

Waterfront Writers
and Artists

Waterfront Writers and Artists

**Brian Nelson
Gene Dennis
Frank Silva
Zoë Lawdale
Bob Carson
Michael Vawter
Ed Scola
David Conn**

© 1980

San Francisco Waterfront Writers and Artists Assn.



Brian Nelson

Gene Dennis

Coffee King

Coffee King don't get
no callouses no more.

Used to be he'd throw
one hundred and sixty pound
sacks across the hatch,
make them dance right onto
the pallet board with
the customized chrome-plated
cargo hooks he held in each hand.

Nowadays he drives a
big blinking beeping
machine on the dock, wears
soft leather gloves
sewn out of doeskin
to hide the silence
of his hands.

Barney (at the pay window)

Quick scuffle step.
One foot bent sideways.
A crab in work boots hiding
under a hard hat; wet,
thick tongue probing the gaps
the dentist made to save
the edges of his smile.

Filed down the giggle,
filled it with a flapping lisp.

Pity

They couldn't retrieve the
soul of his swagger. At least
they released him to work again.

Pity.



Frank Silva

Gene Dennis

Recovery Room

In the silent solitary chamber,
sterilized instruments and white burning
lights sear and tear apart the fabric
of a life lived precariously perched
on the edge of contentment, balanced
by the embrace of textures:

Child's cheek. Lover's quilt. Redwood bark.
Dog's foxtailed fur. Corduroy vest. Oiled boots.
Thickening pudding. Whiskers. Statistical moments
selected from a thousand thousand touches.
Porcelain pictures cupped, protected
from the steeping bitterness. The fading pressure
of these treasured pleasures caressed
with phantom fingertips.

See the single steel plate, massive in its
Simplicity, suspended above by braided wires
from the ship's crane, pressing tons of air
into the deck below on that oppressive
overtime day.

Hear the flinching firecracker snap
of parting cable and the cold clear
distant scream from someone far away.
Watch the sudden slow eternal descent
of steel sealing flesh in a monstrous
metal envelope. Memorize the agonized
litany to conclude each day:
Please, O God, Give me back my hands.

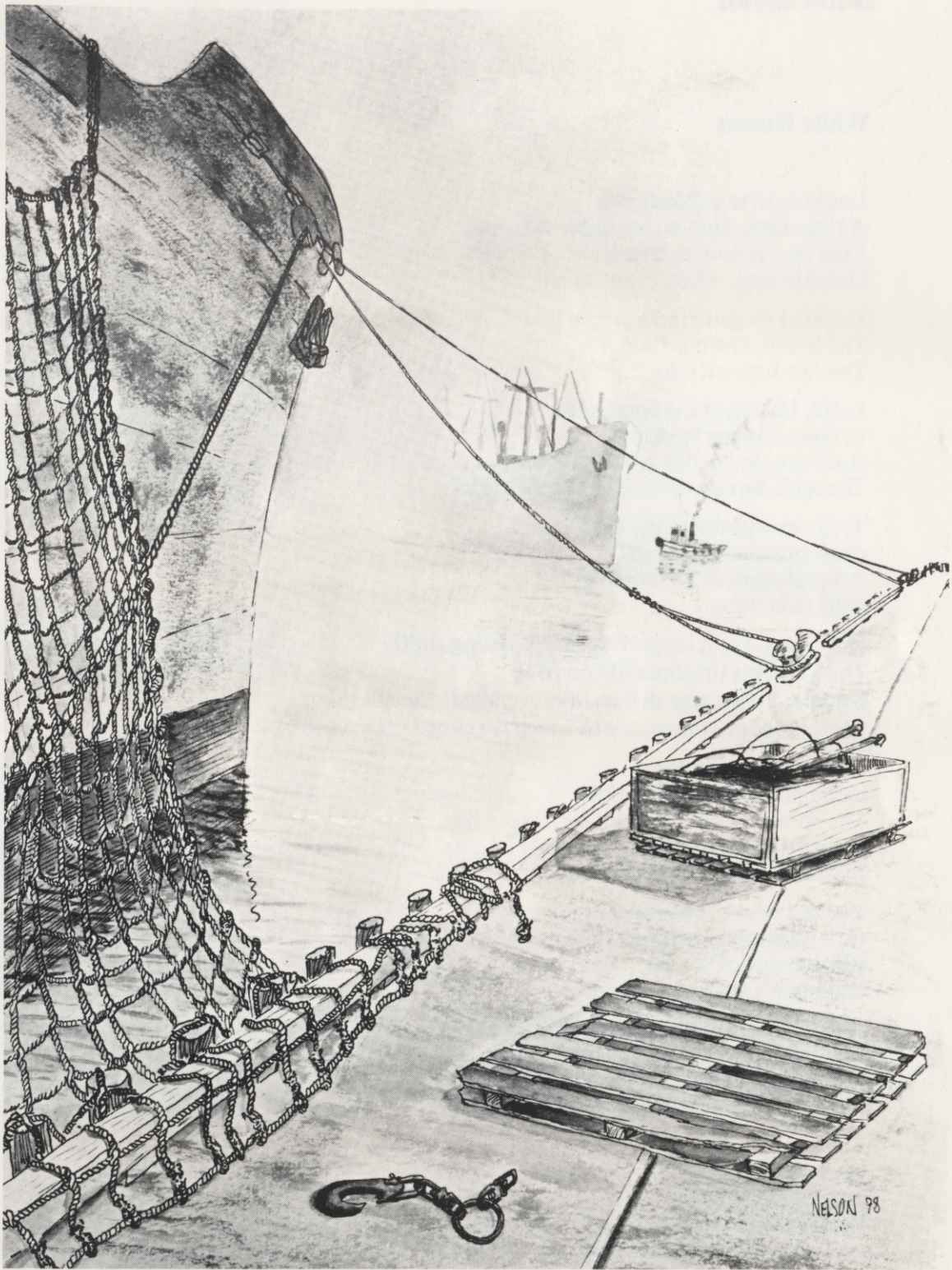
Zoë Landale

troller

offshore
rhythms are like
unbroken circles
at their heart
lie fish
sea
& wind
backed by
deep diesel song
grey days are best
landmarks hazed
toy ship on a
flat world
gleaming mercury sea
like stylized dancers our
arms extend in
stinking
stiff oilskins
pulling gear
gaffing fish
swift-strong bodies
stilled in
broken beauty

only salmon

long ago you learned
not to mind
killing for a living
you breathe air
sweet & empty as
polished shells
petrels & shearwaters
follow
your flashing knife
& timeless days pass like
bloody pearls



Brian Nelson

Bob Carson

White Horses

Looking over a dim-lit sea
A time-torn, blue-water sailor with me
Eyes that followed migration of whales
Dolphin leap, white fin of sails.

Looking — gathered horizon line
The beach, foam a-foot
The fan-formed tide.

I said, staring at his gone stare:
“Is there anyone to care?
And how do we ride a lifelong tide
Through dim-lit waters, how do we ride?”

“Is life measured in bell beat
or an unmeasured thing?”
An explosion of birds rising
wing over wing.

His bleary-eyed, long-visaged, trembling smile.
The look: his tiresome life on trial.
Said he: “It’s a star-driven, moon-pulled, ancient thing
It’s the slopes of memory to which we cling.

“These visions we carry
through the contour of time
The spread of sea, the breaker-ridged line
Waves that drive the stars at night
Battle of the tideland’s struggle for life.”

The last rays of the sun
turn underwings orange
Black bulge of waves
and night shaped forms.

A rumbling, stumbling, sonorous sea
The surf-sound, shell-echoed eternity
Moon blurred in mist, a vapour,
clamour of unseen things.

Sharply he pointed
Beckoned to me.
And white horses
rose upon the sea.

Bob Carson

Almost A Promise

Almost a promise
The life spent
hovering at the juncture
of land and water.

A still air beginning,
gulls at wingfold,
yawing,
to fall and strike.

The long expected promise
Cast upon the waiting sea.
Startling pelican, grebe, gray bay
of time's edge.
The beaches outlined
with crustaceous bone.

Gulls fall and strike.
In the hollow of time-tunneled air.
To return eons later? —
Or just a second?

The rattle and bale of bones.
A coast of dunes
like cairn-heaped hills.
Crabs, shells, winds from the Ice Age.

The bass, salmon and sea grasses.
Almost a promise.
Silver sliding water.
Flash of fish.
Wings fall, strike, seize.

The promised consolation
seined from expectations.
Like the water — a second
upon a second ago.
There — then gone there —
but always there.

More hovering birds and
heaping hills.
The world has fallen,
deepened, collapsed
then risen, breath-moved.

To the promise — a mystery
of flow and time:
To be forever,
Yet never to have been.

Gene Dennis

Melaque Memory

Will you come Alberto, these
many miles from your tienda
by the sea?

Vendor of tequila and
passion fruit, stale cigarettes
and ice cold beer.

Will you come as you
promised that moonfilled night
when we sat

At the small table on
the sidewalk, the table
Sparkling

With centavos and
beer bottles. You counted
Receipts

Scribbled on butcher
paper. I toasted each
Tally.

I said: My house
is your house. I said this
Over and over.

You smiled and counted,
nodded and counted.
I said:

I will show you Colorado
and Disneyland, the Golden
Gate and Delano.

I am home now, Alberto.
Sober now, Alberto.
This

Is the first I have
thought of you since
that heartfelt

Night, melted by tequila
so many years ago.
Or:

Is it you
who waits. I
have forgotten.

Gene Dennis

1955

I did real good
while you were gone.

Took care of Mom,
was the man of the house:
Bought her the presents
you described
in your letters—
the ones the censors
sensed
were all right.

I did real good
while you were gone.
Stood proud by
the prison gates.
Heard you shiver inside.
Watched your hair
bleach ice white
in the jailhouse light.

I did real good:
Swallowed tears
in the park when
Richie beat on me
for being the Commies' kid.
Didn't let the FBI men
ask me questions
when they'd follow
me home.

While you were gone
I grew up fast,
too fast
to be so old
at the age of twelve.

I hope you can
see the difference
when you get out tomorrow
after all these years.

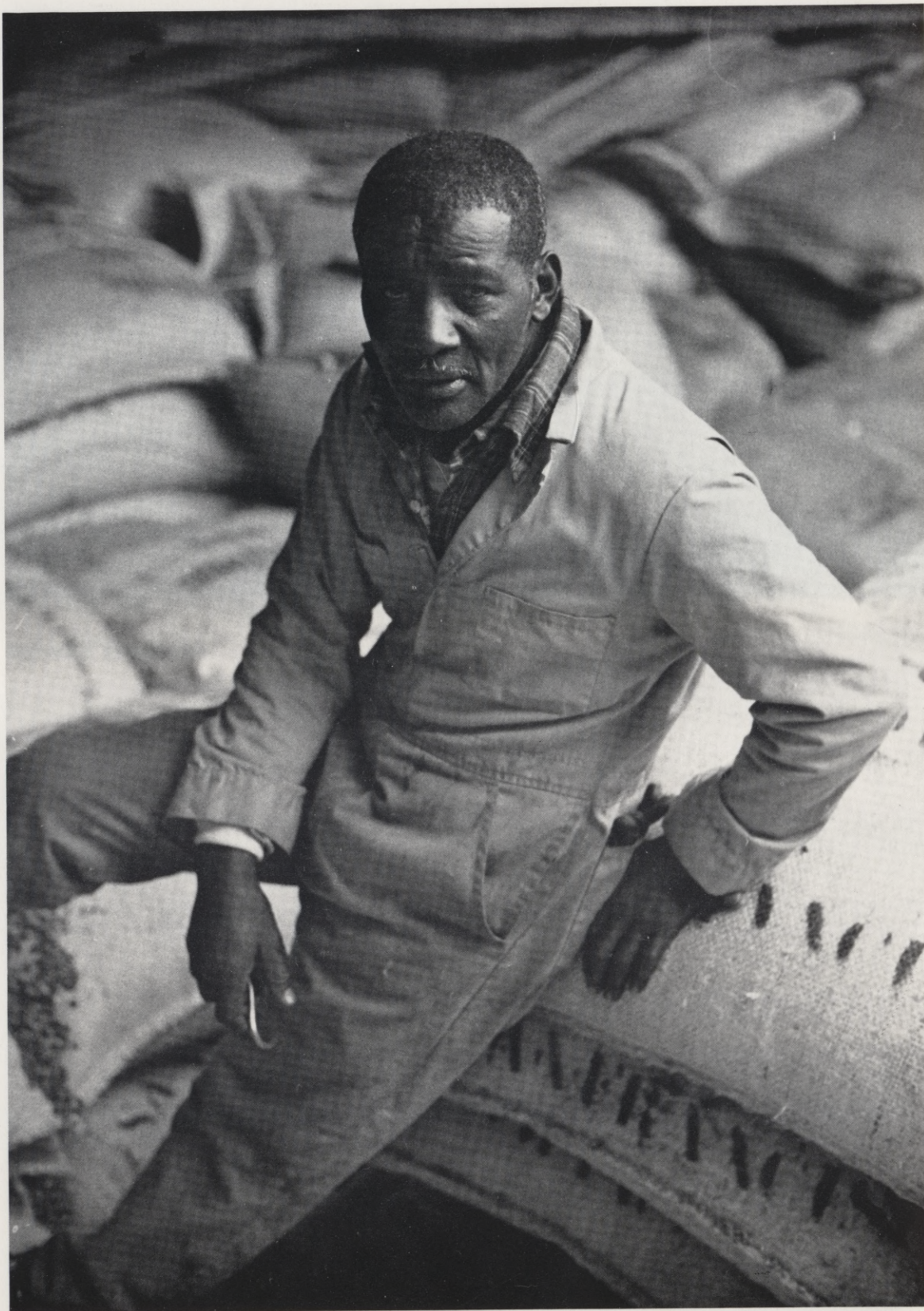
I hope you can see
behind my grownup eyes
and know
I need you home so
I can be a kid
again,
if it's not too late.



Michael Vawter



Michael Vawter



Red Cap

Ed Scola



Capstan

Ed Scola

Gene Dennis

Partners

When Russian Sam looked down into number three hatch, he could see suggestions of movement in the shadows, enough to reassure him that the men in his gang were ready to work. The superintendent had promised a short day. Sam's winch drivers, one a wino, the other a deacon, are anxious to leave early with the guarantee of eight hours' pay.

Sam squints, shades his eyes, slows down his hand signals to the speeded-up wino. He has seen too many short days turn into over-time, too many fast operations turn into a funeral. He leans against the shoreside deck railing, vaguely longing to climb down the ladder and join his holdmen: Whitey and Cigar Face are regular members of the gang, Sonoma Steve and the Portagee came out of the hiring hall this morning—but have worked partners for years. Sam shakes his right index finger at the sky and the wino pulls back on the handles high above the hatch. The winch gear whines and raises the pine-boxed generator spinning from the dock, whips it creaking over the deck, and drops it wind-sudden down into the hatch. Sam walks the fifteen feet from the railing to the hatch coaming to watch his men work. He looks over the coaming.

Four backs beneath a fogbound sun: pale light frosts flannel shirt, down jacket, quilted vest, army surplus coat; frames abandoned hard hat (yellow). Grit-grained shadows warp welded steel deck and riveted bulkhead. Four backs bend, restraining the wooden crate, restraining laws of gravity with crow bar wands to set the swaying tons of generator just so between the other pine-boxed cargo.

"All right!" shouts Whitey from below, "Come on back!"

Ship's gear slacks on command. The wino's doin' good, thinks Sam. The crate wobbles, slams in place: just so. Bent backs straighten into faces. One won't smile.

"What's wrong kid?" asks Whitey.

"The baby," says Sonoma Steve, looking away.

"So get the fuck outta here," says Cigar face. "We can cover ya. This here's nothin' but gravy."

"It's too early," protests Steve.

"You don't go," says Cigar, "I will."

"Go," says the Portagee. "You no good here when you head is there. Go."

Sonoma Steve picks up the yellow hard hat, starts up the hatch ladder, hesitates to watch the next crate, larger, more rectangular in the square of the hatch, descend on the three up-turned faces (already planning where to put it, how to move it). Lost in the noise, poised in plaid at the top of the ladder, he finds the top rung, and is gone.

Sam knows from the rhythm of the gestures below what the men have decided. He turns away as the younger man climbs out of the hatch, having long ago learned longshoremen covering for each other generally work harder and produce more than if all are present. But he does not want to witness Sonoma Steve's departure—just in case he is called on the carpet for letting the gang work shorthanded.

Day darkens, shrouding the hatch in wet winter gray; sprays a shimmer over the bright white malignancy of pine boxes filling the black belly of the ship. The Portagee sits alone in the tent of his army coat, praying in words of the Azores for the baby of his partner. A wonder his head does not burst in the barrage of choked granite consonants. Ten paces away stand the other two: Whitey, folded arms crushing the puffed breast of his down jacket, eyes the scars and bent fingers on his partner's hands (gray hairs curling over New York knuckles); cargo hook protruding from his hip pocket.

"Ya know something?" says Whitey.

"What?" says Cigar Face, sounding bored.

"You are a motherfucking museum piece."

"No shit?"

"No shit. Downright millennial material."

"Damn," groans Cigar Face, and walks away, shaking his head, to sit silent beside the Portagee.

The shift dwindles to an end. The dock is empty, the ship full. Fifteen minutes to quitting time. Russian Sam walks off the ship to fill out the gang's time sheet, suddenly surrounded by sounds of his own remembered partners. He steps stiffly onto the dock, snorts, spits, then obliterates the mound of brown mucous beneath his steel-toed boot. Ten minutes to quitting time.

The Portagee starts up the hatch ladder.

"See you guys nex' time," he says. Whitey and Cigar Face nod and stay below in case there is yet another hoist.

"We owe you," says the Portagee from halfway up the ladder. "Thanks for cover my partner."

Whitey and Cigar Face wave him away and stand together at the foot of the ladder counting down the final minutes.

"You still getting married?" asks Cigar Face, mangled hand pulling a Roi Tan from his vest.

"Why?" asks Whitey, surprised.

"Well, I just want to get things straight before they get out of hand."

"Like what?"

"Like: your heart may belong to your old lady, but your back belongs to me."



Frank Silva

David Conn

The Scrapman

Here he comes, the man
who picks the rags and bones
of ships for all they'll
fetch from the foundries.

Today salt air spices
his carboned lungs,
for he scents seaward
cutting torches of profit.

Here he rolls down
the wharf, clowning
his way to the scrap bin,
assessing his prize

of broken crankshafts
and rusted piping. Chewing
a cigar, he presides over
the salvage loading,

steel to be scrooged
in his yard at \$100 a ton.
The scrapman, pawnbroker
of ships, repossesses

their valuables at every refit.
He puffs off patiently, knowing
all vessels will one day reach
his cousins in the breaking trade.

David Conn

Unloading Scows at 5am

Somewhere beyond the floodlights
a city sleeps snug in the rain.
When we came here at midnight,
we closed the gates on its snoring.

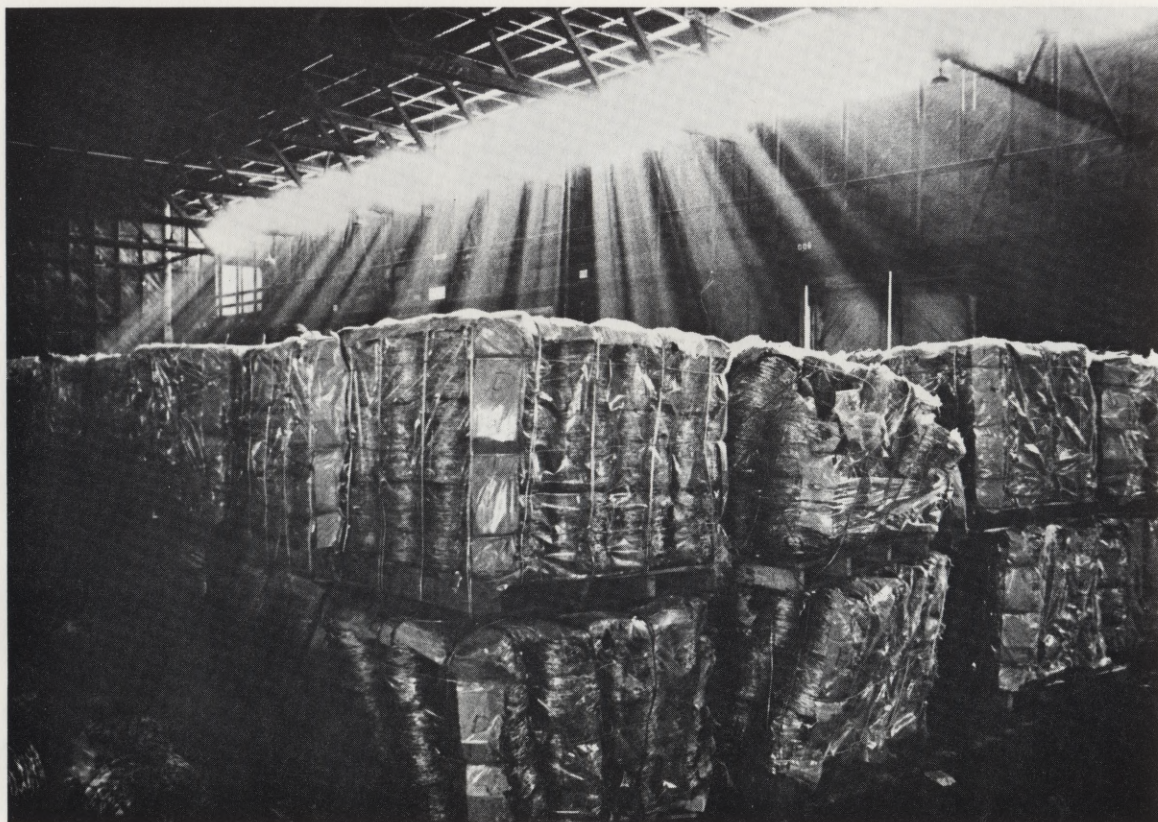
Rain glistens coldly under the lights,
coating acres of piled steel, and
the stacks of beams that settle
the scows deep into dark.

Someone on the far side of the world
has consigned a cargo, transshipped
ever westward, its bills of lading
in perpetual good order,

fully cleared into port.
To make it through
graveyard shift, we have only
to wait for that ship

of daylight to arrive,
unload the hours stowed
by workmen like ourselves,
and stockpile for day shift.

When the overhead crane lifts
the final bundle, we move back
into a roused city to sleep,
close the blinds on morning.



Brian Nelson



Michael Vawter



Michael Vawter



Frank Silva

Bob Carson

Retake the City

Why do these dreams recur —
The tender, the brutal —
Never allowing a separation
to savor or scorn just one.

Dreams of light,
sleight of hand,
Elongation of a raindrop
freefalling
reaching out to splatter
on cement and steel.

The last heavy-veined leaf
from all the branches of thought —
A work partner pummeled to eternity
head first in a glorious swandive.
Slipping on a containership,
the steel and cement closing down . . .

Dull thud we all pretended
not to hear.

A clerk, clipboard in hand,
squashed against a 20 ton container
scattered over a retaining wall.
Don't slip on his liver.

Flowing days
of all our futures.
We set to work
Knowing the water, fog, light,
cement and salt.

These are dreams
and these are realities
into which we all
have fallen
and daily return
suspended like bridges
over the final bay of the world.

Bells toll,
Crossing Dolores Park,
Portsmouth Square, Washington Square.
Whirling tones-
Bells, Colors-
Tones of work partners
Spiraling through space.

City of generations
Who all have fallen
in dreams' gentle violence.
The leaf separated from the tree
falling over the edge of memory.

Bells for forgotten men.
Wanderers, Workers, Poets.
Returning home
The tones of dusk in watercolor.
The sun mixing with the sea

Bells that toll for survival:
Everyday you must remake,
Everyday you must reshape,
Everyday you must retake
The city.

Brian Nelson

Memories of Mechanization

Curses, rumbles and drinking fade out
Thinking, workboots even up tiered cartons
and grimy cables swing under tension
in circular convolutions:

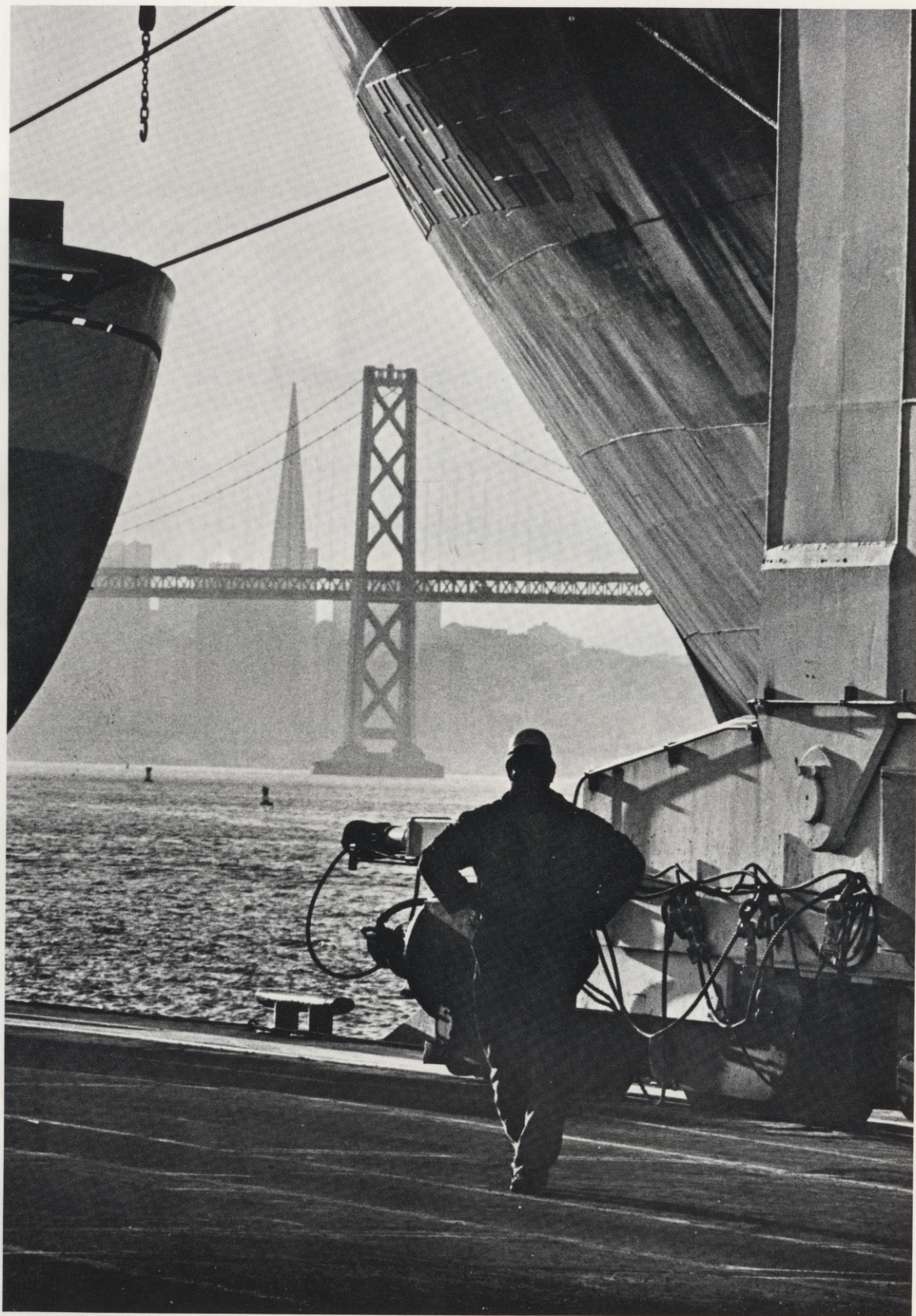
Wheels spin on grease spots,
dank interiors gray and succumb
the same designs planned in previous shifts
Holding bits of everyone who ever worked there
all sloughing off, flaking out all over
sinking into the Bay
rising in filthy plumes as the piers burn
Workboots tracking onto new docks,
vast, naked industrial compounds
Bleak yards that scrape quickly moving feet

Black steel legs glisten dully
Roars from four lanes,
tons of metal on metal and rubber
Forces voices into hollers,
conversations into bits of information

Through the night the black monsters pull and drop
The sound of air rushing through the machines
turning to white noise
a mindless intensity
a consuming energy
the realization of monetary force

The men are sequestered in cabs
Marshaled in rows of on-off units

Rationalized as the plan emerges with cunning understatements
the men won't have to work as hard
the work will be easier, cleaner
the men will share the benefits
But on their way out they age and dwindle
awaiting the new technology



Frank Silva

Contributors

Michael Vawter, 32, resides in San Francisco, where he has been a longshoreman since 1969.

Frank Silva, 37, has recently completed a photographic essay on the physical environment of the Oakland container docks. With Mike Vawter and Brian Nelson he helped produce the first slide show with sound track developed by the Waterfront Writers and Artists. He lives in Oakland and has been a ship's clerk since 1965.

Ed Scola is a ship's clerk in San Francisco.

Brian Nelson, 31, has worked in watercolor, etching, lithography, pen and ink, and photography. A ship's clerk since 1969, the waterfront has been his favorite, if not exclusive subject.

Zoe Landale fishes for a living off the west coast of Canada, and is a member of the Vancouver Industrial Poets' Union.

Gene Dennis, 37, has been a San Francisco longshoreman since 1969, and is past president of the I.L.W.U. Local 10 Steward's Council. He lives with his wife in Berkeley, where he is completing an autobiographical volume of prose and poetry (when not diapering his infant daughter and feeding chickens).

David Conn, 29, is a graduate student at the University of British Columbia and works at the Maritime Museum in Vancouver. He is also a shipyard worker, and has a new collection of poetry scheduled for publication this year.

Bob Carson, 34, has worked as a ship's clerk since 1963. He enjoys sailing and is working on a novel in the basement of his San Francisco house.

Cover: photograph and design by Brian Nelson.



The Waterfront Writers and Artists

was formed in San Francisco in 1977 by a group of longshoremen and ship's clerks belonging to the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union. They are devoted to presenting and encouraging artistic and literary expression by waterfront workers. Although some of them had previously been published, the majority had kept their visions private. Their shared workplace on the ships and wharves of San Francisco Bay has been their bond, and often the focus of their art.

Since the publication of *The Waterfront Writers* (an anthology of poetry, prose and photographs) by Harper and Row in 1979, the group has sought to communicate and meet with worker/artists in other industries and in other cities in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere. Correspondence may be addressed to Waterfront Writers and Artists, 2411 Curtis Street, Berkeley, Ca. 94702.