

# Daniels, J. (2023) *The Luck of the Fall*. Michigan State University Press.

## Review by Sherry Lee Linkon

Thirty years ago, Jim Daniels hooked me with his poems about work and working people. Some were laugh-out-loud funny while others were more poignant, and they all felt gut-punch real. I still regularly use "Factory Love" and "Short Order Cook" to get students thinking about how work can be at once exploitative and fulfilling. I've written before about Daniels's Digger series of short stories, which stretches across a couple of decades in both the writer's career and his character's life on the assembly line. While I love his poems, I also admire Daniels's range as a writer. And he's a hard worker. He has published more than 30 books of poetry, seven story collections, and four screenplays, plus several edited collections. Jim Daniels might be a "Tenured Guy" -- a hilarious send-up of academic workplace politics that was a popular favorite anytime he read at a Working-Class Studies conference or event -- but he is also a very productive guy.

In *The Luck of the Fall*, his latest story collection, Daniels takes us into the lives of the kind of white working-class men who have been described in much contemporary discourse as "left behind." These are not the displaced workers of deindustrialized Detroit. These are their sons and grandsons, men for whom Digger's ambivalence about spending years at the Sterling Axle Plant represents a modest and unattainable dream.

These stories reveal the depth and persistence of loss that the industrial working class suffered as the world changed around them. Like earlier generations who struggled to recover from the loss of good union factory jobs, these men are also recovering -- from addiction, failed romances, low expectations, and limited opportunities. In the title story, Daniels's narrator looks back fondly on a childhood when fathers worked overtime, boys "beat on each other out of reckless affection or subconscious preparation for our assembly-line futures" (3). Instead of growing up into stable lives, the boys and girls of the narrator's memory become addicts who reconnect with each other accidentally, "in the light of the bare-bulb lamp on the naked floor of that abandoned house that had been repurposed for drugs" (5). These are not stories of triumphant resilience. They are stories of resignation and, in some cases, of giving up.

But Daniels also helps us understand how limited economic options can prompt attitudes and actions that make things even worse. We see that link in the title story, where Daniels explains that because the children of displaced autoworkers "could not shoot" the "faceless bad guys" who shut down the plants, "we shot each other until houses were abandoned by our parents, or by us" (5). Often writing in first person, he takes us into the minds of men with few options who often choose the least promising door. In "Heart-Attack Bear," a group of high school friends reunite, including some who have moved away to pursue professional careers, but the story's narrator feels shame and frustration over his less successful path. He feels invisible, "a fat, balding middle-aged man." He went to Michigan Tech briefly "to play football," but he wasn't big enough or fast enough to get off the bench, and he "didn't put much value on the free education." So he dropped out and

married his high school sweetheart. Divorced after more than twenty years, he still mourns his marriage and still lusts after his former sister-in-law. "I'm a guy from Detroit," he thinks. "I can fix a lot of things, but not my life" (61). As in much of Daniels's writing, the first-person narration invites us to empathize with these characters in part because we understand their flaws.

A few stories expand the range of vision to people whose situations aren't as clearly influenced by economic and social decline. In "The Girl in the Tie-Dyed Shirt outside Spice Island," a long-married couple sit in their car "waiting to pick up some takeout" (93). They aren't quite happy, but they are stable: "My wife Meg idling in the driver's seat. I sat beside her, idling also. After thirty-three years, it was the best we could do. At least we hadn't stalled. At least we weren't rolling backward down the hill" (93). In "Single Room" -- the only story told from a female point of view -- we see the world from the perspective of an anorexic college student. She has returned to campus after study abroad, and she has turned inward. She's changed her major to English because she likes writing poetry, but "now her voice is disappearing along with the rest of her, . . . even her thought bubbles seemed blank" (104). She is determined to remain isolated, but the story also shows her beginning to connect with a guy who is equally determined to break through to her.

"Single Room" is at once heartbreaking and the tiniest bit hopeful, as is "Corrections," which offers glimmers of hope along with a tinge of warning. The story follows Hank, who values the relationships but not the crime and violence of his old motorcycle gang. As we follow him on a trip home to Detroit for the funeral of a gang member, we learn how he is trying to rewrite his life. He works as a guard at a private prison, and he is hoping to marry a woman from the Philippines with whom he's been corresponding. The story comes late enough in the book that, without Daniels offering any specific evidence, we suspect that she is a fraud. But Hank writes sincerely, promising her that he is trying to be a good man, that he will take good care of her and her family. Meanwhile, his gang wants his help in killing an old buddy whom they blame for the death of another gang member, and he must decide what to do. In Hank, we see the draw of a better life but also the many obstacles that keep that better life, like his correspondence girlfriend, perpetually in the distance.

While a sense of regret runs through these stories, Daniels's characters do not imagine the more prosperous past as a site of nostalgia. Instead, their nostalgia is focused on earlier days when romances were still full of hope, when going to college or into the plant seemed like it might enable a good life. And Daniels always reminds us that those good times were not as good as people remember. In some stories, he takes that even further, showing how nostalgia can trick us into foolish hope. In "Just a Crack," the narrator goes to visit an old girlfriend. She had sent him a letter, "about us, everything she remembers, and missed." The narrator recognizes the appeal of "some clear, simple, burnished nostalgia for back when we were wanna-be rebels." But he also understands that their reunion will not return them to the time before "rebellion washed away in our self-manufactured storms" (110). Addiction has too strong a hold on this woman, as does her violent boyfriend.

The stories in *The Luck of the Fall* highlight the continuing effects of economic and political shifts that began decades ago. Decades of struggling with bad jobs and low pay, addiction, and most recently the pandemic have lowered people's expectations and left many depressed. In Jim Daniels's eyes, though, the humans of the Rust Belt are not "left behind." They take center stage, and Daniels makes sure we see their whole stories, not just their struggles.

**Reviewer Bio**

**Sherry Lee Linkon** is Professor of English at Georgetown University. She is the author of *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* and, with John Russo, of *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown*. The founding president of the Working-Class Studies Association, she was one of the founders of “new working-class studies” as a field.