



Ghosts Of
Tom Joad

A Story of the #99 Percent

A Novel
by

Peter Van Buren

Thank you for preordering my new book, Ghosts of Tom Joad: A Story of the #99Percent. As a very small way to say thanks, here is a short section that had to be dropped to keep the page count manageable. I hope you enjoy it while waiting for the full book to come out. No spoilers here, but a few hints as to what Amazon will be sending you.

After you've read the book, I will also be happy to schedule a complimentary Skype session with your book club, and/or with your local library or school. Other ideas are also welcome, so just let me know at info@ghostsoftomjoad.com. Thank you again for your preorder.

Peter Van Buren

I grew up in Ohio, more in a suburb than a place just like Reeve (the fictional setting for the story in *Ghosts*), but I saw for myself the changes I've written about in this book. Our town had a sprawling factory, making big aluminum bodied semi-trailers. Nearby was Lorain, Ohio, the nearest "city," which had a huge steel making complex, a shipyard building for the Great Lakes (vessels like the famous Edmund Fitzgerald, from the song) and a string of Ford plants making cars and trucks. If you saw or drove an Econoline van from the 1970s, it probably came from there. I watched every one of those factories downsize, get sold off to foreign firms or just give up and close during my high school and college years.

Lorain, Ohio, something of my model for the fictional Reeve, is a snapshot of our modern economy. Population is down more than six percent since 2000. You can rent a house with a yard and a garage there for under \$600 a month, and the landlord will be glad to have you. The median income is only \$30,526, low even for Ohio where the average is still only \$45k. About one third of the households earn less than \$20k a year even as the poverty line for a family of four in America is \$23,000. Nationally, the numbers are equally grim: more than forty-six million Americans—about one in seven—rely on food stamps, the equivalent of the entire populations of Texas and New York. The program is only two percent of the federal budget, though continues to be cut back by politicians who do not seem to care whether Americans eat or starve. There are few people who need food stamps who think they are getting enough. In my own state, if I applied as a single man with absolutely no resources, the most I could get in food assistance is \$50 a week. That's about seven bucks a day, and it is hard to survive on that without skipping meals and buying the lowest quality, cheapest stuff you can find. I know; I tried it for a month as part of my research, of course using my own money, as an experiment. I ended up with canned tuna for breakfast and bologna and white bread for dinner to make the money last.

The town I lived in, before the factories closed, had a sizable blue-collar population. Those men and women lived on the same streets with my own gray-collar family (dad sold paint.) They had above-ground pools in the back yard, two cars, took vacations and sent their kids to college. Economically and socially there was no difference between the white/gray-collar families and the blue-collar families, something that existed in America for a

couple of generations after World War II and is now gone. What some call the Greatest Generation turned out economically to be the Greatest Exception. I cannot for the life of me see how it can come back.

My old town is still there, though the population has turned over significantly. Most now commute to jobs. Anyone who still works in town is in the service industry, doing a job that does not make or create anything, putting in hours at a nail salon or retail store or, for many adults, behind the counter at a fast-food restaurant. Nearly fifty percent of all adults have worked in the restaurant industry at least once during their life, being trained for the new economy. Restaurant workers who get tips only have to be paid sub-minimum wage, about two dollars an hour. That has not been adjusted for 22 years, though restaurant prices have of course gone up, so the owners are doing well.

The events in *Ghosts* are fictional to a point (though all taken from reality and research), but Hill 124 is a real place. The Hill is the setting for one of the book's climatic scenes, but I need to leave those details for you to discover when you read the book. The Hill is in Yongsan-gu, Korea, though it is not known by that name. A small plaque commemorates the bloody defense of the hill by members of the U.S. 8th Army as part of the see-saw battle for Seoul during the Korean War. Not a significant location in the ranks of Inchon or Chosin, the hill was near where I lived and a nice place now to walk. Elderly Korean women still climb up to collect mushrooms from under the snow, and it is quite beautiful in the winter even with the ghosts I know are there.

The year I spent in Iraq, chronicled in my first book, *We Meant Well: How I Helped Lose the Battle for the Hearts and Minds of the Iraqi People*, changed me. I spent a lot of time with soldiers in the field. They lived a hard life, out there and back home. Many of them joined the military to either get away from something (wife, girlfriend, abusive boyfriend, bad home life) or because they couldn't find another way to earn a living in a tough job market. Few were heroes and even fewer would do anything but laugh when they were called that by people who knew nothing of their world. That's not to say they weren't patriotic, it's to say they were motivated by a complex set of things. I drew from those many conversations, in Iraq and afterwards, to try and tell a bit of their story (the protagonist, Earl, saw his grandfather, father and best friend service in the Army.) Tragically, too many of those men and women in Iraq took their own lives, either quickly with a pistol or in slow motion suffering from PTSD. For myself, the bitter experience I had coming home, losing my job of 24 years with the U.S. Department of State because of the criticisms in *We Meant Well*, fill this book as well.

The main character, Earl, spends most of his adult life working at various dead-end retail jobs for minimum wage. His, and my, experiences are combined into a composite big box store in the book called Bullseye. I worked in retail for minimum wage, both at age 16 and again at age 53, and most all the stories about "Bullseye" are true. While I lived a life from teenager stocking shelves to older adult stocking shelves, the minimum wage only rose by a few bucks. The minimum wage today in most states is a little more than seven bucks an hour. What has changed significantly is who is now working these minimum wage jobs. Once upon a time they were filled with high school kids earning pocket money. In 2013, the jobs are encumbered by

adults struggling to get by. Some thirty million Americans are trying to live on such wages, so something is wrong in what many still insist is the world's strongest economy.

Lastly, Angie, Earl's true first kiss and ultimate source of redemption in the book. Angie comes from someplace very special for me, and I think I'll just keep that one for myself.

There is a rich body of fiction describing the darkest episodes in American economic history. *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, and John Ford's masterful film of the book, stand out, and both obviously informed my writing. My title takes the name of Steinbeck's own protagonist, Tom Joad (you can learn more about the evolution of Steinbeck's character as interpreted by Woody Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Morello and Rage Against the Machine, Elvis Costello, and Mumford and Sons at http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=hrYpysKRcfA.)

Before writing *Grapes*, a work of fiction, Steinbeck did a series of seven nonfiction pieces for the *San Francisco News*, and a piece for *The Nation*, documenting conditions in the migrant camps of central California. The author also traveled the same Route 66 used by the Okie families before creating his "made up" story. Steinbeck's close friend, Thomas Collins, was a Farm Security Administration employee who worked in the Arvin Sanitary Camp, giving him access to the families and many written documents. Collins went on to serve as technical advisor to John Ford. Steinbeck's famous quote, "Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires," hums in the background of my book.

Two other books worth reading along these lines are *Appointment in Samarra* by John O'Hara and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson. My fictional town of Reeve, Ohio is located "near" the more famous fictional town setting of *Samarra's* Gibbsville, Pennsylvania and the actual *Winesburg* location of Clyde, Ohio. Written contemporaneously, these books captured the uncertainty and fear of their times, as no one writing knew when or how the Depression would end.

Most of *Ghosts* is set in the 1970s. The 1970s as a transition decade, an explanation of how we got from prosperity to despair, is the subject of *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* by Jefferson Cowie and *The 1970s: A New Global History* by Thomas Borstelmann. Both are accessible contemporary histories that build elements of the popular culture into the larger socioeconomic narrative.

Sociologist Morris Berman provided much of the intellectual and economic underpinning for this story. Berman's trilogy, *The Twilight of American Culture*, *Dark Ages America*, *The Final Phase of Empire*, and *Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline* are sober, though essential, reading.

The role of women in our New Economy is central to the *Ghosts* story. *Left Out in*

America, by Pat LaMarche, is a sensitive, sympathetic look at the lives of homeless women in modern America. Pat, as part of her campaign as the 2004 Green Party Vice Presidential candidate, spent time living in homeless shelters to educate herself and raise awareness for the special issues women face on top of the daily struggle to simply feed themselves and their children. Though I spent some time myself living out of my car to prepare for this book, Pat offered a perspective unavailable otherwise to me. Pat lost the election for VP that year to Dick Cheney, but continues her work as a journalist.

Nickel and Dimed, On (Not) Getting By in America, by Barbara Ehrenreich, is an evocative picture of a woman's life lived at minimum wage. Ehrenreich worked as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing-home aide, and Wal-Mart associate. She discovered that one job is not enough; she needed at least two to live indoors.

For those wishing to learn more about America's working class, the very best nonfiction on the subject are the books by Dale Maharidge and Michael Williamson, particularly *Someplace Like America: Tales from the New Great Depression*. Maharidge as the writer, with Williamson as a photographer, chronicle the new landscape of the working poor in America, and focus specifically on Youngstown, Ohio and its former roll as a steel making town. Working this topic together since 1980, the two Pulitzer-Prize winners have followed the lives of several families over the thirty-year span to present a devastating portrait of joblessness. Short of growing up in the Rust Belt, these books give their readers the most authentic feel for that time and place available.

No Strength Without Union: An Illustrated History of Ohio Workers, 1803-1980, by Raymond Boryczka and Lorin Lee Cary, is a wonderful resource. The book is half text, drawn from manuscripts and unpublished material, ripe with quotations from several generations of workers, and half photos. It is also full of statistics and a comprehensive bibliography for those who want to dig deeper.

Randy Fox is a photographer and journalist who has made it his life's work to chronicle the changes in the Midwest, over roughly the same period this book is set in. Look up his column on the Huffington Post, or visit his website at www.randyfoxphotography.com for some of the most beautiful photos of the dead and dying towns of Western Pennsylvania. If you want to know what a place like my fictional Reeve, Ohio really looks like, Randy's photos can show you. You can also have a look at my own photos of places like Weirton, West Virginia and Mingo Junction, Ohio at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wemeantwell/>

Bruce Springsteen wrote several of his more poignant songs about working life on the album *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (I guess he reads Steinbeck too.) The songs *The New Timer* and *Youngstown* are based on Maharidge and Williamson's work, and Bruce contributed the foreword to their most recent book. Springsteen is the most relentless and prolific chronicler in popular culture of the plight of the working poor, picking up the job from Dust Bowl singers like Woody Guthrie. Angry but ebullient, Springsteen echoes Maharidge and Williamson in believing that a new era will follow deindustrialization and that the men and women they write about will survive into it.

For me, I am not as sure about the future.

I wrote the basic outline of the chapter “Summer Storms” in *Ghosts* as a college student in 1981, even as the economy of Ohio was collapsing around me and the Rust Belt was forming before my eyes. I got an B+ on the assignment (I am hoping for an A- this time around), the professor saying people would not care to read about Ohio’s troubles. We’ll see if he was right or not. I scribbled down those ideas when I was about my character Earl’s age, and wrote the rest of this when I am about his father Ray’s age. Along the way I have heard commentator after commentator, politician after politician, talk about reviving the middle class, bringing back jobs, returning manufacturing to America, how high-tech industries will solve everything, on and on.

Instead, over the forty years between Ray and Earl, more people are in poverty, with less money devoted to education and fewer jobs. There’s still a lot of hope out there, Occupy, a few caring politicians and journalists, young people so smart, older folks working true, as a counterpoint, maybe I am wrong to not be more optimistic. It has been a long bus ride for Earl, for me, for us, but right now I am not sure where our collective journey will end.

I think *Ghosts of Tom Joad: A Story of the #99Percent* is a good story, but with a conscience. Thank you again for preordering it.

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