

# The Waterfront

## Writers *The Literature of Work* *Short Stories, Poetry, Film Script,* *Essays, Drawings, Photographs*

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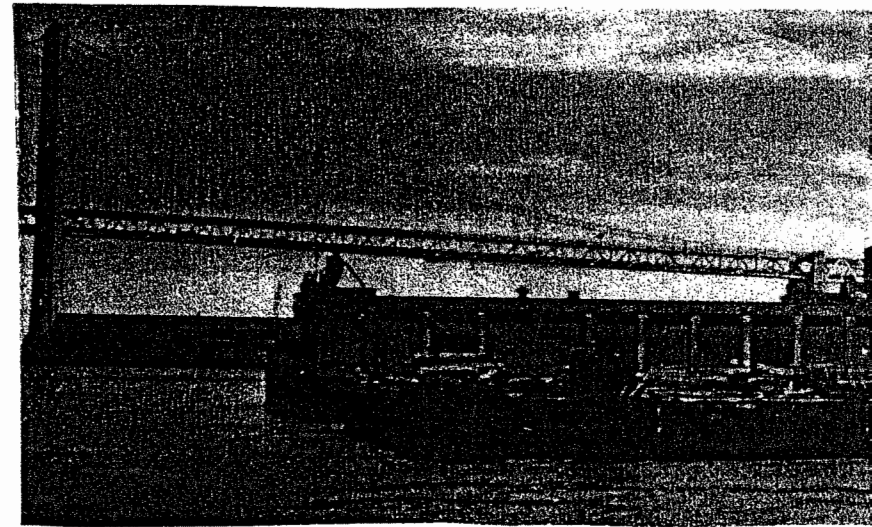
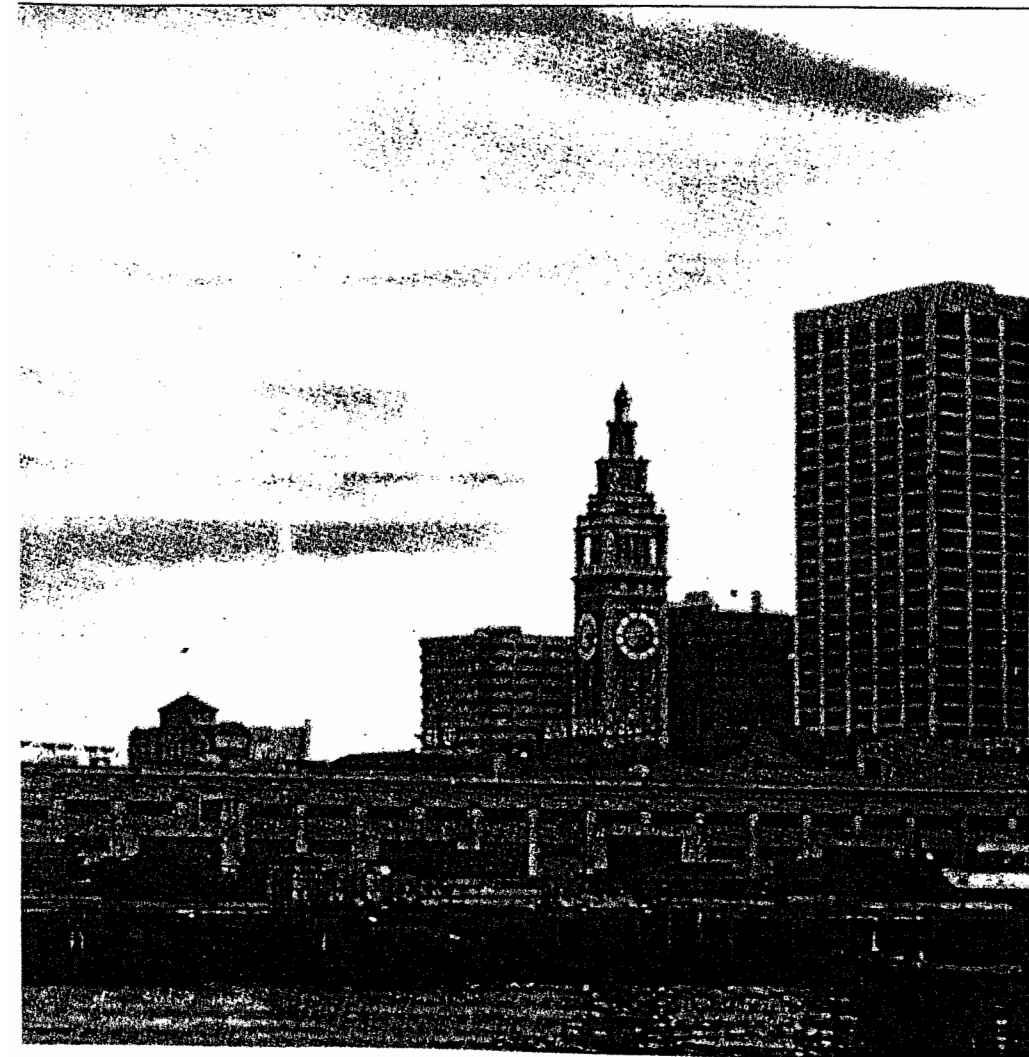
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## Excerpts from A Rat's-Eye View of History

### *Storytelling on the San Francisco Waterfront*

Every longshoreman has been involved in a host of on-the-job encounters that for one reason or another he has subsequently related to others. Such events are simply a part of the job. As a result, each of us has been provided the raw materials from which we have fashioned a number of stories about life on the San Francisco docks. By the same token, every man who has gone longshoring has become something of a storyteller.

Some of the stories recount an event that the storyteller feels should be known and remembered by his fellow longshoremen, if not, indeed, by others. Such stories are essentially intended to convey a lesson or at least an observation about our working and union life. They are consciously didactic, if usually very modestly so. However, stories of this sort also routinely undergo an evolution and elaboration with each retelling, because the men who hear them typically subject the storyteller's understanding to some refinement. For this reason, such stories are really a collective product of the waterfront.

As might be supposed, we also tell these stories to the woman or women in our lives, to our children, and to other friends. We do this, once again, because we imagine them to be instructive. On the other hand, it is never very easy to explain why a story has been changed since last told. Upon inquiry, we may simply mask our own confusion and embarrassment by saying, "Well, it's still true. Fact is, it's even truer this way. Actually, it's getting truer all the time. And besides, it's a better story now."

When a story deals with something the storyteller has come to especially value, it often happens that the man who emerges as its central figure has died since the time of the event. Indeed, the first full telling of such a story is not infrequently occasioned by the death of that figure. In this circumstance, the story is, of course, a memorial and eulogy. It is the way the storyteller and his listeners both remember and bury their dead. And in this modest and unhurried ceremony, they look again—however briefly—at their own existence.

These stories may be viewed as genuine folk stories, partly by reason of the common, everyday events they recount. They may also be viewed in this way because of the audiences to which they are essentially addressed, their occasion and intent, the manner of their evolution, and, of course, their source of validation. Like any story, they vary in their generality. They also vary in the significance that is collectively assigned to them by the storyteller and those who listen. However, they may finally be viewed as folk stories because they invariably give witness to something those persons have come to value in themselves and others. By the same token, they intrinsically deal with things that are in some measure to be opposed. For these reasons, they are at once both autobiographical and social, personal and political, enigmatic and simple. They may again be brutal and reflective, cynical and hopeful, saddening and heartening. In a word, these stories are a collective expression of the consciousness which Bertolt Brecht once called for: "a rat's-eye view of history."

The life we have known as longshoremen and the history of which we have fashioned stories has, of course, been complex and contradictory. However, something of that life and history—and therefore something of the existence we have known by reason of our work and our union with one another—may at least be suggested by the on-the-job encounters that will now be depicted.

### *Encounter 1*

#### **Setting**

On the offshore, weather deck rail of a vessel.

#### **Cast**

*A walking boss* who had grown up in a small lumber port on the Oregon coast. Prior to his landing on the San Francisco waterfront in the mid-1920s, he had sailed aboard the steam lumber schooners that plied the West Coast. This Finn had a favorite observation: "You know, we use more dunnage on a job like this than we loaded aboard them schooners." This man liked people, and people liked him. They liked to kid him, too, because it always seemed that he had "been around for years and years." People would ask him to tell about discharging the *Mayflower* and loading the *Golden Hinde*.

*Four holdmen*, all of whom had been in the industry about six months. They were on the rail waiting for the hoist of a heavy piece of machinery from a

barge which was moored alongside the vessel. They had been talking about the civil rights demonstrations that were then being conducted at various places of business in downtown San Francisco.

#### Event

The walking boss went to the rail to see what was happening aboard the barge. He overheard the discussion.

*The walking boss (having leaned against the rail and having been implicitly invited into the discussion):* "You know, it's no different than what's happening down here. People aren't going to be denied their places any more and especially since the government and all the politicians are always talking about how free and democratic we are. And it's happening on a lot of things. Three days ago I had a fellow on the job that had hair to his shoulders. So, 'long about coffee time the superintendent says to me, "How's Goldie Locks doing?" "Well," I says to him, "He's doing God-damned well, that's how he's doing. He's doing the work, and he wants to learn, so I don't give a damn how he does his hair. Fact is, he's doing a whole lot better than some people that don't have any hair." So, we all got to loosen up and that's what I told him and that's what I tell myself, too. There's a whole lot happening in this world, now."

*One of the men, with the glint that comes from poking fun at somebody who is very much liked and respected:* Well, you sure done your union duty, Bro.\_\_\_\_\_. There you were, tellin' some company guy that things are changing and that it ain't like when the *Mayflower* was coming into port.

*Walking boss:* Well, that's right. That's exactly what I told him, but now I'm telling you that some things stay the same.

*Longshoreman:* What do you mean by that?

*Walking boss:* It's simple. Der boss and der header-upper has still got a job of keeping his eye on things and turning people to. So, let's look alive, 'cause that hoist is ready.

## Encounter 2

#### Setting

The lower hold of a conventional, break-bulk vessel.

#### Cast

*Three men* who had gone to work on the waterfront in 1959.

#### Event

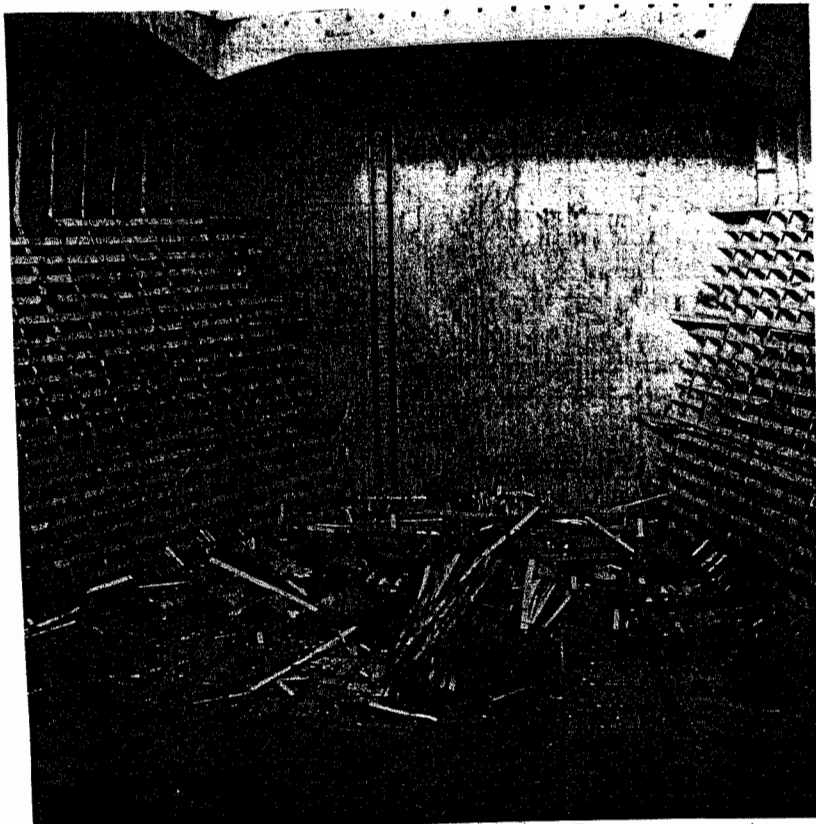
Having stowed some cargo, the eight holdmen who were working the job had proceeded to lay lengths of 1" x 12' lumber atop that cargo. Such lumber is called *dunnage*. It helps prevent the shifting of cargoes stowed beneath it and on top of it. It is provided the ship by the contracting stevedore company and hoisted aboard as needed. Having completed this work, the men retired to the offshore wing to await additional cargoes. As always, they began to converse as they sat and waited.

*First man:* You know, they just don't use dunnage the way they used to. Fact is, nobody gives a damn about a lot of things anymore. Christ, I was on a ship a couple of weeks ago that had some shifted cargo in the upper 'tween deck of number two and it never was restowed. That ship went back out the Gate just like she'd come in. Now, that's a fucking disgrace. I guess it all comes down to competing against the container, but one thing's for sure. Nobody gives a damn.

*Second man:* You've got a point there, partner, but there's no sense bullshitting about it, either. A lot of us so-called longshoremen never did like laying dunnage. We were too busy bullshitting each other about laying pipe and things like that. You know yourself, laying dunnage can mean a whole lot of work. And that means for everybody. There's no four men working and four men off when it comes to dunnage.

*Third man:* Actually, you've both got a point, but this puts me in mind of a job I ought to tell you about 'cause everybody got real involved with dunnage. I was in gang twenty-eight. Christ, it must have been ten years ago. Well, anyway, we caught a job at Pier 23. It was a Jap ship with plenty of general cargo and there was this mate that kept hanging over the coaming calling for dunnage. "More dunnage. More dunnage." All morning long, there he was on the coaming with "More dunnage, more dunnage." So, more dunnage it was and then some cargo and there he was, back again, with

"More dunnage, more dunnage." Jesus, he was really gettin' everybody pissed off. I remember old John Carter. He was the walking boss. I remember now, John died about four months later, but he sure got agitated that day. He got on the coaming with that mate and started stomping around and waving his arms and hollering the way he always loved to do. "What do you mean, 'More dunnage, more dunnage?'" But that mate, you know, he just smiled and came right back with "More dunnage, please. More dunnage, Mr. Boss." So, naturally, us hold men are watching all of this and finally one of the guys yells up to him, "Say, Comrade Mate, what the hell are you doing back home, building a house?" Well, that fucking mate, Christ, I'll never forget, he gets this great big grin on his face and comes right back with "No. Need barn!" Well, naturally, we got a helluva kick out of that, so, more dunnage it was. Christ, by the time we closed that hatch it was half full of dunnage.



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And it was the best, too, 'cause when we found out what he had in mind, we got word to the dock men and naturally they didn't send us nothing but the best.

*First man:* Now, that's a good story, fellow worker, and a whole lot better than some you tell. But the thing is, it don't relate to what I'm talking about. Hell, we don't even have good dunnage any-more.

*Second man:* So, what else is new? What the hell *does* "relate" any-more? It's like a lot of things. We're just gonna have to settle for a good story, but I guess that's better than nothing.

### **Encounter 3**

#### **Setting**

A clerk's shack on the dock.

#### **Cast**

*A walking boss, a super-cargo, and two longshoremen, all of whom had known one another for years and all of whom were union veterans from the early 1930s.*

#### **Event**

A way of passing the time during a standby wait for a truckload of frozen meat scheduled for palletizing.

*Supercargo:* I think these young people that are coming in are doing real good. I don't see it all, but the work gets done and everybody is pretty friendly. Maybe a little weird, sometimes, but friendly.

*Walking boss:* I guess so, but there's lots of differences. I don't know what will happen to the union. We packed union stuff and political stuff to read in the hold. Now they got them underground newspapers with them. Christ, them papers are really something.

*First longshoreman:* What do you care? I see you reading 'em. But, maybe you're just checking them out to make sure they printed your ad. "Very old and grouchy waterfront character desires young, sympathetic, and easily satisfied female companion. Must have big tits."

*Second longshoreman:* Now, you see. Both of you comrades are still wallowing in sexism and chauvinism. Now, me, I just read them papers to stay informed, see. That's why I'm healthy and you guys

are sick. Now, what's really bothering you two is these young people are having more fun than we did. Actually that's what annoys the piss out of a lot of old people. But see, what you guys don't realize is that those young people over in Berkeley and up in Haight-Ashbury are really on your side. Why, there's a group that's working right now for sex in the geriatrics ward and for broke-down stevedores. Shit. That's all part of the revolution and it's part we didn't see, see?

*Walking boss:* Can't we please get this back on a serious level?

*Second longshoreman:* What do you mean, "serious"? What I'm saying is serious. I'm always serious. That's a cross I've borne for years. Serious and concerned.

*Walking boss:* My ass. But listen, 'cause I want you to tell me what you think about something. OK?

*Second man:* OK.

*Walking boss:* OK. So, here's what happened. I had this man on a coffee job at Pier 32 last week and he's sporting that Lenin button. You know, that cameo-type button that's red and gold. OK?

*Second man:* OK.

*Walking boss:* So, the men are on deck, re-rigging the gear sometime in the afternoon and I get the chance to ask this fellow, "Say, I was wondering about that button. What is it?" And you know what he said?

*Supercargo:* He told you to go fuck yourself.

*Walking boss:* No, he didn't.

*First man:* Well, he should have.

*Walking boss:* Maybe so, but he didn't.

*Second man:* Well, God damn it, man what the hell did he say?

*Walking Boss:* He told me it was a Mitch Miller Fan Club button. He looked me right in the eye and said, "That's a profile of Mitch Miller." Then he says, "He's a musician, but maybe you know that. Anyway, you join the club, you get a button."

*First man:* So what did you say?

*Walking boss:* What the fuck could I say? I said "Oh." So, how about it, Mr. Wisenheimer, what do you say?

*Second man:* How the hell do I know? Maybe he's crazy. Maybe that's what somebody told him. Good Christ, maybe he was being straight! Maybe that's how people are organizing these days! But, see, the real problem is that you don't know how to approach people.

*Walking boss:* Oh, is that so?

*Second man:* Yes, I'm afraid it is. You've got to learn how to approach things and how to handle things.

*Walking boss:* Oh, Jesus. You know, I sure am glad I had a chance to talk to you about all this, but I'll tell you what.

*Second man:* What's that?

*Walking boss:* How about you showing me how to approach that reefer truck that's just now rolling in? And when you get done doing that, why then you can show me how to handle frozen meat. How does that sound?

*Second man:* Why, that sounds real good. See, I knew you'd have the proper attitude. I just knew it. And that's why I've been spending all this time with you. Now, if you'll just stay out of the way and keep your God-damned eyes open, why then maybe you will learn something. Then, too, see, there's this to consider. Me and John, here, now we're the best in the business. So, naturally, if you can't learn from us, why then you're not going to learn from anybody.

*Walking boss:* I think that maybe you're the best bull-shitter in the business. I think that maybe that's what we're talking about. But, I do know one thing.

*Second man:* What's that?

*Walking boss:* I know I want to learn more over there against that truck than I did here.

*Second man:* Well, c'mon, then, and let's find out. But remember, stand clear and keep your eyes open, because otherwise we can't do a thing for you.

## Encounter 4

### Setting

On the weather deck of a "freezer ship," i.e., a ship distinguished by hatches that are completely refrigerated. The vessel was being discharged of frozen meat from Australia and New Zealand.

### Cast

A *winch driver* who went to work on the San Francisco waterfront shortly after his emigration from England in early 1946. A fairly short, stocky, thick-armed, and very outgoing man. A knot of tightly curled red hair and fading freckles. He was wearing shorts, something he frequently did on warm days. As might be supposed, such attire was highly unusual on the San Francisco waterfront, but he was only very occasionally asked about it. That may perhaps be explained by his accent or perhaps his stature and the size of his arms. In any event, his friends and acquaintances got a big kick out of his practice: "He says it's part of his culture. And it's about the only sensible part, too. So, on a hot and sunny day, here he'll come, shorts and all, and sometimes with one of those hats that 'the great white hunters' always wear."

Two *holdmen* who had been friends since their San Francisco high school days and who had worked as partners during their eight months on the waterfront. Both are in their mid-twenties and both are sporting big, drooping mustaches.

### Event

The *winch driver* had just got off the winches to begin his afternoon relief period. The *holdmen* had just climbed out of their hatch so as to "thaw out." The three of them meet on the offshore rail opposite the hatch they were working so as to take the sun and watch the bay.

*The winch driver (with a big, ready smile):* Well, now, must strike you lads as a very relative world. Here I am, all decked out in shorts and fit for the beach and there you are freezin' your bloody arses off.

*One of the holdmen, as he sheds a heavy, fur-lined foul-weather coat:* You can say that again. It's cold as hell down there. Christ, I was gonna run after work, but I think my feet are about to fall off.

*Winch driver:* Oh, so you're a runner. Ever make that run from the Ferry Building out to the ocean?

*Holdman:* You mean the bay-to-breakers race? Yeah. I ran it just last month.

*Winch driver:* Well, I'll be damned, so did I. Christ, it damn near killed me. How'd you do?

*Holdman:* I finished. That's about all. You been runnin' long?

*Winch driver:* I used to run when I was a kid, but I hadn't run for years. It was a damn big mistake, too, but, truth to tell, a God-damned woman goaded me into it.

*Holdman (who had broken into a smile):* What do you mean?

*Winch driver:* Well, it was this way. I'd been sleeping with this woman up on Taylor Street every now and then and I was up to her place on the Friday night before the race. And naturally, come Saturday morning, I'm in the sack readin' the green sheet. I always read the sports page. Been doing that for years. And then I spots this article on the race, and when I'm done with it I starts tellin' her about it and how I used to run when I was a kid in England. In some of the schools for blokes who'd had a brush or two with the law they used to make a big thing of runnin'. I guess it was to get you all tired out, but I liked it. It kinda grows on you. It's like that picture, "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner." Ever see that picture?"

*Holdman:* No, I never saw it.

*Winch driver:* Well, it's a good picture, and, if you like runnin', you ought to see it, if you get a chance. But, anyway, runnin' for me was kind of like that, 'cept the guy in the picture thought a lot more about it than I ever did. I guess the people that ran those schools were right. They always said I did things without thinking. But to get back to what I was saying, I starts tellin' this woman about all that runnin' and straight away she comes back with, "Well, you couldn't manage a run like that now, could you?" Jesus, some women sure got a way of missing what you're trying to say and ways of getting at you, too. So, I jumps up and says, "Just you drive me down to the startin' line and then you can damn well meet me at the ocean." Now, naturally, she thought I was crazy and she said so, too, but, to make a long story short, that's what she did and I made the race. Christ, do you know I ran in my swim trunks and, would you believe, a pair of Italian shoes? I could barely walk for nearly a week, but that bitch just goaded me into it.

*Holdman (still grinning):* I guess you haven't run since.

*Winch driver:* You're sure right about that. And, what's more, I don't intend to. The most I'll do is maybe a little jogging. I'll jog to the ice box during commercials, that's what I'll do. But, it's funny about runnin', at least for me. I got to runnin' and all that time

back home got back in my head. Christ, I'm glad I'm here, but I'd best leave the runnin' to somebody else and I'm sure gonna leave that woman to somebody else.

*Second holdman:* You weren't too crazy about England?

*Winch driver:* Well, let's just say the feelin' was mutual. I spent a lot of time bein' in trouble. Nothing really serious, you know, but I mostly had to keep my eye peeled for the constable. That was before the war, actually. I spent a fair amount of time in what they call "borstal." That's where I was doin' all that runnin'. Just like that movie I asked you about. It's like what you call reform school or may be a step or two above that, but then the war came along and they took me into the army. Good Lord, that was somethin', too. I got put into something called the Royal Fusilliers. The 451st Royal Fusilliers, if you please. Now, as far as I'm concerned, regular soldierin' is no picnic, but a sergeant major we had made a practice of sending me over to a disciplinary battalion. Jesus, mate, you've just got no idea what life is like in a disciplinary battalion of the British Army. Or, I should say, maybe you do, but I hope you don't. But, anyway, after the war they let me go to Canada, but that was too damn English for me and they let me come here. My thinkin' was that San Francisco was about as far from merry old England as I could get.

*Second holdman:* So when did you start longshoring?

*Winch driver:* That was in the middle of '46. They took me into the union in '48, after the strike. Jesus, that was sure the best thing that ever happened to me, I can tell you. But listen fellows, I've got the break this up and get back on those winches. Break time for me has come and gone.

*First holdman:* OK, but listen. Your name is Harry, right?

*Winch driver:* Yes.

*First holdman:* OK, so Harry, clear somethin' up for me. What the hell is a fusillier, anyway?

*Winch driver:* I'll be God-damned if I know, mate. I was in that outfit for almost four years and I never did find out. Jesus, it was somethin'. Do you realize I invaded Normandy in chains? It took me three hours of stumblin' around to find the fuckin' corporal that had the keys. But that's another story, so I'll see you guys later.

## **Encounter 5**

### **Setting**

On the weather dock of a vessel, near a hatch coaming.

### **Cast**

*A walking boss* who had long been known for fairly conservative political views, but who had also been very active within the union and on trade union issues for many years.

A recently employed and bearded *longshoreman*.

### **Event**

The longshoreman had come up the hatch ladder to go ashore for a cup of coffee and to make a phone call. The walking boss was on the coaming watching the hold operation. He had watched the man ascend the ladder. As the man walked down the deck toward the gangway, the walker turned to him.

*Walking boss:* Say, how's it going with that support group for Chavez and the farm workers?

*Longshoreman:* Pretty good. We make a trip every month to Delano with some dough.

*Boss:* So, who keeps the books?

*Man:* Books? There aren't any books to keep.

*Boss:* Well, who's payrolling the operation?

*Man:* C'mon. Are you kidding? There's a ledger. One of the guys keeps track that way, and he takes the dough to the bank. There's no payroll to worry about.

*Boss:* I hear there's going to be more boycotts and demonstrations. What do you hear?

*Man:* Me? I don't hear shit, but who's payrolling questions like this, the FBI or somebody?

*Boss:* Hey, wait a minute. Hold on, now. I'm only kidding. Hell, I support them boycotts.

*Man:* Well, maybe so, but you sure got a piss-poor way of kidding people. I'll see you later. I got to go phone Moscow.