most. I was one of the in-between people. Alice and I got by, lost some things along the way—evicted when our landlord let our first apartment go into default—but still had enough to feel more or less human. We married out of high school and were already coming up on ten years hitched. For the last two years, her cousin rented a trailer to us on a road that butted up to the Cass River. I had a few semesters’ worth of college in me, but the only thing I’d learned was that I could spend more than my share of time and money on something and still not feel like I’d learned anything at all. But I promised Alice, and she me, that we’d get enough put away and get ourselves a place.
The banks that came out of ’08 ahead had too many properties than they knew what to do with. That’s where the in-betweener like me and Rid came in. We kept those properties looking livable until they sold. Nobody wants to buy a shack sinking into a yard of chin-high weeds, and if a house looked like someone lived there, so the logic went, they wouldn’t become the target of vandalism. We’d pull up to a double-wide or a split-level out in the country, and before we unloaded, Rid walked around the whole place with a cheap digital camera, snapping shots of the house and yard. These were the before shots. Then, once we finished with the job, he’d go back and snap the after shots.

“So we can prove we did the job and didn’t screw it up or break in or anything,” he said.

Rid didn’t say much that wasn’t related to the job. At the first property of the day, he circled the house with a Weedwacker while I wrangled with the mower. I’d never been on a zero-turn mower before, one of those speedy numbers that wasn’t much more than a rubber seat cushion bolted above three sets of blades and a set of levers used for acceleration and steering. Just a nudge would gun that sucker along, and if you didn’t give both those big levers the same amount of love, the whole thing would start spinning out of control like some redneck hovercraft.

“Lines gotta be straighter,” Rid said. “Lines gotta be straighter.” I swerved down the lawn, taking a wide turn at the road and made my way back toward the house. “For the grace and love of naked baby Jesus, kid, you speak English? The big boss don’t pay if the job looks like shit. Straighten those lines out!” The wind kicked clippings into my eyes and I jerked the mower side to side as I looped around the lawn. The job looked like hell, even after Rid tried a quick touch-up, and he still had to blur the after photos just enough to hide what looked like a drunk haircut. That first house, a boarded-up cottage on a half acre, took forty-five minutes. In the truck, pushing past sixty, Rid let me have it.

“Fifteen minutes per job, max. Got it?” he said. “Thirty-minute drive time between jobs. That paces out to twenty bucks an hour. You just cut that in half.”

“Sorry, Ridley,” I said. “It’s my first time out.”

“A job worth doing is worth doing right and quickly. The first time. Hear me?” he said. He was all cheekbones and nose and his eyes got real narrow, as if he were daring me to not answer.

“First time,” I said. “Gotcha.”

“And call me Rid, only my ma called me Ridley.” By noon, he had rolled the sleeves of his T-shirt over his shoulders and I could see his veins. He looked like a burlap bag pulled tight over a classroom skeleton.

And that was Rid. Twenty bucks an hour, speeding from one vacant house to the next with a twenty-seven-year-old nobody in tow and a work list that looped and spiraled wider and wider as more jobs came in. We started that first week
mowing the abandoned summer houses in Caseville, and by the weekend, we’d wound up halfway to Flint spraying weed killer outside foreclosed apartment complexes.

When the next pay cycle started, we were back up along Saginaw Bay, mowing those same summer houses. They stopped being homes by the time Rid and I got to them; they were only a crisp ten-dollar bill, calluses, and heat rash to us. It only took a couple more screwups on the zero-turn and an earful from Rid before it all became routine to me. Pull in, unload, before shots, mow, weed, trim, after shots, load out, move on. Seventeen or so hours a day. As long as I could keep up with Rid’s pace, the paychecks would be heavy.

**Joe Milan**

Remarks:

I write a lot about rural, working-class people because I don't see many books that do with people who look like me or the people I grew up with. There are all types of people in the spaces between the cities. Many work hard. Many are just trying to get on in a world that’s determined to forget them. Before I seriously traveled, I carried the American ignorance that somehow American lives are so radically different from the margins that they warrant little attention. Yet, whether you travel the swampy roads of the Philippines, the mountains of Korea, or the flatlands of East Anglia, you will come upon the same kind of appliances rusting in front lots and ravines and all those spaces where the people live on rented hardscrabble. Scratch a little deeper, and you learn of the vast disparities that are felt among all those who bleed when they work and reap little back. Like how my ancestors' hands bled. Like how so many of our sisters and brothers and parents and neighbors and relatives’ hands bleed.

I try to write about how so many of us are in the same boat but pretend that we’re in different classes.

Reading:

*Excerpt from The All-American.*

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The first time I shot a bird, I was ten. We were out back, Bobby, me, and the kid who lived down a few trailers who never wore a shirt in summer. I think his name was Daniel but I’m not sure. We all just called him Skin. All of us had already shot guns with Uncle Rick, but Sheryl wouldn’t let us have any for ourselves yet. So, after a couple of months digging up stumps for a farmer not far from where we
lived, we saved enough money to get a couple of air-pump BB guns.

We shot cans. Then we shot crabapples off trees. Bobby couldn’t hit
nothing. He’d complain that it was the gun and we’d switch and he’d still miss.
Just like when we were out with Uncle Rick shooting real guns, Bobby always
pulled the trigger, never squeezed.

One day, after Bobby got angry and stormed off, it was just me and Skin.
Skin was a good shot and we started playing horse with targets farther and farther
out until it came to a pair of robins picking the ground just at the line where the
grass and the woods met.

“Think you can get a robin?” I said.

Skin got on one knee, pumped the BB gun, and aimed. He shot, and the BB
dropped in the grass. The birds kept pecking at the ground.

“Too far,” he said. “Could do it with my grandpa’s .22.”

I got on a knee and pumped the gun. I knew Skin was right; it was too far.
But I just wanted to prove it could be done. I wanted to be better than Skin. So,
instead of aiming, I grabbed a rock and threw it way past the robins into the
bushes. They took off and flew toward us and I shot one right in the chest. When
you shoot a bird with a BB, it doesn’t just drop, it tumbles. We could hear it thump
the ground, roll, and beat its wings as it gave off this airy kind of squawk.

I put it out with the butt of the BB gun. And we stood there for a minute,
amazed. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to be proud or ashamed.

“Show-off,” Skin said. “I never ate robin before.”

“Me neither,” I said.

But when I brought the robin back, Sheryl wasn’t proud of me and told me
to deal with the nasty thing outside. I didn’t eat it and I threw it in the bushes for
the cats. Uncle Rick just shook his head the next time he saw me, and Bobby didn’t
talk to me for a couple of days because he knew he couldn’t hit a robin in the air.

I felt no pride and no shame. It just happened. Later, when assholes started
shooting up schools, people kept talking about how the killers loved killing
animals and playing *Doom*. I didn’t know anything about playing *Doom*, but I
liked hunting and shooting with Uncle Rick. I wondered if there was something
wrong with me, something cold.

Now I’m in a taxi, and in the same way I wasn’t sure how to feel about that
 robin, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to feel about my father. A little voice tells
me to go back to the train, I’ve already got my birth certificate, what I came for,
why go looking for ghosts?

The undercarriage scrapes the change in the road, the line between the paved
town and the dirt countryside. We pass some farmland that’s covered in rows and
rows of black vinyl and clear greenhouses, little naked ground, lots of plastic.

We stop at the foot of a hill not far from town. A dirt path winds into the
thick of the woods. The driver points up the path. I pay him and the taxi leaves, kicking up dust.

The path up is rutty and overgrown. Patches of sun break through the canopy. Looking into the brush, you can still see where someone hacked the forest back to make way for a truck. A few birds I don’t recognize caw above. The woods are quieter here. As if everything wild just ran.

At the top of the hill, just past a couple of persimmon trees and a pile of hubcaps, is a clearing and the teeth of ruined walls: a collapsed house. Through the doorway there’s rubble of blue roof tiles. The window frames are rotted and plaster flakes fill the gaps in the grass. Everything sun-baked. Nothing intact.

A breeze whistles through the house. Out past a rusted car, behind a pair of rusting refrigerators and a pile of rust-spotted tin cans and broken glass, are cages. Many, many cages. I step on a plastic bowl and nearly trip on a spike in the ground. This I’ve seen before. I know rust-flaking metal and weeds and broken things that used to be special and new and pricey. Just like I know somewhere nearby, maybe in the woods, or in a run-down barn, there’s a pile of pallets with stakes and links to build a wall around a pit of dirt that smells of piss and blood and sweat.

So, my bio-father liked dog fights.
Win any money?
Lose so much you had to ditch me?
I kick a half-buried plastic jug. I’m not mad, but somehow, as if someone is watching me, I act this way to play along. It is an old feeling. Deep. It sticks down your throat and under your chest and vacuums everything you’ve got.

Where is he? Where’s his grave? All I find is rust and trash between the stalks of grass. I try to imagine a man living here. It doesn’t feel right, like one of those abandoned chicken shacks that traps a bunch of water in its foundation, so far out in the woods you just can’t figure out why anyone would bother to put something up.

I think of the robin again. How the cats fought that night in the bushes and how a couple of strays never returned.

“They run off. That’s what strays do,” Sheryl used to say, looking out the window above the sink, smoking a Mustang Cool. “They don’t want nothing to do with anything but for a meal. When they find it somewhere else, they go. They just go.”

I go back down the path, not bothering to look back or into the brush or up into the trees, because there’s nothing to learn that I don’t already know. Bio-father is dead and gone.

It’s a long walk back to town. And after the plastic-covered farmland, the houses with bad tile roofs and cracked walls and empty lots with little gardens and
empty lots with kids kicking around soccer balls screaming with the goals and dancing like touchdown dances and the houses crumbled and gutted for their wire and pipes and anything still good and usable and after the corner where you see the only nice new thing in the town, the city hall and a gas station across from it with a convenience store, and you notice that instead of Pennzoil T-shirts, these people got different kind of freebie shirts. A man squatting by his tractor, smoking, has a Buffalo Bills shirt. It reads SUPER BOWL CHAMPIONS.

The Bills never won a Super Bowl. It’s a fake.

Giwon is broke and sad and tired, and the people say whatever it is in Korean that means, Oh well. If I had grown up here I would be just as broke, trying to get out. Maybe playing soccer. I bet every kid in Giwon has an escape plan. Would my metrics be right for soccer?

Tibicut is way over there and Giwon is here, but it feels like you could go over the hill and be right on top of Lion Mountain and see Sunny Meadow in the crack of its ass.

**Toni Jensen**

Remarks:
I’m from a no-stoplight town in Iowa, population 843. My grandparents didn’t all graduate high school; my parents didn’t graduate college. As a first generation college student whose family farmed, before big ag took over the region, I write about working class people who wait tables, type up other people’s reports, tend bar and muck stalls dirtied by other people’s horses. I write about people who are, most often, as smart or smarter than their bosses but who lack the formal education to be the bosses themselves, who lack the resources and structures to understand the world of formal education. I write about Métis and other Native people like my father who worked the available jobs and also hunted and fished and worked a trapline. I write about people like my mother who spent a lifetime doing a lawyer and an accountant’s work at a secretary’s wages.

In my own history, I’ve worked for wages since I was ten years old, in jobs including: babysitting (ages 10–14), detasseling corn (ages 15–18), waitressing (ages 16–24), bartending (ages 22–24), newspaper reporting and editing (ages 18–23), telemarketing (age 20), public relations (ages 28–29), technical writing (ages 29–31), and teaching (ages 21–29; 31–present day). At sixteen with the waitressing job, then, I began the two-job hustle.

I’m mainly interested in the stories of this work but also in the structures—governmental, social, regional, racial, and cultural—that promote the tiered or
stacked ideas Americans have about work: white collar atop blue collar atop pink collar. All of it familiar and tidy, but none of it serving the majority of people very well.

Reading:
Excerpt from *Carry*.

Before moving to the neighborhood, in Arizona and on the reservation back in South Dakota, I taught English and public speaking classes. I loved the work in both places, the students, my colleagues, the vastness of landscape and sky. I especially loved the southern South Dakota landscape, the place in the center where it borders Nebraska. The whole area is beautiful, is surrounded by nature preserves and open land. In March each year, about a half a million sandhill cranes migrate through the region, stopping over at the ponds and small lakes of the Valentine National Wildlife Refuge.

I taught four classes each semester while I lived there, yet did not earn a salary above the poverty line. It’s what the university had to offer, and I have no complaint with anyone there, only with the overarching system that makes it so. Almost everyone there lived at or below the poverty line; most lived far below it.

Because I was poor, I worked a second job doing public relations of a sort for a nursing home in nearby Valentine, Nebraska, the mostly white town where I lived. It was an easy commute in good weather, the half hour or so north or south on Highway 83, but it was less easy sometimes in the winter. I would rather have lived on the reservation, but there was a housing shortage, a housing crisis. One thing the myth of the vanishing Indian continues to get wrong is that we’re disappearing.

All the white people I knew, including members of my family, assumed I left this job because living there was hard in the unquantifiable ways many white people assume it’s hard to live and work among people who aren’t white. It wasn’t.

My motives for leaving were simple—I wanted to hustle less, to work less. I was tired.

This is in the early 2000s, and it amuses me, nearly twenty years later, when people write about the new gig economy, the new second job, the new hustle. There’s nothing new, of course, about any of it. What’s new is how members of the upper middle class now are part of this experience. Once it’s theirs, it’s a
subject to be studied and written about endlessly. It’s a situation, an epidemic, an important cultural shift.

Before this struggle became reality for young people from the upper middle class, back when working two and three and four part-time jobs was the norm only for those from poverty and the lower middle class, in that time I’ll call since always, no one noticed. No one studied it because there was no “it” to study.

Whether a circumstance is acknowledged openly or formally or whether it’s denied, how a situation becomes one worthy of study, is mainly in how it does or does not intersect with or affect the lives of the wealthy. Because it’s a commonly held American belief that those from poverty or any version of its neighborhood deserve to suffer, to overwork, to burn out their minds and health and good hearts early. It’s a shrug-and-move-on situation if it’s a situation at all. It’s a Wednesday. It’s as regular as bright leaves falling off trees in the fall.

Part of how and why I come to feel sorry for Susie, then, or at least to feel a sort of kinship with her, is through her being poor, being displaced. Even though I learn she’s sued almost every member of her family, some multiple times, even though she rants and raves and seemingly has no other work than to make trouble, I feel for how in her middle age, she’s both poor and exiled.

**Dustin M. Hoffman**

Remarks:
I want to know about everyone’s job, because they’re all fascinating and tragically often invisible. I personally spent a decade working construction, mostly painting houses, during the housing bubble that led to the 2008 recession. I escaped to writing and teaching, but many of my friends working the trades did not. They pawned their power tools, lost jobs, lost homes. I still experience a kind of survivor’s guilt about it, and that’s led to a sense of duty to tell the stories of these people who don’t have the same privileges I do. Writing about working people is my penance but also my obsession. I love the jargon, the inside jokes, the families that forge behind the backs of customers and terrible bosses. These jobs rarely offer fair compensation, and it’s even rarer that they offer recognition and validation for a job well done. So that will be my job, then, as an artist—to give these working identities a little light, a little air to breathe.
on a second shift, collapsed over a headlight, the same headlight he’d been assembling since 1978, the same five Phillips-head screws. They just kept rolling down the belt and they always did and they always will and they’re coming down the belt just now, into Betty Davenport’s hands as we speak, which is why she won’t make the service. We understand. Everyone understands someone has to screw those five screws. Everyone understands the line can’t stop.

Dad owned one suit, back of his closet. We pulled the plastic bag, unzipped a brown number that seemed impossibly small, tailored to fit a miniature Dad even Mom couldn’t recall. There was a picture somewhere, our sister Jilly said, of him pinched into that suit and squatting on the hood of an orange Mustang. Mom didn’t remember an orange Mustang. None of us did. Jilly dug through boxes and albums but couldn’t prove it.

The brown suit sprawled across the kitchen table all night, and when we found that deflated man in the morning, we knew it wouldn’t fit our dead dad. No way.

We returned to the closet to shuffle hangers, all holding neatly draped Wranglers and Levi’s and Lees. Finding pants formal enough for death was a problem. Dad didn’t go to church, and he’d worn blue to all our weddings, all our babies’ pageants and baptisms and spelling bees. Anyplace that don’t let me wear jeans, don’t need me, Dad always said. But we had an open casket to face, and the mortician was calling again asking if they could lend some burial garments from their stock or if we’d be bringing clothes over. Borrowing burial garments from the funeral home sounded like a good way to make twenty-dollar slacks cost two hundred, and we knew Dad would’ve hated that. It would’ve made him spit, right on the carpet, which he’d done only four times—when the union busted, when the plant cut overtime, when Jilly’s husband bruised her jaw, and when Jilly remarried Janice, but that time he’d done it because he was too happy. Janice was from the factory, from his floor, and he loved her more than he’d ever loved any of us. She cried hardest when we unzipped that sad little brown suit.

Back at the closet, we dug under brightly colored teal and orange sweaters from the ‘80s and found a pair of threadbare jeans bleached white as a ghost. In a cardboard box labeled with a Sharpie-drawn smiley face wearing a hardhat, we found denim so deeply indigo they’d pass for black, but they were speckled in white paint, streaked in the maroon of Jilly’s teenage room, dabbed in the sage green of my kid room, dotted in the gray and purple and red and beige of the rotating colors Mom had demanded for our front door over the decades, splashed
in the canary yellow of baby Wanda’s room that she only got to live in for three weeks and four days before she stopped breathing one night in her crib.

Jilly liked the idea of burying him in these pants, said it’d be like taking the family house down to the dirt with him, but we knew that just wouldn’t be right. You can’t go to the grave wearing your weekend-work pants. Since we couldn’t decide, we resorted to a game. Each of us would pick a pair of jeans at random, eyes closed, all of us good and drunk off the bottle of ten-year-old bourbon Dad had been saving for the most special occasion, and we supposed this was it.

We stumbled into his closet, blindfolded now since we’d decided none of us could be trusted to keep our eyes closed. When it was my turn, I stumbled in, head throbbing because they’d tied the blindfold too tight in their drunken belligerence. It felt like my eyes might roll back into my skull, and I’d show up at Dad’s service too blind to read the eulogy I couldn’t bring myself to write. But then my fingers found his denim and I squeezed and I crouched to bury my nose in his smell—shop grease and WD-40 and Brut deodorant and Stetson cologne and behind that fatherly potpourri, there was the trace of ammonia he could never quite mask. Dad was a heavy sweater. Even dumping vinegar in the washing machine couldn’t cut the stench that made him so self-conscious, a smell we said nothing about even though we all hated it but we fucking loved him so much and I was glad my eyes were so squeezed behind that blindfold or else I’d cry and he couldn’t stand crying because it would get him going. He was as much a crier as he was a sweater—a father who couldn’t keep anything bottled up, who poured everything out on the living room and factory floor.

I fanned my fingertips across the dozens of pairs of jeans and said a Hail Mary and an eeny-meeny-miny-mo, and I grasped that pair. This one. Right here. This would be the one we’d bury him in, because could you imagine him wearing anything else?

Q&A Session