The Grievance

Poems from the Shop Floor

Martin Glaberman

A Singlejack Little Book
The question of work and how it could be made more fulfilling by the people who actually do it, has never become an issue of public discussion in America. In the last decade there has been a growth in the literature about work, but almost none of it has been written by those who spend over half their waking lives doing it.

We are all starved for images of ourselves, for identity and for aids to communicate the condition of our lives and the good in them. But the millions who do the so-called "unskilled," "semi-skilled," "craft," and even "professional" jobs in American workplaces are seldom, if ever, represented fairly in the popular literature and media of the nation. Commonly they are shown as clowns and culprits, near-apes or gum-smacking hollow-heads. It is rare to find any one of these media and fiction characters involved in the actual work of their occupation. Thus, the value of the contribution made by a majority of the citizenry is robbed of visibility and recognition.

The Singlejack Little Book effort is primarily directed at the publication of writings about, or related to, work, written by the people who are doing it or have done it. And to writings which are designed to provide ideas which working people will find of practical use. We know that in workplaces around the nation there are writers (some of whom have not yet written), who need to see evidence that there are places where they can publish before they come forth. As we find some of them (and prove our existence to more), it is hoped that our success will encourage similar publishing endeavors.

The shape and size of Singlejack Little Books is determined by the ease with which they fit into work shirt, blouse, apron or pants, and skirt pockets and purses.
The Grievance
Poems from the Shop Floor

Martin Glaberman

Singlejack Books
San Pedro: 1980
NOTE

Each of the poems in this collection originally appeared as one of the ongoing Songs of Mr. Toad.

This project is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, in Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.

The term singlejack originated with the hardrock miners of the American west. The drilling of holes for the insertion of dynamite was a tough and dangerous job. The miners worked in pairs, with one kneeling to hold erect the steel unll, which he would turn slowly as his partner drove it into the rock with blows from a sledge (or single jack) hammer. They would switch tasks now and then, and since the job demanded as much mutual trust as skill, many lasting friendships were formed.

Around the turn of the Century, on-the-job organizers for the Western Federation of Miners and the Industrial Workers of the World brought additional meaning to singlejack. They used it to describe that method of organizing where dedicated advocates are developed one at a time on a highly personalized basis — as between partners.

In turn, still broader veins of definition can be extracted from this rich historical term. We like to apply it to that private bond which ideally is sparked between a reader and a book. We hope you agree.
CONTENTS

The Grievance .................................... 7
Wildcat II ........................................ 15
Fist .................................................. 18
Workingman’s Store ............................ 20
Wildcat III ......................................... 22
Factory Song ....................................... 24
Ecology ............................................. 26
Wildcat I ............................................ 28
The Committeeman .............................. 30
THE GRIEVANCE
It's Out of My Hands

The shop was like a sweat box,
The heat was ninety-three.
I had a little grievance,
As anyone could see.

I went to see the foreman
And called to him by name.
I asked him could he open up
That nailed-down window pane?
But my boss said, "It's out of my hands."
I asked to see my steward,
And the boss he did agree.
But for two more days, nor hide nor hair
Of either did I see.

I finally caught the foreman
As he was running by.
He said my message was delivered
To the proper guy.
And now it was out of his hands.
The steward, when I saw him,  
Looked both shrewd and wise,  
And told me how much more there was  
Than seemed to meet the eyes.

He quoted several clauses,  
Interpretations too.  
Said that writing up a grievance  
Was all that he could do.  
Then it was out of his hands.
The Committeeman next came around,
Him I had never met.
The rest is strictly rumor
For I haven't met him yet.

But the story, when I got it,
At third or second hand,
After many weeks of waiting,
I was made to understand—
It was out of his hands.
The next thing that I heard of,  
Through the grapevine, tried and true,  
It had reached the shop committee,  
They'd see what they could do.

The days were getting shorter,  
And fall was drawing near,  
When the long-delayed decision  
I finally got to hear.  
It was out of their hands.
I wish I could say
That this ended my ditty
But my case was referred
To the Screening Committee.

I was told I was lucky,
After months had gone by
That my grievance had not
Just been left there to die.
But it was now out of their hands.
The Umpire considered
And pondered and thought.
He was honest and upright
And could not be bought.

Of the one hundred grievances
We lost ninety-nine,
But the one that was salvaged
Turned out to be mine.
The window was opened
On a cold wintry day.
I shivered and shook
Till I thought I'd give way.

I went to the foreman
And called him by name,
And asked him to shut
That damned window pane.
But he said, "It's out my hands."
WILDCAT II.

You are aware of it before you look up
(perhaps it's the advancing quiet)

The catch of the excitement as you see them
walking toward the gate
not hurrying

Each man distinct. The group growing
as the shop melts away
behind them.

Washed clean
by a single wave
that leaves a few pebbles behind.
Foremen stand here and there
not anxious to get in the way
little eddies at their feet
immobile in the mud.

Outside it is crisp and cold
men waiting for the stragglers
to get through the gate.

“What the hell’s the matter?”

“Where did it start?”

“They took the helper off the big job.”
“Christ, that could kill you working that job alone.”

The men drift off
No need to keep anyone out
or in

A day to rest
shop maybe
do some repairs

We’ll see tomorrow.
**FIST**

He lost his hand in a bright new automated punch press.

Five digits now none
Taken by a digital computer
Witch
Lo and behold
Makes mistakes just like human beans.
Humanized computer
Computerized human
It’s all the same
But it can’t hold hands.

Neither can he.
He took his other five digits
And melted them down into a
Fist.
WORKINGMEN’S STORE

You hardly see a Workingmen’s Store anymore.

Meagre stocks behind grimy windows
  (nothing to see through the windows anyway
  just the grimy factory windows across the way)

chewing tobacco
blue and red bandanas
cotton work gloves
striped denim engineers caps
  and
  of course
The Racing Form
and some girlie magazines.

All no longer needed.
The company supplies the gloves and permits smoking.
The state runs a lottery and the cops protect the in-plant numbers.
There's a cheap go-go bar next to where the store used to be.

No longer do the men stand around shooting the shit 'til time to dash for the clock.
No longer are there a few minutes to socialize until the bus comes.

Take the car into the parking lot protected by chain link fencing shutting out the street and the grimy windows.
The International Representative sits behind the local union president
An occasional whisper keeps him firm against the rising anger.

Why is it so difficult?
Just stay out until we win.

The simple repetition with growing heat proves too much
for the president
The whisper cannot carry over the roaring debate
And the International Rep.
brushes the president aside
power now openly wielded.
“You are weakening the union...
“How can we negotiate...
“You are violating the contract...
“Return to work…”

Why is it so difficult?
Stay out until we win.

“You must back your union...
“An administrator will be appointed…”

It’s their contract...
Let them run the damned plant.
FACTORY SONG

I look backward and inward
twenty years in the auto shops,

Illuminated by politics
the way the bright lights illuminate
a foggy stretch of the
Pennsylvania Turnpike.

The cold, gray, grinding winter mornings
warm the blood
The cast iron dust penetrates the skin
and firms the spine
(discolored by streaks of red rust)
The body is a tool to be used
The broken arm and gashed leg
are calculated risks and
damn all absolutes.
What is there to see inside?
Only the reflection of a thousand men
who touched you
with their own bit of steel.

They are not you
You are not them
But the parts can no longer be told apart.

Was it worth freezing your ass off
coming home from the night shift?

The rain cleans the asphalt
And the street light adds a shine.
ECOLOGY

Don’t leave the finger
on the floor
the doc might be able
to sew it on

And it could make the relief man
uneasy
being pointed at
as if
he
tripped the fuckin’ press
And the next man on the job
might slow her down
And then it would be my blood
spattered on the floor
turning slowly brown
mingling with the butts and tobacco juice
filling in the cracks
without waste.
WILDCAT I.

A most practical cat.

Walking silently on padded feet
Unseen, unheard
Power concentrated
in a compact body.

Lean, lithe, less
in appearance
Than the explosive leap,
periodic culmination
of growing power
of growing hunger.
Amber, black, mottled, gold.
All colors help to hide
its invisible path.

Slowly it climbs and waits
on limb
on cliff
on overhang.

All right, buddy,
Let’s not get romantic.
Shut her down and let’s go.

A most practical cat.
THE COMMITTEE MAN

He came in the day after his election wearing a clean sport shirt

Easy
One of the boys
Taking the traditional jokes pleasantly.

"Don't get your hands dirty now."
"Visit us from time to time, y'hear."
"Don't get too soft—we're liable to put you back on a machine."
The men started to work and  
he wandered around the  
department aimlessly,  
grinned uneasily  
when the foreman  
called his congratulations.

Lunch time he wasn’t at his usual place.  
He had business with the shop committee  
at the union hall  
And stayed outside the gates  
for a beer.  
In the afternoon he was seen  
chatting amiably with the foreman  
and flirting with the  
Superintendent’s secretary.
Born in 1918, Martin Glaberman worked for about 20 years in production jobs in the auto industry. Active in the U.A.W. during that period, he served as steward, committeeman, local union editor, etc.

He now teaches social science at Wayne State University in Detroit, and is the author of *Wartime Strikes*, the story of the struggle against the no-strike pledge in the U.A.W. during World War II.
WATERFRONT SUPERCARGO, by Tom Murray. For more than 30 years on the San Francisco Bay-area waterfront, Murray "kept book" on what went on around him. Starting as a clerk in the 1930's, he details the dockside procedures for the movement of cargo that has all but vanished today — and the men who helped move it: Paintlocker Charlie, Tanglefoot, Chips, The Turk. Authentic and often funny, Murray's Little Book describes a life that has largely vanished. (0-917300-10-6) 59 pages, $1.95

NIGHT SHIFT IN A PICKLE FACTORY, by Steve Turner. Seasonal cannery work in the northeast comer of the country — but the clanking and rattling old factory could be located in any number of spots in the U.S.. Turner sees it, understands it, and gets it all on paper for one of the best pieces of reporting of it's type ever written. (0-917300-18-0) 61 pages, $1.95

FOUNDRY FOREMAN, FOUNDRY MEN, by Lloyd Zimple. Two exceptional short stories that not only put you through the long shifts working in a foundry core room, but also show what it means to both be a foreman as well as work "beneath" him. Two stories that will not be soon forgotten. (0-917300-11-4) 60 pages, $1.95

MILES & WEIR, LTD.
Singlejack Books
Box 1906X
San Pedro, California 90735

NOTE: If you wish to order directly from the publisher, please add 50¢ postage/handling for the first book ordered, and 25¢ for each book thereafter. Thanks!
SINGLEJACK LITTLE BOOKS

LONGSHORING ON THE SAN FRANCISCO WATERFRONT, by Reg Theriault, shows what it means to be a member of an occupation which undergoes an automation/mechanization revolution. Spanning the period from the 1950’s to the 1970’s, Theriault compares hand-handling cargo with containerization, and his writing contains remarkable insight as well as not-a-few laughs. (0-917300-02-5) 30 pages, 95¢

STEELMILL BLUES, by Steve Packard. Describing his experiences in the basic steel industry, Packard’s Little Book represents one of the mainly overlooked benefits of the 1960’s. In their aftermath, hundreds of youths with already developed writing skills became industrial workers, and Packard is one of them. He writes from the heart, without affectation, and with much humor. (0-917300-03-3) 31 p, 95¢

LABOR LAW FOR THE RANK AND FILER, by Staughton Lynd
One of the country’s top labor lawyers shows you how to protect yourself more effectively when the law is against you, and how to get more accomplished when the law is on your side. A book that everyone working for wages should have. (0-917300-04-1) 64 pages, $1.95