

# waterfront writers



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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WATERFRONT WRITERS

*On September 17th, 1977, a unique event took place in San Francisco. For the first time West Coast Longshoremen gave a literary reading from their own works. The media coverage, then plentiful, has continued to grow – they saw good copy in the seeming incongruity of longshoremen as poets. The audience and media found a wealth of new insights into Art, Work, Workers and the larger world we all share. A new perspective was shaped to take a place in American Letters.*

*This perspective has found an organizational root in the formalizing of the group into “Waterfront Writers and Artists.” Augmenting the readings with sketches, photographs, paintings, the group achieved a balance and richness expressed across interconnected artistic media. Thoughts are no longer produced at random but have a focus and a forum that successfully breaks the bond between worker and self-tutored art. Having to work should not have to stifle the power for Art.*

*Because of the “collective” sense of the group and its aim to open the artistic field to all workers, it makes all decisions after full discussion on the basis of one man, one vote. It is building archives, making contacts, printing booklets, preparing for the time when it will open as a school, a library, a place for discussion for the intersecting values, arts, forms of workers – smashing the brutal hardhat image of American workmen.*

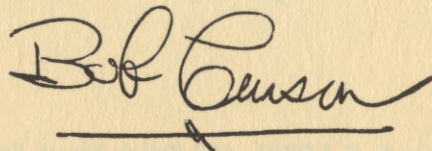
*Against this image the longshore readers brought depth and diversity to their works as a result of favorable historical and artistic conditions. They drew from union tradition reaching back through a series of social-political stands to the General Strike of 1934 (one of only two such strikes in U.S. History). Because of their position in international trade, longshoremen often see the world’s political crises heating up by observing the flow of cargo.*

*The lure and lore of the sea, preserved by an ongoing oral tradition, is upheld by the Waterfront Writers. They stand at the junction of a dramatic shift from a colorful past to a mechanized, routinized future. In part this is why the “interdisciplinary” approach of the “Waterfront Writers and Artists” was developed. When presenting a subculture undergoing a cultural shock, it was felt the input of discussion, poems, stories, pictures (all reflecting and amplifying each other) would flesh out the skeletal understandings of the problem.*

*The experience of the group as workers, thinkers, and artists is a distillation of the experience of Society at large. The Waterfront Writers are forging a fertile, evolutionary literature for a culture struggling to maintain the worth of personal insight and feeling under the dehumanizing onslaught of automation and computerization.*

*These worker-artists vigorously contradict the notion of the artist in America inhabiting some ivory highrise of garret isolated from mundane living, a mere observer of his society. As workers, the Waterfront Writers and Artists help to produce, maintain and change the society they inhabit, and as writers and artists they bring us to a fuller understanding of that society.*

*The essays and poems in this booklet will bring the reader to a better understanding of the problems of men trying to hold on to and use their creative talents in a dehumanized and automated environment.*

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Bob Cousin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line drawn underneath it.



## CONTRIBUTORS

Pages 3 & 4: **Herb Mills** — Sociological evaluations of the changing work environment and workers' reaction to new stresses.

Pages 5 & 6: **George Benet** — A positive creative force emerging from negative life experiences.

Pages 7 & 8: **Ken Fox** — Poet/Musician seeking a rhythmic expression of his personal metaphysics.

Pages 9 & 10: **Bob Carson** — Introduction and a set of poems dealing with the relationship of workers to the workplace and to the culture at large.

Pages 11 & 12: **Gene Dennis** — Poetic visions within the work-a-day experience.

*Cover and Illustrations by Brian Nelson*



## HERB MILLS

### "THE COMMUNITY IN BATTLE" \* FROM "THE GOOD OLD DAYS"

It should be noted that the men upon whom the employer could most readily rely for "a really first class stevedoring job" and a very conscientious performance of the work were men who were viewed by their fellow workers as the very best of union men and the most militant of their union brothers.

The opportunities which their work afforded these men for an effective militancy was frequently "raised to the second power" by collective and concerted "job action." Indeed, the ability and willingness to undertake disciplined and well-planned job action, i.e., work-stoppages or mini-strikes of limited scope and short duration, became the very hallmark of the San Francisco longshoremen. As a rule, job action was intended to enforce the union's understanding of a contract provision or to effect what was viewed as a sensible way of proceeding and/or necessary safety measure. Occasionally, however, a work-stoppage clearly had "a negotiating thrust," i.e., it was undertaken in the hope that the contract might be in some manner changed. In either case, the effectiveness of such action was essentially rooted in the employers' inescapable and ongoing dependency upon the experience, initiative, innovative skills, and good will of the men.

. . . job action was for years *the* mass, democratic form. It was also the most direct, immediate, and vibrant. As a collective expression and experience of community, job action was a veritable fountainhead of organizational elan and individual verve. By concretely reminding the men of the nature of their struggle and means whereby disputes and grievances might be resolved to their satisfaction, it was also destined to play a vital role in their evolution and self-education as a community. Hence, the militancy of these men was in certain fundamentally important respects the most complete expression and embodiment of their occupational satisfaction.

\*Reprinted from *Urban Life*  
Sage Publications





"THE ROUTINIZATION OF WORK" \*

Conventional longshoring routinely entails widely varying and constantly changing operational circumstances. This being the case, the efficiency with which a conventional operation is conducted is fundamentally dependent upon the initiative and ingenuity of the longshoremen, both individually and collectively. A wide range of skills is routinely called upon. The "bank" of one's experience is repeatedly brought into play; there is an on-going and vital need for cooperative innovation. In a word conventional longshoring requires a very broadly defined decentralization if initiative and must proceed as a collective and cooperative enterprise.

Circumstances of this order allow the individual longshoreman to take pride in his work. So also may a gang of men enjoy a collective sense of pride. Because conventional longshoring must proceed as a collective and cooperative enterprise, each man can express and concretely "embody" his sense of community and union with his fellow workers via his on-going contribution to the operation. One can simultaneously earn the reputation of being a good longshoreman and a good union man.

As compared to the work associated with conventional operations, modern longshoring is utterly routine. There is very little variation of operational circumstance . . . The range of skills and experience which routinely comes into play has been drastically narrowed. By the same token, circumstances which require a collective and innovative approach on the part of the men are all but unknown . . .

. . . Thus . . . the operational circumstances which for many years allowed the San Francisco longshoreman to enjoy his work, to take pride in its performance, and to thereby express his sense of community and union with his fellow workers have been almost completely eliminated by a new technology.

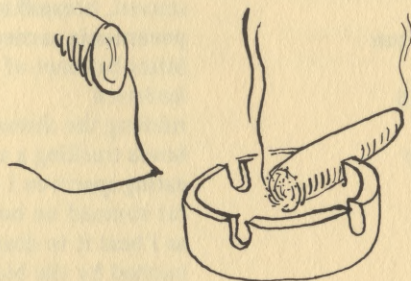
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## GEORGE BENET

### Daughter

When she was a young girl,  
she asked . . . "Father,  
do you know the people of Nigeria  
have swamps full of Malaria?"  
What do I know of Nigerians?  
My tears are for my own dad with his carbide lamp  
following a small donkey into endless  
tunnels . . . into his coffin of oak beams  
lined with anthracite.  
My tears are for a seaman who loses his grip  
on a mast, and falls screaming to the cold steel deck.  
Flesh is so soft and the steel hard and cold.  
My tears are for six longshoreman  
killed in a crane accident . . . men  
who drank beer on Saturday nights  
bet only at the two dollar window.  
Screwed from birth.  
My tears are for the sailors at the bottom  
of Kula Gulf. U.S.S. Helena, dear dear girl.  
My tears splash against Kolombangara, Savo Island  
where I served my apprenticeship with death.  
I speak for sailors, longshoreman, miners.  
I'm competent only to cry for them.  
What do I know of Nigerians?  
What do I know of the dreams and desires  
of young girls?





**Awareness**

I'm aware of who I am  
When you're aware of me  
and this is Wrong!!!

For it should be —

I'm aware of who I am  
When I'm aware of  
ME!!!

**Awakening**

Come to me my love it's time.  
The wee hours of solitude  
are over.

Come to me my love — dawns  
urge to be near you is  
like sunrise.

Come to me my love — nestle  
soul and body within my arms —  
So that I may feel the sheer  
joy of your yielding flesh  
upon my own.

Come to me my love — I want  
so to caress you — to kiss  
your eyes with mine.

Let the dawn light awaken  
you slowly. Hear me whisper  
“I love you” as an unceasing  
melody — intermingled with  
my touch.

Let love — my love —  
make full your Response —  
Now let the  
Sun Light In!

**Where Were You?**

Where were you (?) when my  
Potted Eye  
Looked into your Inner Ear  
You certainly weren't  
Listening!

I could tell just by Watching  
The Anvil and the  
Hammer,  
That nothing I said really  
Entered Your  
Head!!

Where was your Eye (?) when  
I tried to show you  
Me!

I took mine own out of the Way  
So your vision of Me  
would be Free.

But No! Instead I could perceive  
Peripherally that you  
Never Looked  
Within!

Where were you (?) when I bared  
Myself — I sat, waiting  
For you to look.

I sat in a state of Bare Tumescence,  
With my desire so plain to see —  
All you did was to  
Stare Vacantly at My Forehead  
Inscribing Noises of confused  
Desire Upon My Brain!!

You told me “NO!” and “YES!” and  
“NO!” and “YES!”

So many times —  
You told me “Maybe Later!”  
and I waited foolishly.

You Told Me and You Told Me —  
and my Desire for you abated  
On thoughts of what it would  
Be Like If  
You Were  
ME!



## BOB CARSON

### Ambience

Kicked artists off the Northern Waterfront.  
Want to maintain the view.  
No ship ever stood over us like  
the buildings they've planned.  
Moved the Eagle Cafe to a second level  
of a complex built by a taco king.  
Pushed longshoremen to the thirteenth floor  
of a twelve story building.  
Brought consultants from LA to tell us  
the social aesthetics of our own territory.  
Sure they're going to serve up a  
Longshoreman's Brunch.  
View the Bay.  
Unmolested.  
No workers.  
Champagne cocktails, clean fingernails,  
Croissants, and — imagine Clipper Ships.  
I know they want our sweat trapped  
Under the plastic tops  
Of their hatchcover tables.

### Old Sailor Looking at a Container Ship

At bend of Bay  
Sail voices in the wind,  
Fog's slow spiral under the bridge.  
He sees containers overall.  
All the same shape, all the same size.  
Loaded from a flat obtrusive yard;  
Cut from the city by cyclone fencing.  
He remembers sixty years ago,  
Time cutting through him  
Like a knife.  
Silver blade clear as  
Light on the open sea;  
And against the horizon  
Canvas wings  
Beating down the sky.



## BOB CARSON

### Road Gangs

(from "The Ireland Cycle")

Ireland has traveling road crews,  
work gangs that sleep by their  
patches of pavement — in tents.  
They follow the lines of falling land;  
From their hands come the cement  
that holds the Republic together.

They know the stone homes,  
returning to the land, piece by falling piece,  
the thatched roofs of Adair,  
the barren of the Burren,  
Lakes of Kilarney where their brothers  
on jaunting cars hustle: "Looking fer  
the good ride, best tour, I kin show ya  
mister, yes missus."

They patch roads, stay off the Dole  
with gypsy guile and free-born swing  
the work army rises every morning  
across the country. Cold balance of water and air,  
Reels, poems still wrapped in midnight  
to be sung on mended trail between

Wandering rocks, solid stones of graveyards,  
the celtic spiral, fall and return,  
weavers and menders place together  
ancient rituals, ways of work, thread-bare lives.  
With their hands they are the transmission line  
of the road ever on.

In Dublin they drink with city  
industrial workers.

Border of international trade,  
Blood and muscle of Rising, Revolution,  
Failure, dream of return.

The electric shock, connected electrodes  
raise the night only to meet the road and sun.  
In cross-town bars, 11 pm curfew,  
Struggling old men don sunglasses, aching eyes,  
hit the road, leaving younger men — roadgangs  
and workers — the patched dreams:  
Blind poets, Fenian gods, Future organization.



GENE DENNIS

**Loading Rice at 14th Street**

My eyes focussed  
(confused)  
registering the ship,  
the hatch,  
the tons of rice  
bound blindingly  
belly up  
in white one hundred  
pound sacks.

Wild Bill's watch  
pointed to eleven o'clock.  
An hour had slipped by  
with the silence  
of a daydream.  
Stirred by the whirring winches,  
nurtured by a  
rare working rhythm,  
a muscled mantra had  
released my mind  
in meditative elegance,  
leaving behind the day,  
the sun, the sacks,  
my hands, the pallet boards,  
my back.

For this hour  
there were no wages,  
no boss, no bills,  
no carburetor trouble  
or contract violations.  
No need to think,  
just to move by instinct  
as heart and head  
fused and flew  
star grazing  
in galactic pastures,  
then returned  
to make this a day  
I'd have paid to work.

**The Older Woman**

Shades of lace  
woven with wrinkles  
covered her face.  
But not her eyes,  
nor her smile,  
or her sweet spit;  
so I tasted it.

**Albino Charlie's Widow**

Anyone could bring  
the beer and beans,  
but only Charlie  
could bring the dreams.

His nonsense  
made sense to none  
but one  
and she survived.

All she had  
were his sketches  
on a pad  
and the bed  
where he lay dead.



**A Question of Priorities**

I fell in love  
with Lily Tomlin  
during a work stoppage  
on board a vessel  
carrying a cargo  
of virulent poisons.

A broken drum of arsenic  
had spilled a trail  
of toxic dust  
across the deck.  
We hung the hook  
and refused to work  
without protective gear.

I lay back  
against the bulkhead,  
closed my eyes,  
and there she was:  
Angular smiles  
blossoming  
in every corner of her face  
in a race with words  
to share the gentle  
insanity of her soul.

I never knew  
a television mind  
could be so kind  
and still tickle  
my most secret places.

The business agent  
appeared in a flurry  
of company faces.  
We won the right  
to respirators,  
rubber covers for our clothes,  
and a pittance of penalty pay.

The implications  
of that arbitration  
have blurred with time.  
The only detail that  
survives from then to now  
is the angle of the arch  
above Lily's brow.

**A Bill of Sale**

Eight or seven years ago,  
before my back  
began to scream at night,  
we worked a rested freighter  
held together by forgotten screws.

The cargo was burlap bags of coffee  
and the lingering heat of Latin sun  
Spilled beans became  
ball bearings beneath our feet  
as we swung the sacks into  
bulging stacks on pallet boards.

The talk was of other lives  
and private selves  
with dreams of suburbs  
and hard fought football games.

An older brother hear something  
in my own embroidered tale  
and said: what's  
a nice educated boy like you  
doing in a job like this?

I said then,  
and pray it can be said at the end,  
I sold my body  
to save my mind.



