



Walking With A. D. Winans:  
A Review of *Drowning Like Li Po in a River Of Red Wine*

By [Neeli Cherkovski](#)

It is late afternoon and I return to *Drowning Like Li Po in a River of Red Wine, Selected Poems 1970-2010* by A. D. Winans, a treasure-trove of images and insights from a lifelong member of the non-academic club. Winans' poems have the authority of the streets, the bars, and the workplace. They remind me of Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay, those mid-Americans, not because they were of the Midwest, but on account of their way of slicing right down the center of American consciousness. If A.D. Winans connects with anyone, it is people themselves, driven by the natural ideology of daily living. He does much of this from the vantage-point of San Francisco, where he was born and raised, and to where he returned after military service. His poet's eye wanders over the city, in and out of North Beach bohemia, in and out of his own often acerbic attack on the death of compassion in a society driven by greed. Yet he also pauses to eulogize the commonality of human experience, always in transition. In "The Old Italians of Aquatic Park" he writes, "there is something sad about being Americanized/there is something sad about/growing old/the bocce ball rolls slowly/along the grass." In another mood, we are invited to sit at the poet's side: "Pull up a chair/Take off your shoes/The telephone ringer is off/The doorbell disconnected? It is New year's Day as Winans goes on to ease the poem into a profoundly easy poetics: "You are welcome here/This is a new year/A new day/Come/Sit down/Make yourself/At home."

Among A.D.'s direct antecedents are Jack Micheline and Bob Kaufman, two outlaw literary characters, even among the outlaw beats. From them, the poet was inspired to define his poetic stance from the power of ordinary speech. That is where he put his trust. As he hung his hat there, he began to hone a keen and original sense of observation, a matter-of-factness standing in direct contrast to literary trends of the 1970s and beyond. There is a theme of opposition in these poems -- an opposition to literary standard-bearers. This is evidenced dramatically in an elegy for Kenneth Patchen, another of Winans' heroes: "where were they when you lay in your deathbed/crippled and dying/where were they when you lay starving and broke?" He goes on to describe a memorial reading for Patchen, and, like the consummate outsider he has always been,

observes, “no real sign of emotion in this bought and paid for audience/each poet following the other like a line of corpses/strung out for ten miles. . .”

The poems dive deep into the past -- memories -- hidden moments or scenes on the raucous streets of San Francisco’s North Beach -- populate this hefty volume. Consider the ease of the following lines from a poem called “I Remember Still:

I remember still how wonderful it was  
Running to join each other’s dreams  
Sharing our separate worlds of hope  
In rooms of music where angels lay

It is a reverie, and nostalgic, and easy to picture. The poet runs to ‘rescue’ a moment in time, easing into a language that will eventually ump out of the ordinary. Of his shared time with an unnamed woman, he sees into a marvelous beyond. Rather than spiral deeply into metaphor, Winans stays near the surface of the moment:

It was a work of abstract art  
A garden of unsurpassed beauty  
I became God himself  
And having you  
I did not need a son

The leap here is pure Winans, looking for a center, or a sense of equanimity, and finding it in the straight-forward declaration, “I became God himself.”

A series called “Tales of Crazy John” demonstrates Winans’ humorous side. When I read these poems I thought back on Patchen’s more whimsical writings, but here Winans keeps to a more accessible narrative than the elder poet. A reader may easily identify Crazy John. Is he not a ubiquitous character, one found almost everywhere, and especially so in the bohemian world Winans found himself in for much of his life. We see:

Crazy John was a local poet of some repute  
slightly paranoid with a laugh that never  
failed to frighten the establishment and  
their highly trained psychiatrists who  
recommended he open a hotdog stand  
in downtown san francisco. . .

In another poem:

they say Crazy John is  
mad because he claims  
to convene with  
the ancients grabs

strange girls off  
the street and tries  
to sell them his peripheral vision

but its been many years  
since I've seen him  
perform a miracle

he claims he's waiting  
for the holy ghost  
to come out  
of hiding

I can picture the poet concocting an endless trail of Crazy John poems, but there are plenty of characters in the Winans "cosmos" to build around. One of them was Paddy O'Sullivan, a North Beach denizen who had a slim volume of sentimental poetry he may or may or have written. He was a quintessential outsider, skirting the edges, a heroic figure for Winans:

Paddy O'Sullivan. . .  
walking the street of north beach  
in search of old visions now only  
memories in the nightmare mirror  
of madness -- swapping tales  
with obscene priests hung over in  
the drunkenness of eternal failure

In the concluding lines of the poem O'Sullivan is left on a corner as Winans sails over his hometown, soliloquizing, then returns to O'Sullivan

the sun is not as you see it now  
everything changes and yet remains the same  
the streets are no more or less intense  
the lines on your face are the lines  
on my face as we move back into  
the body into the inner flesh measured by  
the amnesia of yesterday

For Winans, O'Sullivan is a soul mate, a man who understands that "the town coughs up its dead most rudely." The identification with the man of "old visions" is a way in which the poet comes to grips with time. He celebrates the rude city and accepts what he dubs as "the raw nerves of time returning to haunt me." Winans chooses time passing as a major theme in his poetry. Through that prism he draws portraits, not just of this affable elder, but of many others as well.

Seared in the often melancholy tones of classical jazz, and of the Blues, he draws his tempo from the recognition of the inevitable.

“For Bob Kaufman” is an anthem in the Winans opus. He casts a keen eye, sentimental, yet realistic, setting a mood that draws on rich experience and the art of observation. The poem is the finest expression of life in the North Beach literary community as I have ever encountered. There is no need to re-arrange the sense of shared time. It is not difficult to imagine Kaufman himself leaning in on the tempo of Winans’ mind reeling out the scene as it existed:

Room full of poets, writers, philosophers  
drinking the hours away at Spec’s bar here  
in north beach this cold weekend night  
Vicki and the great felony artists waiting  
for Fairfax Alix and the midnight party  
Patchen’s old lady and books translated  
into a hundred tongues

The grounding is deeply felt. One may imagine fog crawling up the street outside of the bar - glasses clinking -- the bartender moving swiftly and skillfully down the line of drinkers. Winans takes it all in -- and holds it -- then giving what he can to the poem, which is a whole world of being:

a table full of beatnik memories  
old testament prophets  
Micheline and yes you Bob Kaufman  
come out of the evening shadows  
out from beneath your safe withdrawal  
that makes you walk these streets no  
longer filled with wonder

but tonight you are alive  
thin and trembling like a pale ghost  
the protruding veins of your skull  
working out their poetic skill  
eyes dilated lips trembling  
giant come home to taunt  
the soldier’s  
here at Spec’s  
new but not so new words from the head. . .

Winans walks on ordinary streets and in ordinary places that he makes into kind of sacred profanity. Here is the concluding stanza of “City Blues,” yet another San Francisco poem, gathered like mythic gold off the streets.

a city of sober comedians, whose children  
resemble w. c. fields

in a city where laughter is  
everything and poets a dime  
a dozen

“North Beach Poem,” one of the more ambitious works in the book, included in *North Beach Poem, 1977*, one of Winans’ most well-known collections, a classic of time and place, combs over that pocket of San Francisco like a newsreel from the poet’s youth. We participate in an unfolding of images that is anything but gentle, though it beams-in on the all-too-human aspects of a real neighborhood as they existed before things became sanitized. This poem, and others like it in the collection, is driven forward by scenes from the working-class town that no longer exists, and so we see what had been not what is in the present:

out into  
the harsh night into

the lonely streets  
of north beach stoned  
...

old men and women leaving behind their sins  
dressed in simple hats and death black shawls  
bowing to the holy eternal mumble  
of dead saints dressed in gold thirsting  
for the wine that is denied them

This rich language hovers on the edges of the surreal. The poet floods us with finely-drawn portraits. They draw on time bumping into time, rip-tides of images, observation torn out of pathos.

the heads of the masses staring always  
staring searching for paradise  
fat and content smoking tijuana slims  
stone faced magicians. . .

I find the mood here so captivating -- a true tone poem -- these “stone-faced magicians march down through time -- transmuted into timeless figures. Winans continues, celebrating what others might not even see, looking deep into

san francisco  
home of my birth where  
iowa scarecrows peek through broken  
windows at overheated stallions breathing  
hard down the necks of sweating dwarfs. . .

It is an imaginative mind now that discovers a city underneath the city, an underground of associations that summons up the endearing heroes of the imagination:

walking the night  
walt whitman in search  
of sherwood anderson lost  
in clown alley sniffing used  
ashtrays

The poet turns time upside-down. The North Beach poem becomes a kaleidoscope of metropolitan angst. Line breaks fly. Capitalization is tossed aside. Here is a poet who walks on the rough-hewn side of the avenue, building a tough, whimsical, and loving montage.

He opens the doors to one of the city's favorite watering holes and shows us that:

superman is alive and well  
at gino and carlo's disguised  
as a dissipated italian gone  
mad on kryptonite

The nine-age paean to North Beach takes nine pages of the collection. It has the force of Nelson Algren's prose poem to Chicago, containing the same sense of the unsparing note-taker who lives for the true tenor of what comes before his eyes. All those big-town sorrows. That army of misfits. Those old-folks hanging on to outdated religious myths. "Peter with dreams/of picasso/who walks/the open artery/of a dying wound." Winans does what he can to bring it all home. Here again are Paddy O'Sullivan and Bob Kaufman, and a new figure: ". . . Jerome whose visions/of nexus faded in/mendocino state hospital/where you can't always tell/the difference/between a smile and a scream."

Much later in the collection *Old Warriors of North Beach* continues the probing down and around the home turf. The pacing is a bit different, decades have passed, and Winans may seem time in a whole new light, an older man, an elder poem. It is 2004 and he informs his reader:

walking the streets of North Beach  
in search of the elusive ginger fish smell  
Death a sightless chauffeur waiting  
like a concubine facing another  
Apocalyptic day

I can only tell the reader to come walk with A. D. Winans. Step into this whirl of one life lived in poetry. It is a strong song. One we need now as always, for our sanity and our true selves.