



REDISCOVERING HOMELESSNESS

In the wee hours of April 25, 1982, two journalists from the *Sacramento Bee* climbed aboard a northbound freight train in search of “the new class of hobo and street person” created by the worst economic recession since the 1930s. Sensing that “something big was happening to America,” reporter Dale Maharidge and photographer Michael Williamson spent the next several months crisscrossing the nation’s industrial heartland as participant observers of the “new underclass.” They traveled by rail, by bus, and by foot. They ate in soup kitchens and, on occasion, from Dumpsters. Like hoboes of old, they took shelter in missions and abandoned buildings, improvising jungle camps when caught between cities. All along the road, they heard hard-luck stories of lost jobs, broken families, and dashed dreams. “The next decade or more seems to be the time of the Out Generation,” the journalists concluded. “It’s the era of the disenfranchised worker, left out of jobs, left out of the system, forgotten.”¹

Their homes repossessed and workplaces shuttered, the forgotten men and women that Maharidge and Williamson encountered on their journey bore living witness to the betrayals and broken promises of corporate liberalism. The great class bargain of the 1940s, which delivered homeownership and job security to the white working class, lay shattered amidst the declining wages, plant closings, and capital flight of the 1970s and 1980s. While Maharidge and Williamson were gathering their first impressions of a darkening job front, America awoke to a crisis of homelessness unparalleled since the days of the Great Depression. Old skid row refugees, displaced by urban renewal and gentrification, suddenly found themselves outnumbered by legions of newcomers: men, women, and even children pushed to the streets by the lack of affordable housing. By the time the two hoboing journalists landed back home and began col-

