

William Heath

A Vow of Mutual Care

David Salner. *A Place to Hide*. Apprentice House Press, 2021.

David Salner is, in my opinion, the poet laureate of working people. In *John Henry's Partner Speaks*, *The Stillness of Certain Valleys*, and two other books, he has drawn upon his poetic license and blue-collar life. He has been employed as a longshoreman in San Francisco; a bus driver in Texas; a cab driver as well as a worker in a power plant and graphite shop in West Virginia; at plants that processed iron ore and magnesium in Minnesota and Utah; at a steel foundry in Arizona. From these experiences he has charted with admirable craft the daily agonies and occasional exhilarations of the men and women who labor for our country. For example, one poem, "Furnace," depicts the ordeal of facing the intense heat of an open hearth; another, "Monongah WV," recounts the horrific day in 1907 when the Fairmont Coal Company exploded, killing more than 360 ("So many died for coal"); a sequence of poems creates a "partner" for the famed John Henry to vividly recreate his story. While some poems are grim, others are humorous, such as one about the day he downed a six-pack for breakfast ("I was giving the finger to dead-end jobs, / getting pretty well primed"). Another celebrates the small pleasure of carrying a steel lunch pail ("something I can count on"). He has a keen eye for the way workers look out for each other, and he laments in poignant detail how once thriving industries became part of the Rust Belt. He captures the tragic loss of lives and limbs in the harsh world of American laboring people—he himself lost a big toe while sandblasting in Arizona.

Now he brings his considerable abilities to his first novel, *A Place to Hide*. James Little, whose famed brother Frank was lynched for labor organizing in 1917, and who has been recently released after six years in jail, is fleeing from Montana vigilantes who wish him a similar fate. Changing his name to Bill Waite, he spends much of his fugitive life literally underground, first as a sandhog digging the Holland Tunnel then as a coal miner in Pennsylvania, each risky task described in nitty-gritty detail with great skill by Salner.

Often his hero survives dangers because he and his tough fellow workers share a vow of mutual care. During his cross-country flight, friendly truck drivers teach him the Code of the Road (this chapter appeared in *Kestrel*, issue 39): "We help each other and we help other folks. We give rides. We don't ask questions." Once he arrives in New York, he finds work on the tunnel under the Hudson that

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is especially dangerous: a huge circular steel shield slowly presses “the primordial mush of the riverbed” out “in giant sausage shapes” that the men must then load onto conveyors or haul out in carts. Because they are working underwater, succumbing to the bends is an ever-present threat. Their survival depends upon reliable partners:

No one else worried about their safety, why should they? Unless you had a partner, someone for whom you felt responsibility. That buddy provided you with an excuse to fret, to make extra sure, on his account, that the pressure was not being reduced too quickly or to concern yourself that the blasting was being done by men who knew their trade. It wasn't for yourself that you worried but for your partner. This was a mutual thing, a caring that had saved many lives. Good engineering was necessary. But the only truly failsafe equipment is the human heart.

Bill's buddy is Virgil, who takes him home to his apartment on the Lower East Side, an area that has come to epitomize the Jewish immigrant experience in the early decades of the twentieth century. Bill immerses himself in this culture that retains its vibrancy in spite of pervasive poverty and falls in love with Hannah, who lives nearby with her daughter. Salner movingly traces the budding of their romance and how it not only taps into Bill's deepest feelings but also makes him vulnerable to discovery and forces him to flee once more to the coal mines of Pennsylvania. What happens next leads to the novel's satisfyingly suspenseful conclusion. A tale of life on the lam with a deeply human dimension, *A Place to Hide* is a memorable read.

David Salner's work appeared in *Kestrel* 28, 35, & 39.

