

# Fiction by Gregory Alan Norton

## Factory

"MacNaughton."

"What?" I shouted over the din of the dog food factory. I hadn't seen my machine shop foreman sneak up behind me. I lurched out off my shop stool and stood between my machine and the boss, effectively blocking a close-up inspection of what I was doing. It was about 7:30 p.m., and I was working second shift as usual. It was a hot summer night but I was wearing my sand colored khaki uniform complete with a shirt with a big name tag that read "Pete."

*I hope to hell this dumb fucker doesn't see that my boring bar isn't cutting steel.*

I had set the bar to cut air for the last half hour before lunch time. The cutting tool would inextricably advance on automatic feed toward the headstock of the lathe until it hit a stop. I would then manually back the apron of the lathe back to the starting position, then resume operations. From a distance or to untrained eyes, I looked busy, boring out a fixture for large dog food containers. In actuality, I was fucking the dog.

"I want to see you in the office." He yelled in my ear.

"Why?" I yelled back, trying to make myself heard over the roar of the nearby punch-press department.

"Because I said so, that's why."

"Is this a disciplinary session?"

The foreman, a young man, not yet 30, stared at me with an exasperated look on his face, "Yes, as a matter of fact it is." His spotless white shirt and plain black tie was complemented by his bright red face.

"I'll need my union committeeman, then."

"He's working up front on an important project. What's the matter, can't do your own talking? Why do you have to stand behind the union every time I have to talk to you?"

"Because I have a civil right to have my union committeeman present. That right is backed by the full weight of federal labor law."

*This time, they intended to fire me.*

"Ok, have it your way." He threw up his hands then waved me off the way people do to street peddlers. He strode off toward his block house office in the front of the machine shop.

I shut down my lathe, cranked the cutting tool to within a few thousands of an inch of the interior steel wall I had been boring to get rid of the evidence of my malingering on the job, then set off to find my union committeeman who was wandering around somewhere beneath the roof of the 20-acre factory.

I loathed the union committeeman, "Doc," a short, fat hillbilly because I was convinced that he had been bought out by the company. With conspicuous slowness, I carefully removed and folded my shop apron on top of my tool box, then leisurely cleaned and put away my precision measuring tools, and finally locked the boxes. I noted that Attila the Douchebag, my pet name for our new boss, seemed to be watching me from his desk. He looked more agitated than usual. I strolled over to the drinking fountain and took a long drink before I ambled out of the department on my quest for my union representative.

*They're going to fire you this time, man. I got 250 bucks in the bank. I'll get one more check to pay the rent and utilities. I can apply for unemployment, but these motherfuckers are going to challenge that. Man, what kind of job can I apply for? I've got a degree in history and twenty years of work history as a machinist.*

I started wending my way through the punch press department looking for "Doc." The women operators each waved to me as I passed their massive, rapidly stoking machines.

*It's the petition, man. You're gonna get fired for passing around that petition. You had to do it. If that's what it's about, then this is worth it. You had no choice. They cut down the first flag-bearer, so you stepped up. Be proud, man. You don't want to live like a wimp. Don't be afraid. Be angry. Act like a fucking communist.*

The company had recently fired a woman, Linda, who they claimed had taken too much sick leave collecting "workman's compensation." Nothing existed in writing contractually or in law regarding the amount of time anyone could take. The basic reasoning had been, if you're hurt, you're hurt. When you're better, come back to work. Work paid a lot more than compensation, so there was no incentive to stay on it.

When they announced Linda's firing at the union meeting, people were very upset with the company for doing it, and with the union for permitting it. The union, the IBU, (nobody knew what the letters stood for -- we called it the International Bureaucrats Union or alternatively, the International Bullshit Union) claimed they had filed a grievance on her behalf.

The following Monday on first shift, her long time friend, Carmen, started passing around a petition protesting the firing. She did it legally, moving it around during breaks and lunch. The company promptly fired her. We wouldn't know the official reason for that for another month at the next union meeting. But her friends were saying she was fired for passing the petition.

So, after Carmen went down, I retrieved the petition from a fork-lift driver and started it back around the factory. I redid it, demanding reinstatement for both women. But that caused double work, and I had to get the thing re-signed by everybody. I did have one helper, Vicky, a middle-aged woman a couple of years younger than me whom I suspected was both alcoholic and a coke addict. But she was the party type and had lots of friends so I handed her another copy to pass out. Naturally, word got out immediately from the snitches that I was doing it.

*You know the way it probably leaked out? People were probably discussing it in the lunchroom and a supervisor overheard it and asked a few questions. One of the dummies probably just flat-out gave up the information. No concept of the importance of the information or how it could be used. And now it's my ass.*

For some reason, images from a Hollywood "B" movie that they had aired on a cable TV the night before kept cropping up in my consciousness. Cops and robbers, totally boring and repetitive. Superheros who fight off super-vicious bad guys.

Why couldn't they just make one movie true-to-life where somebody gets pissed off at their moronic boss then blows them away? Just once I'd like to see a movie about a punch-press operator who loses her cool after her boss unjustly chastises her, and she calls in a bomb threat to the factory, or comes to work after a three-day disciplinary vacation and blows her boss away with a 45 caliber automatic. Then I realized you do see that movie from time to time. On the nightly news.

Of course, I'm your basic, marginalized, underemployed lunatic-fringe type who's been overeducated for manual work. A monster lurking in the social fabric, I'm the type the corporations and government dread: educated and working class. Educated and working class equals totally alienated, the kind of people who join the socialist parties, and the forces of oppression understand that.

So, as a classic misfit in the Psychotic Atomik Empire, I yearn for insurrection, sabotage and disrespect for all forms of authority. When I hear about a guy packing bearings full of lapping compound, I laugh. When I learn one of friends has called in bomb threats, I'm delighted. Most people are fried by the time they hack their way through the traffic congestion to get to their work place. Then they have to survive 8 to 12 hours of alienating work. The only thing I can't figure out is why the majority never seems to catch on and overthrows the government to put an end to the fucking bullshit. Probably because there is no convincing alternate.

Everybody in the punch-press department waved to me as I passed. Some of the set-up men tried to duck me. *Chickenshits don't want to sign the petition. Afraid of me because I'm trouble. Man, they're afraid of losing their jobs. They don't have a college degree. As if the fucking degree was anything anybody could fall back on anyhow. Somebody in The Fourth International wrote a paper one time that mentioned the acute anxiety most people experienced in daily life.* I remembered a book from distant college days, a survey course on existential philosophy. The title of that book was The Age of Anxiety. And that's what the class war boiled down to in the factories and offices of the Psychotic Atomik Empire. You never knew when you were going to lose your job due to the economy, company consolidations and buyouts, or when some asshole will simply decide to fire you on a whim.

I found one of the set-up men skulking back in the poorly lit area where they stored steel coils. "Charlie" was smoking inside the building, a major offense against the corporation. Clouds of blue smoke boiling out of the screw machine department made smoking in the building into a joke. The burning cutting oil they used could be smelled in the parking lot.

"Hey, Charlie. Got the new petition for you to sign." I handed it to him. A skinny, middle-aged white guy, Charlie or whatever his real name was, never had much to say. He never went to union meetings.

He slowly wiped the machine oil off his hands onto his pants. He removed the cigarette from his mouth and studied the petition.

*Comon chickenshit. just fucking sign it.*

"It's the same one you signed last time, man. Only difference we added Carmen's name."

He took a greasy pen from his chest pocket and signed.

"Thanks Charlie."

"You think this is going to do any good?"

"Can't hurt."

"Yeah, I guess." He turned his back and resumed looking at the tags on the coils, presumably looking for the next roll to mount on his punch press.

Our organization had some members unofficially linked to the Fourth International (because it is illegal in the United States for workers to form organizational combinations with workers from other countries, but legal for corporations to go multi-national). Once we participated in a peace march in the Chicago suburb of Rolling Meadows. The object of the march was to reach the gates of the U.S. Army Psychological Operations unit. Helicopters flew overhead from the start of the march in a forest preserve all the way to the base. When we arrived, dozens of civilians and soldiers pointed video cameras, film cameras, and regular cameras at us. They pointed more surveillance devices at us than firearms. In the past I had been accosted by the Chicago Police going berserk, the National Guard with bayonets and teargas, and even police on horses. But that demonstration remains in my mind as one of the creepiest things I had ever witnessed. I'm sure some of those cameras weren't loaded, but they were more effective than firearms.

I carefully wiped off the grease that Charlie had inadvertently smeared on the margin of the petition, then refolded it, and placed it back inside my shirt. *There's not much difference between the way factory workers had to do things back when Gorky wrote The Mother and today. We still have to smuggle in socialist literature. We still have to pass petitions around like the country was occupied by Nazis, and we still have to live in fear over every move we make. Then, we had no civil rights to be violated. Now, they give us civil rights on paper, then take them away on the shop floor.*

Curiously, the United States is the only country in the world with a left without working-class representation. In the United States, the most of the left is composed largely of middle-class intellectuals. So, working-class socialists wind up fighting the corporations and the government, their own bureaucratized unions, and on some occasions their own middle-class- dominated sectarian left.

*Why do you do this shit, man? The only rewards are getting fired, having the police hassle you, having the FBI create files and maybe a case against you, or maybe just plain get shot and thrown into one of the swampy ponds in the industrial districts around Chicago.*

I paused at an open door that led to the shipping dock and the August night glimmering over the Illinois prairie. I glanced to see if anyone was looking, then slipped through the door. Outside, I found a woman press operator and a mechanic quietly smoking on the cracked cement steps. I knew their faces from passing them in the factory for years, but not their names. The outside air felt cool on my face. A vast orchestra of crickets chirped away in concert under the stars.

"You guys want to sign the petition protesting the two firings?"

"Sure." They said in unison. I carefully unfolded the petition and handed it to the woman first. I knew from long experience women were quicker to sign than men. If I handed it to the skilled mechanic, he might start raising issues over it, then find a reason not to sign. Of course, he would never admit he wasn't signing out of fear. But fear was contagious and then the woman wouldn't sign either.

After she signed, she handed it to him, and I realized these two were lovers in their late 30s. I wanted to remain outside with the chirping crickets and the fresh air, but I thanked them, and returned to the rancid odors, dust, and noise of the factory.

*You do it because of the indestructible streak of idealism in your wretched personality. You do it because your genes are programmed to do it. Just like carpenter genes are programmed to produce beautiful cabinets. They create cabinets because that's what they do. You raise hell because you've been programmed to be part of the conscience of a race of hairless, tailless monkeys.*

I crossed a main aisle between the presses and the dog-food-can machines. When I did, the straw boss, a guy in his sixties, spotted me. He nonchalantly approached me.

"Hi, what are you doing up here? We don't have any machines down."

"I'm looking for the union steward."

"Doc? He's in the cafeteria up front."

"Thanks." I walked on.

That fucker was one of the most effective bosses the company had on the shop floor. He never started any shit, but he knew everything that was going on. And he wrote out so much disciplinary paperwork that the workers called him Shakespeare. I didn't bother stopping to hand the petition around even though a couple of people were trying to flag me from their machines, because I knew Shakespeare was probably prowling somewhere in the shadows taking notes. He wouldn't stop tracking me until I was out of his department.

Instead of going directly to the grungy cafeteria with its fluorescent lights, I stopped off in the men's washroom by the time clocks. I found a variety of Puerto Rican forklift drivers and Mexican machine operators holding an animated conversation. Mainly young guys, they were formed in a large semi-circle around one of the wash basins talking about women.

One of the guys, Rico, a tall handsome man with raven hair and light skin, had been in the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. He asked the others in Spanish to sign the petition. They all did. And then they resumed the conversation like I wasn't there.

*I'm in a dream. Didn't William S. Burroughs say that in one of his interviews or books? Your life is a series of encounters with others, punctuated by daydreams, reveries, memories, sleep, and dreams. But when they haul you in the office in front of several ugly faces, that's no dream. You're fired and you can have your next daydream at the unemployment office where you have to fight to try to get your unemployment turned on. Or when you're standing in front of the lathe trying to figure out how in the hell to make a part, with sweat pouring down your face, that's not a dream either.*

In the cafeteria, I found Doc sitting at one of the long, dirty lunch tables having coffee with the second-shift supervisor. They were sharing mutual laughter over a joke when I walked in.

"I need to talk to you."

"Ok. What's it about?"

"Attila the Douchebag wants to talk to me."

"So? I'm busy. Go talk to him."

"He says it's disciplinary, Stewart." He hated his own name, Stewart.

"Well, find out what he wants, and then I'll come down if necessary."

"I'm officially asking for union representation in front of a witness, Stewart." The manager made a face and looked down at his coffee.

"Ok. Go back down there, and wait outside his office. I'll be down directly, and we can go in together."

"Right." I swiveled around and left. *My ass. Motherfucker is going to call down first and see what's up. Then he's coming down and both those assholes are going to pile on me.* I decided to take another route back.

I found a pack of electricians working on the main splitter for the factory. The machine was down, but no bosses were in sight. I walked up to the group and asked the lead guy, Roy, a former local president to sign the petition. I didn't show it to him, because I didn't want him to see the names on it.

"I can't sign that, Pete. That's up to the local officers to decide what to do. Bring it up at a union meeting. That petition isn't going to have any weight."

"If the whole factory signs it, they gotta know its trouble if they don't hire them back."

"Yeah? Who's gonna cause that trouble? You?"

"Me and everybody else."

He turned back to the panel board in the machine. "I'm not signing it." The others kept working and acted like I wasn't there. I knew it was useless to approach them in that situation. I might get a couple of the younger guys to sign if I caught them alone, away from Roy.

*Skilled trades make more money than some "professionals." Of course they have to work 60 hours a week, week after week, year after year, but they make a lot more money than a forklift driver or a machine operator. Lots of these guys have part-time businesses on the side, too. They own nice houses in middle class subdivisions. They own nice cars and big toys like motor homes, boats, snowmobiles, jet skis, and vacation homes. They like the union because they get big pay. And the US left worships them because they think they're going to lead a working-class revolution some day. What the US left has yet to figure out is that the non-union workers are the ones who are going to lead a social revolution some day. Those are the sans coulettes of our time. Not the big-pay union workers.*

People asked me why I volunteered to help organize more locals of the IBU. I told them belonging to a bureaucratic union was better than no union.

*Besides, then you get to fight both the company and the union for your rights and decent pay. But at least with a bureaucratic union you had the opportunity to fight. It's a step-by-step process.*

I found a Mexican janitor next, and he signed. He had been demoted to janitor while the union stood by, as usual, and did nothing. Then I passed two white millwrights in their 60s in the aisle. They were filthy from crawling under a strapping machine. Neither one had a high school education and neither had been through an apprenticeship. They were "shade-tree mechanics." They both signed.

*The last time I had volunteered for an organizing drive at a small factory up in Woodstock, Illinois, where they had imprisoned Debs in the county jail after the Great Railroad Pullman Strike of 1893, I had encountered white and Mexican workers who were renters, drove battered automobiles, and accepted revolutionary ideas as readily as the morning weather forecast.*

Of course, there was no welcome mat placed out for them in the U.S. left, so the United States remains the only country in the world where there is no discernible working-class presence in the left.

I strolled through the forklift repair shop, but nobody was home. Before heading down the aisle, I peered around the corner looking for Shakespeare or Attila, but didn't see anyone, so I headed back to the machine shop.

In the can test shop I found three women water testing the dog food cans to make sure they didn't leak. All three had signed Vicky's petition, or at least they said so. As I passed through the truck drivers' waiting room, I placed the rank and file bulletin from our organization on the table. With great difficulty, our grouping had made progress organizing drivers and other Teamsters over the years in the battle against that union bureaucracy.

I handed out our organization's rank-and-file union newsletter at union meetings, then fought to have a motion passed to get the local to buy it and distribute it. I won the vote by a margin of four votes. I had to go to every single union meeting to keep the IBU from rescinding it because the bureaucrats hated it. It linked our

shop's battles to the national and international ones. And it showcased the bureaucratic problem in every issue. That was not the kind of labor journalism the big shots or the little shots wanted in the union hall.

As I passed by the Quality Control bulletin board on my way to the shop, I noticed someone had left the dry erase marker in the little tray beneath the board. I looked both ways down the aisle, then carefully erased the daily safety slogan and number of days since the last industrial accident. In big black letters I printed, GIVE LINDA AND CARMEN THEIR JOBS BACK.

As I finished, I turned around to find an African American machine operator, a taciturn man in his 40s, had watched my propaganda efforts. His name was Ted.

"They said I would find you over here. I want to sign the petition. But not here. Let's go over by the welding shop." He nodded at the bulletin board.

"Yeah, I hear you." We moved quickly to an empty welding booth about 100 yards away from the board. Before we could finish, I noticed Shakespeare walk past the board toward the QC department. Either he hadn't seen the new safety slogan, or he didn't care. What really concerned me was that he might have been tailing me, and I hadn't noticed.

A couple of the evening welders signed the petition. Several others said they had signed Vicky's. The evening boss in the welding area, a guy in his mid-60s, waved me out of the area. A short guy with a grey crew cut and standard black pants and white shirt, he was a good guy who had come up through the ranks. He never reported anybody. He just didn't want any trouble. And I was definitely trouble.

*I wasn't passing a petition around. Do you have a witness saying I was passing a petition around? I walked up front to see my union committeeman. He sent me back here to wait. I don't know anything about the bulletin board. Do you have a witness who says I wrote that on the bulletin board?*

When I reached the shop, I was pleasantly surprised when the die makers said they had signed Vicky's petition. That made it a lot easier for me. Arguing with those boneheads, skilled labor, was a pain in the ass. As I made the rounds, tool box to tool box, I realized she must have come through at the start of the shift and signed them all up. They all wanted to get into her pants, so they signed. They'd probably remind her, too, when they met up with her again at the tavern down the road from the factory.

*There's a swamp on one side of that road where people dump stuff they don't want. And there's an abandoned gravel pit filled with deep water back in the woods on the other side. Make sure you don't wind up there instead of the tavern.*

I folded the petition back into the safe spot between my khaki shirt and t-shirt. I would compare notes with Vicky the next morning. I would drive down to the tavern to meet her about six a.m. before she started her shift. Sometimes when we met, I realized she had never gone home.

I meandered up to the blockhouse and peered inside. No Attila. I leaned against the block wall with all the indifference I could muster. Shortly, Doc appeared.

"Hi, Stewart."

"What's this all about? What did you do? And call me Doc like everybody else would you?"

"I didn't do anything, Doc. I don't know what his fuckin' problem is."

"Well, maybe that's the problem. You didn't do anything. Maybe he wants you to do some work."

"I work as hard as you do, Doc." That was a reference to the vast amounts of time he spent either up in the front office enjoying air-conditioned hospitality all summer shooting the shit with the big shots or sitting the cafeteria with one department boss or another discussing baseball scores or where the best fishing existed in the area.

"I spent my time productively taking care of y'all. If you'ns didn't get into so much trouble, I'd be out on my machine more."

"Is that right?"

"I know you been pushing that petition around again. You're asking for it, you know. They're gonna fire anybody has anything to do with passing that thing around."

"What petition?"

"Yeah, right. You're gonna get it one of these days, MacNaughton. And there ain't nothing the union is gonna be able to do about it, neither."

"I heard that song before."

"And you're gonna hear it again, before it's over with, goddamnit."

"Yeah, I'm sure."

"Some people never learn."

"You got that right."

Attila came storming up to the blockhouse with an engineer. They were holding a big assembly print for the main coil cutter. The engineer must have stayed overtime. The big boys wanted that machine running. Attila glared at me as he slammed open the door to the blockhouse. Doc and I followed in their wake.

Attila turned to us right away. I noted the bright red hue of his face. "What do you guys want? I'm busy. Can't you see that? What's the problem now?"

"You told me you wanted to see me," I said.

"For what?" Attila demanded.

"For how-the-hell do I know?"

"I want you to get to work. Get some goddamn work done."

"I was working when you interrupted me."

"Well... work faster."

"Is this a verbal warning?" I asked. Doc stood by completely ignorant of the rules of engagement or grievance writing. I realized as I stood there, the dumb fuck had probably never written a single grievance in his two years on the job as a committeeman.

"Yes."

"Then, I'm going to file a grievance."

"You'll have to do that on your own, partner," said Doc.

"Well, if you refuse, then I'll take the day off tomorrow to go down to the labor board, and file on you, too, Doc." That was complete bullshit, but neither one of those two turds knew it. "And, you can't charge me for the day off either, because it's against federal law."

"Can he do that?" asked my boss. Doc looked at my boss with a blank expression.

"OK, then this is not a verbal warning."

"Then what the fuck is it?"

"I don't know. Just quit fucking around so much and do some work for a change."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

Then, my boss made an elaborate show of ignoring me. I walked out and left Doc behind. I heard some yelling inside the blockhouse, and as Doc exited I could distinctly hear the words, "Get out!" all the way from my toolbox. Doc didn't bother to debrief me.

I put a little notebook on top of my tool box. I kept notes of all the transactions between myself and the union and company. I always put the thing on display so news of the little book would get back to both management and the union hacks. I boxed each entry against the others to prevent any future tampering and ensure the thing could be used in any legal procedures.

I missed my meeting with Vicky in the morning because I couldn't get to sleep until 4 a.m. I generally got off at midnight, but I had to pound down several beers before I could relax and sleep.

I did meet her the next day when I pulled into the parking lot around 3:30 p.m. Vicky came running out on the hot asphalt to greet me, her long, unkempt blonde hair trailing behind her.

"Did you hear what happened?"

"I just got here." I made sure my windows were left open a crack before I got out of the car.

"Carmen got her job back!"

"Really? What about Linda?"

"The union says they're working on that."

"How did Carmen get her job back? We didn't even turn this in, yet." I handed her my section of the petition.

"Well, after you wrote that on the board, everybody took out markers and wrote it all over the factory all morning. Everywhere you looked: GIVE LINDA AND CARMEN THEIR JOBS BACK."

"I wrote on the board?"

"Oh, bullshit. Everybody knows you did it. Anyway, at noon they posted an announcement on the union bulletin board that Carmen was coming back to work next Monday -- they reduced it from firing to a week off."

"Hear anything regarding me?"

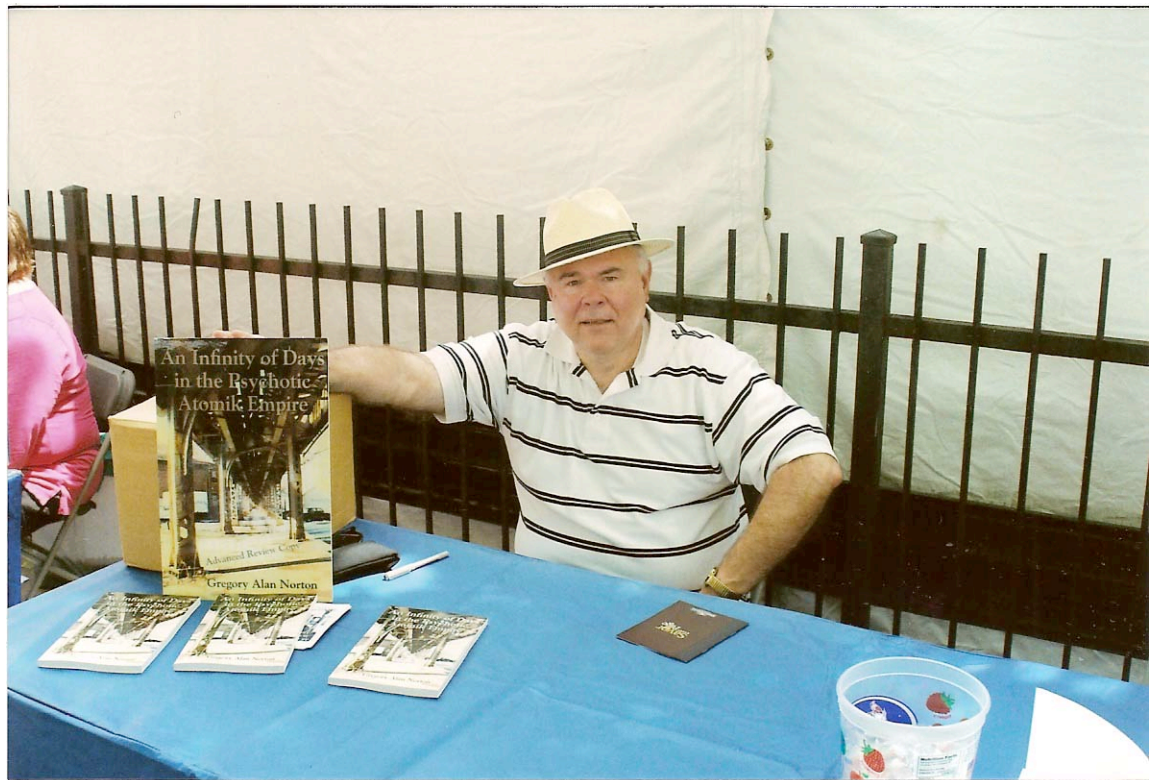
"No. What?"

"Just curious," I said.

"Meet me after work at the tavern so we can celebrate."

"Sure." I walked into the factory for another shift in an infinity of factory shifts in the Psychotic Atomik Empire.

By Gregory Alan Norton





# THERE AIN'T NO JUSTICE, JUST US



Gregory Alan Norton

# Fiction by Paris Smith

## Hysteria

"Wesley! Don't ya hear yo mamma callin you, boy?"

Chester Sledge lumbered across the weed-choked front yard, favoring his left foot with a dip in his step, his bottom lip and paunchy belly sagging loosely.

"Ya better get a move on it. Ain't nobody got no time for no foolishness."

Wesley was careful not to let the screen door clap shut behind himself when he stepped out onto the porch. He yawned and gaped inquiringly at his daddy, his big brown eyes still swollen with sleep.

"Yo ma wants ya to take the washin back to Ma'am Kent. I heard her callin you bout half hour ago. And I want ya to stop at the store and pick up some salt on yo way back."

"I was comin, Daddy," Wesley mumbled, dropping his gaze and stuffing his hands into the pockets of his faded overalls.

"Gits so it's hard as hell for you to move in the mornins, boy. Maybe you need some good leatha on yo backside."

Wesley's lips quivered as a hot surge of unpleasantness shot through him, making his bladder tingle. He didn't want to displease his daddy. He dreaded one of those whippings where the old man would hold him up by his arms while he tore up his bottom with that heavy black strap.

"Don't keep standin there like a damned dummy, Wesley. Go on and see what all yo mamma got for ya to do."

Wesley bolted down the stairs and dashed around to the rear of the old frame house where Holly Sledge was standing over the big cast-iron pot, stirring a batch of clothes with a long pole. The flames underneath lapped up around the bottom sides of the black bowl while a mixture of smoke from the coals and steam from the cleansing brew dissipated into the air.

"Where ya been, Wesley? I knows ya heard me callin ya." Frowning at him, his mother set the pole aside and wiped her face and hands on her apron. She was a frail woman with gangling arms and knobby elbows. Her reddish-brown hair, pinned back and slick with pomade, glistened under the morning sun. Her hands were callused and crusty. A deep, hook-like scar made a gash through her left eyebrow and tapered off across her nose.

"Git yo wagon and take them clothes there back to the Kents." She pointed to the bundles on the table by the back door. "Ma'am Paula's supposed to give ya a dollar-and-a-half. Ya hear?"

"Yes, Momma."

"Them Kents oughta be payin at least two dollars by now," his mother went on. "I know they got money cause old man Kent owns the town newspaper. They always got a bunch of clothes. And he's so damned particular bout the starch in his collars."

Wesley made no reply. She was fussing more to herself than to him. He shuffled over and pulled the wagon out from its space under the back porch. The axles squeaked and something rattled underneath. It was a vehicle he had put together using pieces of wood and the wobbly wheels off a discarded baby carriage.

Just then, his father hobbled around the corner of the house, carrying a couple of planks under his arm.

"You watch yoself round them white folks, son. Just take in the clothes, git what they owes ya and git on way from em. Ma'am Paula'll make ya wait fore she gives ya the money. And all the time she'll have it in her pocket. But she likes to do that. Make ya have to wait for her. But don't say nothin. She'll think ya bein sassy." He stood the wood against the side of the house then rubbed his hands together. "I hates them damned crackers. I hates their fuckin guts."

"Hush that kinda talk round this boy," his wife interjected. "He don't need to be hearin nothin bout no hate."

Chester fired a resentful glare at her, then chuckled and showed the empty space in the middle of his top row of teeth.

"I'm tellin this boy what he needs to know in order to survive in this man's world, in this here year of nineteen-thirty. These peckers is out to see us dead. Don't ya realize that, woman?"

"Maybe the world ain't like this everywhere," Holly said. "This is Georgia. Everywhere ain't like Georgia. It ain't like this up north."

"Like hell it ain't. It's like this wherever there's white folks." Chester turned and fixed a stare directly on Wesley.

The boy became still, except for the tremor in his limbs. Again the hot feeling rushed through him, stirring his bladder. His stomach felt hollow. His father's threatening talks always upset him. It was all a part of life he didn't exactly understand. But he understood there was a certain way he was expected to behave around the whites who in all instances had more of everything than the blacks and could tell them what to do.

"I just don't want no trouble with none of these damned peckerwoods," Chester grumbled on. "I wants Wesley to be sure he knows how to act when he's gotta be round em. We done had enough trouble."

"Lord, have mercy," Holly proclaimed, raising her hands in reverent surrender to the high blue sky.

Wesley's joints suddenly felt stiff as he pulled the wagon over to the table. A hot tightness seemed to be binding his brain while sweat seeped from his armpits, soaking his tattered shirt. He knew why his father talked the mean way he did. A group of white men had come to their house one night several years before and accused

Wesley's older brother, Nathaniel, of stealing some whiskey and talking fresh to a white woman on the street in town. They barged in the front door, led by Mr. George, the brawny owner of the general store down by the railroad tracks, and ordered Holly to leave the room while they interrogated Nathaniel, then proceeded to beat him unmercifully with rubber hoses and pieces of stove wood.

Having been barely four years old at the time, Wesley had hidden under his parents' bed, too afraid to cry, cringing and pissing while the heavy boots stomped and the angry white men's voices called for murder. The worst happened when Chester protested the beating of Nathaniel, thereby sending Mr. George flying into a rage wherein he ordered the men to tear off Chester's pants and hold him down on the bed to be whipped across the ass with a section of bridle harness. His struggles were easily vanquished by the brutal men, and for the finale, he got knocked numb by a big fist in the jaw. Wesley could never forget the way his daddy had whooped and hollered and how the bed shook every time Mr. George laid on one of his lashes.

"You lucky I don't hang yo black asses," the store owner had ranted. "You niggas better start knowin yo place. And you better always have respect for a white woman. That's the one thing you better never forget as long as you live."

Holly had cried for a long time after the intruders left their home, and she got down on her knees and prayed out loud to the Lord.

"Awright, Wesley," Chester roared. "Stop that daydreamin and git the lead out."

Wesley snapped back at the sound of his father's voice and yanked the rope handle on the wagon. He parked it alongside the table and proceeded to load the clothes into wicker baskets.

"I know what I'm tellin the boy is right," his daddy lectured on. "He don't need to be like his brother, bringin trouble up in here then havin to run off to live in Atlanta. White folks ain't nobody to be messin with."

Wesley felt weak in the knees as a curdled taste filled his mouth. He hoped his father would stop talking about the white people and his brother.

"Ya don't give them damned Kents no sass. Ya hear me, Wesley? And always keep yo eyes off them white gals. Don't ya look at em no kinda way. Keep yo little eyes on the ground. One of the quickest ways for ya to git in trouble is to git caught lookin at a white gal. That thang tween their legs ain't for you."

"Stop it, Chester," Holly chimed in again. "Wesley's just made eleven years old. He ain't thinkin bout no gals. No kinda gals." Her mouth wrenched into a scowl and her chin started quivering.

"What's the matter with you, woman?" Chester limped over to the steaming pot. Holly picked up some soiled linen and tossed it into the water. He grabbed her arm, but she jerked away.

"That kinda talk ain't no good in front of the child, Chester. You'll make him scared to death of white folks. He's already fearful enough as it is. He's still wettin the bed at his age. And ya see how he's afraid of the dark."

"It ain't a matter of him just bein scared." Chester hawked and spit out his words, making the veins bulge in his sweaty, brown neck. "I wants him to know just how mean them suckers can git. My leg ain't never gonna be right again behind them crates fallin on me at that old damned Meacham's Lumber Mill. That old foreman, Mr. Harry, won't let me work no mo. And it was all his fault them crates fell in the first place. I can't help our boy no mo if he gets in trouble. I can't even run fast. He gotta know what he can and can't do here in Calhoun County. I learnt and my daddy learnt. Now Wesley gotta learn. And you know the worst he can do is say somethin outa the way to one of them cracker gals. He better not even look." Chester started gritting his teeth and frothing at the corners of his mouth. "Naw, he can't even look. He's guilty just for lookin. Mr. George coulda took Nathaniel out and hung him for speakin and winkin at Miss Ford that time. Ya know that, Holly. I know you ain't no damned fool. And ya know that little sway-back hussy was leadin the boy on."

Holly didn't reply as she picked up her pole and churned the clothes around in the pot, her long arms working furiously as she summoned all her strength. The water was starting to bubble more vigorously and the steam continued to rise.

"Yeah, ya better listen to me good, Wesley," Chester began again, turning back toward the boy. "I'm tellin ya these things for yo own good. Ain't nothin you can do gainst no white folks. Not in these parts. So don't be gittin no kinda funny ideas in yo head or listenin to none of them crazy folks round here, them Communists and things. Ya hear me? And you don't be lookin at Ma'am Paula too hard when ya take them clothes over there. Everybody figures she's a good looker. She thinks so herself."

"Yes, Daddy," Wesley replied, meekly, without looking up from his loading chore.

"Leave him be Chester," Holly wailed. "Please leave him be. Things is bad enough out here in the world. Can't we at least have some peace amongst ourselves?"

Whirling around, Chester leveled his finger at his wife and slowly advanced on her, his face contorted into a monstrous expression of distemper. He hiked his belt up on his puffy belly and kicked at the dirt.

Wesley finished loading the basketsful of clothes into the wagon and picked up the rope handle. He wanted to get away before some awful calamity happened, but his legs felt weak and he felt like he wanted to pee again.

His father stopped beside his mother as she stirred the boiling laundry with all the force in her worked-out body. He muttered something Wesley couldn't hear, then suddenly he snatched the pole away from her.

"You's the biggest fool I ever seen," Holly stormed at him. "That mess with that Mr. George happened over seven years ago. That man ain't even in this county no mo. Lord, have mercy."

"Hush yo mouth, woman. All you ever do is cry to the Lord and read that damned Bible."

"You better watch yo mouth, old damned nigga, or you gonna git struck down. You's blaphemin God."

Wesley cringed and almost started to cry when it appeared as though his father might hit his mother, but the man stopped short, looming over her with the pole in one hand and his other fist drawn back.

Wesley ran around the side of the house, pulling the rumbling wagon behind him over the bumpy ground. He crossed the front yard and headed up the road, his heart beating fast, tears swelling in his eyes. A car was coming toward him, stirring up a cloud of dust. He veered off into the weeds so that the bundles wouldn't get dirty. A white man with a long neck sat hunched over the steering wheel and paid him no mind as he rolled by. Wesley took time to relieve his bladder while standing in the brush.

He paused when he came to the crossroads on the hill a little ways from his house. He turned to look back at the row of shabby shacks where he had lived all his life. His shanty was the one with the roof that dipped in the middle. He wondered whether his father had hit his mother by now. Were they fighting and tearing up the house? Or was his mother lying across the bed sobbing while his father continued with his tirade about the white folks? Wesley had witnessed many such scenes, especially since the old man's accident at the lumber mill. His father now seemed all-consumed by hot blood and rage devouring him from within.

Wesley looked both ways along the newly paved road, the first to be covered in his part of Calhoun County. Pulling the wagon was going to be faster across the smooth black turf. The late-morning sun was starting to come on strong. Sheets of heat reflected off the asphalt, shimmering before his eyes.

"Hey, Wesley," called out a voice from behind him. "Where ya goin?"

He looked around. Terrell Cooper, a boy his own age who lived in the shack across the road from his, was trudging toward him, kicking up the red Georgia dust.

Wesley twisted the rope handle tightly around his fingers and waited to greet his neighbor.

"You sure is walkin fast," Terrell said when he caught up. "Where you on yo way to?"

Wesley looked back at the loaded wagon and shrugged.

"Oh, you takin stuff to the Kent folks. Gonna git yoself some money."

"That's my momma and daddy's money."

"Can't you spend none of it?"

"Naw. My daddy'll whup me if I do."

Terrell looked down at the clothes and sneered. He was taller than Wesley, and wider in the shoulders. A challenging look rankled in his eyes. Wesley disliked him intensely, but he didn't want to say anything that might rub him the wrong way and start trouble.

"Well, you better git on along to yo folks," the boy taunted with a grin. "They probably waitin on you and lookin at their watches. My daddy don't work for no white folks no mo. He works for hisself, like I'm gonna do when I gits grown. My daddy sells whiskey. Even Sheriff Busby buy his whiskey from my daddy. And we got a car, too."

Wesley lowered his head and remained silent while the feverish sensation started building again. He could feel that Terrell wanted to do something mean to him.

Wesley turned away from the boy and stepped onto the paved road that felt hot enough to burn through the thin soles of his shoes. He didn't look back as he skipped away with the wagon wheels rolling squeakily behind him. An occasional car or truck whizzed by. A horse-drawn cart loaded with watermelons creaked past him, headed in the opposite direction. The sunburned driver smiled and waved to him with the red handkerchief he used to mop his sweaty brow.

Soon, Wesley came to the railroad tracks and stopped. The earth rumbled beneath his feet as the express train roared by, the driving rods on the wheels of the great locomotive churning furiously while the puffs of steam belched from its stack. Someday he intended to be riding in one of the dark green coaches bound for Chicago or maybe Detroit.

When the train had passed and the dust and cinders had settled, he continued on, turning off after a while onto a gravelly side road at the top of a hill, within sight of the church steeple and the courthouse in the main section of town. He scurried along, pulling the wagon again with more effort than he had across the smooth asphalt. The leaves on the branches of the great willows and magnolias shielded him occasionally from the searing rays of the sun.

White people were all around him now, relaxing in the shade on their front porches and going about their daily chores, moving sluggishly as though they commanded all the time in the world. But he moved with great haste, knowing the Kents were expecting their laundry before the morning had gone. A queasy feeling sloshed in his belly. He had to be extra careful and do nothing to raise the ire of the people around him. Hopefully, Ma'am Paula wouldn't stall about giving him the dollar-and-a-half, the way his father had predicted.

The Kents' home sat on the right side of the road about a quarter-of-a-mile from the main thoroughfare. It was a sprawling frame house, recently painted white, with a porch that wrapped around both sides. The grass smelled freshly cut, and the neat rows of snapdragons and petunias along the fence showed meticulous care; fancy lamps stood on each side of the stone-laden walkway leading to the front door. There was a distinct aristocratic air about the place. He approached cautiously. The little girl, Gertrude Kent, wearing a pink dress and ribbons in her hair, was playing with her dolls in the front yard under a fig tree.

"Hello, Wesley," she said, pleasantly.

"Mornin, Missy." He forced a smile and cast only a quick glance in her direction.

Nelson Kent stood at the door, seemingly staring right through Wesley. He was a hulking man with an extruding lower jaw and a bristly moustache that obscured his top lip. His blue eyes projected something cold and sinister. Wesley stepped up his pace so that he could hurry up and get away from him. A breeze came, making the trees swing and sway as he scampered around to the rear of the house. He stopped suddenly when one of the Kents' dogs, a husky shepherd with blazing eyes, ran toward him, barking and snapping. The animal came in close and began circling Wesley, holding its head low and showing its teeth.

Wesley stood very still, not at all sure what he should do if the real attack came. He had always been afraid of dogs.

"Come here, Butch," shouted a young male voice. "Leave that boy alone. Get on away from him."

Wesley looked around just as Donald Kent, the oldest boy, ambled up and drew the dog's attention by clapping his hands.

"That ain't nobody but little Wesley," Donald drawled as the dog jumped up and nipped playfully at his master's fingertips. "Leave him alone. He's just a fraidy cat like his ol cripple pa."

The remark made Wesley wince. He started to move away, but something in the white boy's eyes forced him to keep still. The quivering started in his limbs. What had he done wrong? What did Donald Kent want?

Then suddenly it dawned on him. "Thank you, Master Donald. Thank you, thank you," he said, nodding the way he had seen his father and the other black men do.

"Awright, Wesley. But you be sure you don't mess with old Butch again." Donald Kent rubbed the dog's head and grinned. "Now you better scat. My momma's waitin for them clean clothes."

Wesley hurried around to the rear of the house and parked his wagon, then stepped up to knock timidly on the kitchen door. Music was playing on the radio somewhere inside; something sweet was cooking on the stove. But no one answered. Again he rapped softly on the wood.

Presently, Paula Kent came to the door. A tall, busty woman with copper-colored hair and keen features, she carried herself in a haughty manner, head held high, her pinched nose turned up as though she detected an odd aroma. Patches of freckles dotted her cheeks. Wesley always felt tense and awkward in her presence.

"It's about time you got here, boy." She flicked the hook on the screen door and pushed it open. "Bring the clothes in and put them over there." She stood aside and pointed to a long table. "And hurry up now."

"Yes, Ma'am." Wesley didn't dare look into her eyes as he stepped into the kitchen.

"Git the clothes first, boy," she snapped. "Where's your mind today?"

"Oh, yes, Ma'am," he said, feeling foolish for having rushed in empty handed.

"And don't you let any flies in this house."

"Yes, Ma'am."

He stumbled clumsily over his own feet, but managed to keep from falling as he hurried back to the wagon. Moving quickly, he made three trips back and forth carrying the bundles into the kitchen and stacking them neatly on the table. He looked around for Paula Kent when he was done, but she had gone. Sighing dejectedly, he went outside and flopped down in his wagon. His father had told him right. He was going to have to wait for her to give him the money. Hopefully, she wouldn't hold him up for long.

A dull, throbbing ache started around his temples while his stomach groaned and twisted. His mother would most likely have some lunch ready when he got back home. He hadn't eaten any breakfast. A couple of crows were perched on the picket fence separating the Kents' domain from their neighbors'. He imagined that the birds were laughing at him when they started their raucous chatter.

He felt small sitting in the shadow of the grand house where Nelson and Paula Kent carried on with their charmed lives, far removed from underlings like himself. Had circumstances always been this way between people? he wondered. Would they always be this way? The things his father said about the white people always turned out to be true. Frighteningly true. But why didn't his mother want him to hear his father's words? Why did they argue so much? It was all too confusing.

His thoughts drifted away to grape jelly and bread. That was what he wanted when he got back home. And a tall, cold glass of milk, or maybe some iced tea. He looked at his wagon. It was time for a new one. He would start working on it right away. Maybe he could find some wheels near the dump on the east side of town.

In a little while Paula Kent came to the door again. He stood up, but still kept his eyes down as the tingly feeling returned to his limbs.

"Come and get your money, Wesley." She cracked the screen a bit and held out a paper dollar and a coin for him.

He went and received the cash and slipped it into his pocket. "Thank you, Ma'am."

"Wesley," she said, as she was about to turn away.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Want to make yourself a quarter?"

An upsweep of jubilation made him raise his head.

"There's a pile of old clothes and things I want cleaned up in the cellar. They've started to mildew. The whole cellar flooded last week when we got all that rain. You can move the stuff off the floor and put it in the barrels you'll find down there."

Wesley nodded and grimaced when his empty belly groused again. His gaze focused on Paula Kent's smooth, pink hands and the glittering diamond ring she wore on her finger.

"Now come on and I'll show you the cellar and what needs to be done."

"Yes, Ma'am."

He followed her across the kitchen and into a cluttered pantry where the shelves were lined with jars and cans of fruits and vegetables. She moved with a lilting spring in her step, her flowing blue dress showing off the curves of her hips. He caught a whiff of her perfume. She opened a door inside the pantry and reached in to turn on the light.

"All right, Wesley." She stood back, pointing to the broken staircase descending into the cellar. "You'll find a bunch of stuff piled in a corner down there. Just take it and put it in the barrels like I told you. There's a shovel down there you can use. And you be careful going up and down. I don't know when Mr. Kent's going to be finished fixing the steps. He's been working on them for the longest. At least he ran a wire down there so there's some light."

Wesley paused at the top of the stairs and peered down into the gloom. A musty, rotten odor came forth. The staircase was rickety and a couple of the steps near the top were missing, enabling him to see through to the floor.

"Don't be afraid, Wesley. There's nothing down there but maybe a squirrel or some field mice that might've got in. But they'll be long gone once you start making a little noise."

He cleared his throat and sighed, "Okay," then started down, holding onto the rail, which was still loose from the wall. When he was a step away from the cellar floor, he turned to look back. Paula Kent had gone. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to wait long for his money after he finished the job.

The air felt damp and chilly. Bitchballs and cobwebs obscured the holes and cracks. Tools and sections of pipe were scattered about. A riding saddle, decorated with rhinestones and fancy straps, was resting on a stack of old newspapers and magazines.

A low groan seeped from between his teeth as he surveyed the unpleasantness of his new job. He could've refused the work, but that might've implied sassiness on his part, and his father and mother had warned him about the consequences of such expressions.



Sighing longingly, he turned and reached for the shovel leaning against the wall. For a moment he thought he might drop into a heap when a nauseous sensation ignited somewhere deep inside him. He didn't want to be stuck in the Kents' cellar working with filth while a glorious summer day raged above him. He let the heavy shovel clank across the floor as he dragged it over to the pile. Old clothes, newspapers, and numerous other discards were packed and held together by the muck. He worked slowly but steadily, scooping up the smelly debris and tossing it into the barrel.

After a while, he decided to take a rest and wipe away the sweat. He assessed the work remaining to be done. There wasn't much. Soon he would be finished and on his way to buy something he wanted with his own money.

He went and sat down under the stairs on an old steamer trunk that was rusted around the latches and hinges. Something bumped across the floor overhead, then the dog barked outside. Wesley slumped his shoulders and stretched his legs. The solitude of the cellar seemed to be creeping over him and settling in his bones. And he appreciated the seclusion he had inadvertently stumbled upon. The antagonists in his world were busy with other things, freeing him for a short time from their wrathful badgering and scrutiny. His thoughts wandered from place to place in his life, lingering now and then on his father and mother, the house, the characters, the Georgia sun and the red clay. He used the toe of his shoe to make an aimless design in the dust. Maybe he should buy a new pack of marbles. Terrell had beaten him a few days before and captured his best cat's eyes.

The clapping of footsteps startled him out of his repose. He looked up. Miss Paula's dress made a rustling sound as she started down the stairs. Then she stopped and turned around to speak to someone. "Take the seeds and put them in the shed, Joe."

Wesley's eyes opened wide as he stared up through the space where the plank was missing in the staircase. Miss Paula was standing directly above him, straddling the opening and presenting him a clear view of what was underneath her dress and petticoat.

She was wearing split drawers, which left the cleft between her thighs uncovered. A tuft of auburn hair bristled over the apex of her gap and blended out to a ring of fuzz around the cheeks of her rump. The flesh just inside the lips of her opening looked moist and pink, resembling a huge eye that stared down accusingly at him.

A scalding sensation erupted somewhere inside his brain and flowed down into his eyes. He dared not move. He was looking at something ominous and terrible; something he had no business seeing. But he didn't want to see. He hadn't asked to see. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe, and he was thrown into an inner frenzy as surging emotions he didn't comprehend upset the fragile balance in his fretful world.

"Bring those boxes down here," Miss Paula ordered, continuing her descent. At the same time, Wesley let out a blood-curdling scream as the fire flared up in his eyes and cut off his sight, sending him first into brilliance, then into darkness. He started crying and blundering around, bumping into the stairs and the wall, hoping somehow to blink the right way and bring back his vision. But nothingness prevailed.

"What's the matter with you, boy?" Miss Paula stood on the bottom step, her scrunched brow expressing her befuddlement.

Wesley moved away from the sound of her voice. Were there others with her? Did she know what he had seen? He trembled and quaked, and his knees gave way as he sagged to the floor. His thinking went blank while in his mind's eye he saw angry white faces swirling around him. His father's mauling, punitive voice rumbled in the background, accusing him of a gross impropriety.

"What's wrong, Wesley?" Miss Paula questioned, impatiently. "Did you fall? I told you to be careful. Don't you hear me talking to you?"

But he didn't hear her. Couldn't hear her. He was too wrapped up in the wrathful ball of fire. He had been struck blind, and he was now about to be set upon by the powerful villains that ruled his world.

"Don't beat my daddy," he whimpered. "Please don't beat my daddy. I didn't mean to look."

Paula Kent and a scruffy-looking white man wearing patched work clothes stood over Wesley.

"What's he talking about?" she asked, more to some invisible fourth party than to the scruffy man.

"Maybe he's havin some kinda fit," the man replied, churning a wad of tobacco around in his mouth, his drawling words sounding like mush.

Wesley recoiled and gasped when firm hands finally lifted him and carried him upstairs. Was he being taken out to be whipped? Or were they going to hang him? His eyes were open, but still unseeing. The sounds and voices around him became incoherent and disconnected. What was this thing he had seen between Miss Paula's legs?

Not knowing anything else to do for the child, Paula Kent spread a cold towel across his forehead as he lay sobbing on the seat in the foyer. Nelson Kent looked in on him, but was too occupied with newspaper business to become involved. "Those damned people are always having some kind of spell or seizure," he said, scornfully, while glaring down at the quivering child. "You better send for his folks so they can come and get his ass out of here."

What seemed like several hours to Wesley passed while he shielded his face with his arms and languished in a state of numbing fear where the slightest noise made him think of impending calamity. He felt sick to his stomach a couple of times, and broke out into a sweat. Paula Kent called him a "sickly little black rascal" when he peed on himself and the urine soaked through his pants and made a spot on the seat.

He started crying again when he finally heard his daddy's grumbling voice. "Where is he, Ma'am Paula? What's done happened to our son?"

Wesley knew his mother was there, too. He reached out for her, and sure enough she was there to embrace him and rub his head.

"I can't see, Momma," he sobbed again and again, hoping she would hurry up and get him out of there before someone found out the truth about what he had seen.

"I don't know what happened to him," Paula Kent declared. "We found him stumbling around in the cellar talking about how he couldn't see."

"We thanks ya for sendin for us, Ma'am Paula," Chester said. "We's gonna git Wesley on home so Doc Hayes can take a look at him."

"My seat is ruined," Paula Kent said, disgustedly, after Holly had coaxed Wesley to stand.

"I'll clean it for ya, Ma'am," Holly told her, most sincerely. "I'll come first thing in the mornin and scrub it real good. Don't you worry none. I'll git all that weewee off of there."

Chester paid a man he knew named Walter to drive them home in an old blue pickup truck. They all sat cramped in the front cab, Wesley on his mother's lap leaning his head against her shoulder. No one said a word during the short, bumpy ride.

Wesley's sudden blindness baffled everyone. He claimed he couldn't remember what happened to him in the cellar. Both his grandmothers came to see him, and they talked in whispers with Chester and Holly.

Dr. Hayes, a bony, stooped-over man, stopped by the house later that same evening and looked him over, but contended that he couldn't find anything wrong, especially with his eyes. He speculated that Wesley may have fallen down the Kents' staircase and banged his head. But the doctor couldn't wholeheartedly support his own theory since he could find no cuts or bruises anywhere on the boy.

"My baby done been struck blind!" Holly shrieked as she and Chester sat in the kitchen listening to the puny country doctor deliver his vague diagnosis, and suggesting finally that Wesley be taken to a specialist in Atlanta, whenever they could raise the money, and advising that in the meantime the boy should get plenty of rest and drink hot tea.

A morbid cloud fell upon the Sledge home after Wesley came down with his affliction. Over the next few days, he spent most of his time sitting on the porch listening to the familiar sounds he had always taken for

granted. Neighbors came bringing fruits and candies, but unbeknownst to them, their approaching footsteps and voices always caused him dreadful attacks of anguish and terror. He still believed that somehow it would become known how he had seen under Miss Paula's dress, thereby inciting the white men to inflict suffering on him and his daddy as they had done a few years before.

Chester blamed the Kents for Wesley's sudden handicap, maintaining that they had knowingly sent the boy down into an unsafe situation. He started spending more time away from home, and would stumble in late at night, reeking of moonshine, grumbling and mumbling to Holly about the bleakness of their situation in the world, cursing the Kents and all the other white people in the county. Wesley would be lying awake in bed, listening and trembling, sometimes crying softly while squeezing his fists against his eyes. Holly made sure that Chester didn't find out the boy was wetting the bed almost every other night. Wesley felt safest when he and his mother were at home alone. She would cuddle him and tell him silly fables about the small animals that resided in the woods, carrying on their lives in human fashion. He loved these stories wherein his mother would affect different voices for the possums, raccoons, ducks and hounds. Then she might sing to him while keeping the beat with her tapping foot and thumping fingers.

"Momma, will I stay blind forever?" he asked one evening while a gentle rain pattered against the windows.

Holly stroked his head and sighed. "Only the good Lord knows, Wesley. We just have to put our trust in Him to see us through this ordeal."

A terrible ache built up in his chest. He wanted to confess his crime, or sin, to the only person in the world he could trust. It wouldn't hurt him and his daddy if she were the only one who knew.

He sat close to her on the bed with his head lying against her breast, inhaling the fragrance of the talcum powder she dusted on every morning.

"Yo daddy's gonna git that money we needs to take ya to that special doctor in Atlanta," she said. "I'm startin to do some sewin for the Killebrews tomorrow. We'll git ya there, son. We'll git ya there."

He kept silent for a long time. The rain started coming down harder and the wind shook the whole house. No one was going to knock on the door for a while. His father was most likely getting drunk at the liquor house and wouldn't be home for a long time. Wesley wanted to tell his mother what he had seen. Surely, she wouldn't scorn him.

"Momma," he mumbled finally.

"Yes, son."

"It's somethin I gotta tell ya bout Ma'am Kent and what happened in the cellar."

Holly tried to make him sit up, but he buried his face deeper between her breasts, almost smothering his voice, and she allowed him to remain there while caressing him behind the ear.

"Momma, I'm scared."

"Ain't nothin for ya to be scared of. Ain't nobody here but you and me."

His heart was starting to beat fast. He opened his eyes and strained to see beyond the blackness, but there was still no sign of light.

"Come on and tell me," she urged. "What happened in that cellar? It's been two weeks since it happened. Ya can talk about it now."

"I seen somethin bad." The tears were building again. "Somethin real, real bad."

"What, Wesley?"

"It was Ma'am Paula," he moaned, his teeth chattering. "I didn't mean to see. I didn't mean to look, Momma."

"What did ya see, son? Tell me. What did ya see?"

"Oh, Momma, I was sittin under the steps in that cellar and I could see straight up to the ceilin. There wasn't no boards in the steps. Then Ma'am Paula come and stand right over where I was and I seen straight up under her dress. I seen what daddy and everybody say I shouldn't see. I seen her thang, Momma. I seen it."

"Wesley, Wesley. It's awright. Ya hear? It's awright. Don't be scared."

"They gonna come and beat me and daddy," he cried. "They gonna hang us, Momma. God struck me cause I done bad and seen it."

"Naw, naw." Holly held him close so that his tears soaked the front of her dress. "Ain't nobody comin here and doin nothin to us. Not a thang. Ya hear?"

"But, Momma. I seen it. I seen it."

"What did ya see, Wesley? What did ya really see? You ain't seen nothin but some old white woman's behind."

He sat on the side of the bed, shoulders squeezed in his mother's tight grasp, his gaze vacant and seemingly fixed upon some abstract symbol very far away. His thoughts linked up with his vocal centers and tried to come up with an answer to his mother's inquiry. What, indeed, had he seen? What was that patch of hairy, perforated flesh? All women and girls had one of them, as he understood the way the Lord made people.

He never answered his mother. Instead, he drifted off to sleep and remained in a state of peaceful slumber throughout the night.

A clamorous rattling of pots and pans in the kitchen startled him awake the next morning. He sat up in bed and gasped as the sunlight blazed through the windows, making him squint as he opened his eyes in wonder.

"Momma!" he shouted, leaping up and running into the kitchen. "I can see again, Momma. I can see."



# Poems by Tim Hall

## Working people, why still slave?

Working people, why still slave  
For men who ride you to the grave?  
Why still toil, drip sweat, shed blood  
For lords who tramp you in the mud?

Why still serve to those who shirk  
The banquet flesh of you who work?  
Why give away unbounded wealth  
That geysers from your laboring self?

Galley-slaves of factory,  
Why still forge in misery  
Chains that bind your very life  
To your foe in bitter strife?

Do you have leisure, peace of mind,  
Unstressed love, food, shelter, time?  
Or what is it your hard work buys  
While unrest in your heart lies?

The cars you build you buy to drive;  
The wealth you coin keeps rich alive;  
The clothes you weave are sold to you;  
The guns you forge defend the few.

Build cars -- but build your strength to rise;  
Coin wealth -- but also, organize;  
Weave clothes -- and fighting network tight;  
Forge guns -- to seize for your final fight!

Then build cars -- for working folk to keep;  
Then coin wealth -- but let no rich man reap;  
Then weave clothes -- delight in your struggle's fruits;  
Then forge guns -- lay low the lords in suits.

*(After Shelley's 1811 poem "Song to the Men of England")*

# The cabby's lament

The cabby's work is never done.  
He sees the rise and set of sun.  
In a Fury's hot front seat  
He toils in summer's boiling heat.

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
Being used by the cab boss-man?

He longs for snow and bitter cold.  
A "wind-chill-factor" brings a little gold.  
O pity him if he leases cabs!  
What he makes the owner grabs.

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
Being robbed by the cab boss-man?

The cab boss rides a black Cadillac,  
Bought by the sweat from the cabby's back,  
And lives like a king off the fat of the land  
While the cabby dies at the gunman's hand.

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To be left in the cold by the cab boss-man?

Darnell was murdered at Sacred Heart.  
Overwork and a stroke made Bob depart.  
Gunmen killed Skip, Ted and Peterson.  
The list is long. Who's the next one?

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To shed your blood for the cab boss-man?

Pity the cabby when he gets sick --  
He must pay in cash and pay it quick.  
And when he reaches sixty-five,  
No check will come to keep him alive.

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To be discarded by the cab boss-man?

The cabby flies down the darkened street --  
Another cabby he must beat.  
But when he gets the address right  
They wave him off, saying: "That's all right!"

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To run yourself ragged for the cab boss-man?

Ride on, you cabbies, ride furiously!  
Battle each other desperately!  
Each one of you make sure that crumb  
Goes to you and not your chum....

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To compete for crumbs from the cab boss-man?

The owners love it, it's jungle law.  
On their way to the bank they laugh, "Haw-haw!"  
At the cabbies in the streets competing  
To see which one of them will be eating.

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To be exploited by the cab boss-man?

And curse the dispatcher! It's all her fault!  
(As the owners lock their cash in the vault  
And pay the dispatcher minimum wage --  
That's all she'll get until old age.)

Cabbies, dispatchers, how can you take it?  
Under these conditions can't nobody make it!

Let the dispatcher take the blame  
For what you lose in the owners' game!  
Ride on, cabbies, till a heart attack  
Or maybe a bullet lays you on your back!

O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To be rode to death by the cab boss-man?

Traffic Manager Terry will engrave  
On the stone above your grave:  
"HERE LIES A CABBY. HE PUSHED HIS HACK  
FAITHFULLY, TILL A HEART ATTACK

(O cabbies, cabbies, how can you stand  
To be held to blame by the cab boss-man?)

(OR WAS IT A JUNKIE?) BROUGHT HIM DOWN.  
NOW HE GOES TO A HELL JUST LIKE THIS TOWN.  
WE'VE REPLACED HIM BEFORE HIS HEART STOPPED BEATING  
WITH ANOTHER CABBY WHO DREAMS OF EATING.  
THE TREADMILL GOES ON WITHOUT A HITCH.  
GOOD-BYE AND GOOD RIDDANCE, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH!"

O cabbies, cabbies, when will you rise  
Up against the boss-man's capitalistic lies?  
When will you shout with a mighty voice  
That being exploited is not your choice?  
When will you park your cabs around  
Michigan and Trumbull and shut it down?  
Give the owners a big surprise!  
Cabbies, when will you ORGANIZE?!

# Yalobusha county

Ridin through Yalobusha County in an old SNCC car  
In Mississippi, in 1965  
Four civil rights workers, tryin to stay alive  
Two of us Black an two of us white  
Three freedom riders had already died  
The Klan might not catch us, but they sure was gonna try  
There was Howard, from Holly Springs  
SNCC Field Secretary, which he didn't hide  
Cream levis blue workshirt cowboy hat an Black pride  
An Pepper from Fayette, aint scared of a damn thing  
Big an roly-poly jump on him an see that man swing  
An Freda from New York, Jewish an all guts  
She'd go anywhere for freedom, she didnt care  
The crackers thought she was nuts  
An me a white Ohio boy new scared but pissed off  
When they killed those little girls in Birmingham  
I said that's not how I get off, you'd better lay off  
I had to fight that racist shit, I had to take my name off  
Or how could I face my children, how could I wash the shame off?  
I was drivin my '56 Ford,  
Bought in Memphis, crackers knew what for.  
They put sawdust in the crankcase of the Chevy, but not the Ford  
Got duals an glass packs with that deep exhaust roar  
Drivin out of Holly Springs we were feelin good an flyin  
On our way to Shaw, the Freedom Labor Union town  
But the shit got serious at the Yalobusha line  
Cause the spies in Holly Springs must have got on the line  
With the courthouse gang in Oxford an tol them the time  
Cause the sheriff was waitin at the Welcome to Yalobusha County sign  
An I started to sweat as I checked the speed limit sign  
An the speedometer an eased my foot and put it in a glide  
An saw the sheriff car pull out an come up from behind  
An tail us close like they planned a lynch-time  
An Howard busted out with that old freedom song rhyme:

*(verses sung to the tune of the civil rights anthem "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize")*

We have hung our heads an cried  
All for Herbert Lee who died  
Keep your eyes o-on that prize  
Hold on! Hold on!  
Ho-old on! Ho-old o-o-on!  
Keep your ey-es o-on that pri-i-ize  
Ho-old on! Hold on!

We have walked through the shadow of death  
We have walked all by ourself  
Keep your eyes o-on that prize  
Hold on! Hold on!  
Ho-old on! Ho-old o-o-on!  
Keep your ey-es o-on that pri-i-ize  
Ho-old on! Hold on!

Now that sheriff car was ridin right up on our ass  
But I didnt dare floor it, couldn't let him hear the glass packs  
An that baby was fast but not that fast



So I drove slow an sweaty tryin to make the minutes pass  
Pepper said, "That motherfucker givin us a test  
Or they got some cars layin for us somewhere to the wes  
We better slide on slow an look our bes"  
He said, "You drivin good, just don give it no gas  
Le me tell you a story to make the time pass  
How we fucked up the Kluxers the year before las  
Le see, it was in Fayette, cross the Tennessee line  
Where we started to reddish Black people, a hunnert at a time  
Them crackers went crazy when they seen us in the courthouse line  
They tol the white bosses all of our names  
An before we knowed we was off of our farms  
From land we sharecropped since slavery time  
Some freedom riders helped us organize  
And we set up a Tent City on a Black man's land  
The Kluxers got pissed, called it a crime  
Night riders came by shootin at the tents at night  
But they pick the wrong damn people to fuck with this time  
My Daddy was in Korea an so was Jesse Lyon  
An Duke an his boys from down by the line  
So we all layed in ditches that very next night  
An when the Kluxers come by we give em a fire-fight  
No one got hurt, boy that was a surprise  
But the Kluxers lef squealin, goin 95  
An the very nex day when I went into town  
Somepin had changed in the white man's min  
They useta call me boy an expec me to grin  
Now they just waited on me, didnt say a goddamn thing  
We started carryin our shotguns way up high in our truck racks  
An they didnt say shit cause they knew we was gonna talk back  
An that's how we gave those crackers the rainbow sign  
Said, No more racist bullshit or the fire next time"  
The sheriff was still tailin, creepin into Oxford town  
Like a wasp round your head in the hot noontime  
So I drove slow an perfect, watchin every sign  
And we bust out again with the freedom song rhyme:

Aint but one thing we did wrong  
Stayed in the wilderness a day too long  
Keep your eyes o-on that prize  
Hold on! Hold on!  
Ho-old on! Ho-old o-o-on!  
Keep your ey-es o-on that pri-i-ize  
Ho-old on! Hold on!

Aint but one thing we did right  
Was the day we began to fight  
Keep your eyes o-on that prize  
Hold on! Hold on!  
Ho-old on! Ho-old o-o-on!  
Keep your ey-es o-on that pri-i-ize  
Ho-old on! Hold on!

My glass packs whispered into Oxford town  
With the wasp on our tail, followin us around  
The clock on the courthouse showed high noon  
An brought to mind a Bob Dylan tune  
"Oxford town, around the bend  
Come to the door an couldnt get in

All because of the color of his skin  
Now what do you think about that, my friend?"  
We was goin out past the town limits sign  
When the wasp turned on his light an made his siren whine.  
"The shit is goin down right here"  
Said Howard, "Power! Dont show no fear!"  
Didnt see no other cars but us an him  
But they could be waitin around the bend  
The sheriff an his dep, their guts hangin down  
Waddled out of the car with dark glasses on  
They advanced to our windows an I cracked mine  
"Lemme see yaw license an registration" said a voice like turpentine  
The deputy rapped on the windows with his stick  
Told Pepper an Freda to show theirs quick  
All but Howard had Tennessee shit  
All of us were legal but it didnt mean a bit  
Freedom ride through Yalobusha -- you were in for it!  
Sheriff said, "Where you boys gawn wit yer Jew bitch whore?"  
(Proving to us he knew who we were)  
I said, "We're goin to Greenwood to see my sister-in-law"  
He said, "Youre lyin boy an breakin the law  
You know you cain drive niggers 'roun wit yer dirty white whore"  
"You," he said to Howard, "Yous the head nigger in this car  
Get yaw ass out an show us what kine a nigger you are!"  
Howard said, "We aint broke no law  
An our people is expectin us before nightfall"  
"So we got us a smart-ass nigger! We'll show you what for!"  
Howard said, "Sheriff, I know who you are  
Your granddaddy lynched my great-uncle in 1924  
If I die it's gonna be in this here war  
But we aint scared of your kine no more!"  
Sheriff an Howard stared for a long, long time  
Then he rapped on my window  
"Nigger-lover, hit the county line!  
An if I see yer commie asses in Yalobusha again  
Ahll hang yeh like we did yaw people way back then!"  
So I eased off the Ford, creepin in low  
An we headed for Shaw with still some Yalobusha to go.  
Pepper said, "Watch out, he might have some Kluxers jus waitin  
To grab us when we aint anticipatin"  
As I eased out onto the open highway  
We started up that song in that old freedom way:

We been buked an we been scorned  
We been talked about sure as youre born  
Keep your eyes o-on that prize  
Hold on! Hold on!  
Ho-old on! Ho-old o-o-on!  
Keep your ey-es o-on that pri-i-ize  
Ho-old on! Hold on!

You can talk about me just as much as you please  
You'll never make me bend my knees  
Keep your eyes o-on that prize  
Hold on! Hold on!  
Ho-old on! Ho-old o-o-on!  
Keep your ey-es o-on that pri-i-ize  
Ho-old on! Hold on

# The ice cracks

Noon. February 25.  
A gray day in the 40's.  
Chrysler headquarters, Highland Park, Michigan.  
A grassy boulevard.  
A semi-modern, 1940's architecture, complex  
of offices, plants, parking lots.  
Somewhere behind that brick,  
that concrete,  
that glass,  
sits Lido Iacocca,  
don of the Chrysler empire,  
master of the lay-off,  
Simon Legree of the speed-up,  
godfather of concessions.  
You wouldn't expect  
a brand-new sprout of the workers' movement  
to crack the ice  
of Reaganite concessions in the auto industry  
on a day like this,  
but weather is funny in Michigan  
and somehow  
the lay-offs had come too often,  
the speed-ups had drained too much life,  
the concessions had robbed too many pockets  
too many times,  
and now don Lido proposed to sell  
the parts plants,  
condemning 28,000 workers to joblessness  
or wages not much above the McDonald's level,  
and the workers couldn't stand it any more.  
The seed of rebellion  
had been germinating  
and now a brand-new sprout,  
one among many,  
broke through the cold winter soil  
and surged upwards.

The UAW hacks,  
Lido's dotting lackeys,  
felt the hot anger of the workers  
on their behinds.  
Against their will,  
they had to  
call a march,  
organize buses,  
plan militant-sounding orations.  
As for the workers,  
they came out.  
2000 of them.  
They came from Ohio,  
wearing white-fronted baseball caps,  
veterans of wildcats from the Toledo jeep plant.  
They came from Jefferson,  
militant black workers  
whose wildcat backboned the contract struggle  
three years ago  
and who were now organizing  
a fight against job combination and lay-offs

with the Marxist-Leninist Party.  
They came from Dodge Truck,  
where the assembly line is called I-75  
for its speed,  
where robots run amok  
and two workers do three workers' jobs.  
They came from Sterling Stamping,  
where anger against the proposed sale  
forced the hacks to call a strike vote  
which passed by a wide margin.  
And they came from Ford in Utica,  
GM in Pontiac  
and elsewhere.  
They carried home-made picket signs:  
"Cooperation and Concessions Mean Good-bye!"  
"Keep Acustar, Sell Iacocca!"  
"Solidarity with Kenosha, To Hell with Iacocca!"  
They came out,  
these auto workers,  
slandered by the media as slip-shod laborers,  
slandered by the UAW hacks as lazy absentees,  
slandered as "apathetic" by the "left-wing" opportunists  
who praise the hacks  
while the hacks suppress  
the workers' every struggle.  
The workers came out,  
and when each new busload arrived  
a cheer went up  
as the workers discovered still more  
of their own strength.  
And as the picket line circled  
it blocked off the street,  
and as if shaking off the bourgeoisie's slanders,  
the workers spent the first half an hour  
hailing each other, greeting  
old friends, discovering new,  
laughing and joking.

The Marxist-Leninist Party,  
party of the revolutionary workers,  
hated by the hacks and the company,  
was represented by only three comrades,  
two of them postal workers,  
one a cab driver,  
all others being at work.  
But still  
the Party used the mass gathering  
to raise the militancy of the workers  
up one notch,  
to spread class-consciousness  
still wider.  
While the workers were gathering and circling,  
the comrades approached every one  
with leaflets and *The Workers' Advocate*  
laying out the orientation of the struggle.  
Over a hundred took  
Party picket signs  
saying "No Lay-offs, Fight for Every Job!"  
The workers drank up  
the revolutionary literature

like dry soil drinks up  
a summer rain.

Then,  
after the greeters had been greeted  
and the jokes had been told,  
the workers settled down to serious business.  
The demonstration needed  
a unified voice.  
Two black workers from Detroit  
took up a chant  
"DON'T SELL... AC-U-STAR!"  
Joined by a comrade,  
they did it in harmony and rhythm,  
exhorting the opposite side of the picket line  
as it passed  
and soon the line rocked with a single voice.  
Militant groups marched down the center  
of the circle, chanting  
and shaking their signs,  
cursing Iacocca.  
Fists raised,  
private conversations ceased,  
eyes turned toward the headquarters  
where behind brick and glass  
the godfather of exploitation  
sat with his 20 million,  
his new face-lift  
and his failed marriage  
to a woman half his age.  
On television  
this don always seems to be saying:  
"Do it my way, or sleep with the fishes!"  
But the workers didn't give a damn  
for the threats of this  
two-bit automotive mafioso.  
The picket line rocked for a good hour.

Then the hacks,  
silent till now,  
called a rally.  
They droned their usual  
respectful introductions  
and nauseating drones,  
but the workers didn't  
want to hear it.  
"STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!"  
they shouted  
till the nauseating drones gave way  
and up jumped  
the Big Cheese of concessions groveling,  
the maestro of bootlicking,  
the two-faced demagogue  
of the militant phrase  
squawked from bended knee,  
Marc Stepp,  
who once wore a "militant" black turtleneck and a  
black beret  
while giving away \$20,000

of each worker's pay,  
and later sported  
a Banana Republic safari outfit  
and flirted with Nikki Grandberry of Channel 2  
while the militant workers protested  
the hacks' sell-out  
inside and outside of the Jefferson local union hall.  
Up jumped this dog  
to speak to the workers.  
And he babbled  
something about how we have tried to cooperate  
with the company  
("YOU GAVE IT ALL AWAY!" a worker shouted,  
"STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!" went the chant),  
something about how we can no longer trust  
Iacocca  
("NEVER DID!" a worker shouted,  
"WHO CAN WE TRUST?" another yelled,  
"STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!" went the chant),  
and something about how a strike  
vote was taken on grievances  
at Sterling, etc.  
("STRIKE THE WHOLE COMPANY!" a comrade shouted,  
"STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!" went the chant),  
till Marc Stepp,  
the Great Black Hunter,  
ended his joust with the lion Iacocca  
and stepped down  
in disgrace  
and soon  
the rally ended  
with "STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!  
SHUT IT DOWN!"  
the chant  
as the workers prepared to take home,  
back to their plants,  
the militancy of this day,  
and milled around talking  
for a moment,  
unwilling to depart from  
the scene of their solidarity.

And before the day was out  
the demonstration was discussed  
on the afternoon shift  
in every plant.  
In Toledo, at Jeep,  
they talked of strike  
in their baseball caps,  
proud of their militant history.  
At Jefferson  
they talked of strike  
and thought of their laid-off comrades.  
At Detroit Forge  
they talked of strike  
in the heat and smoke  
to stop the sale of their plant.  
At Dodge Truck  
they talked along the 1-75  
assembly line  
of strike

and how it was the only answer  
to the high-handed bosses.  
And within three days  
don Lido,  
the omnipotent mafioso,  
had to change his plans.  
A strike would cost more  
than he would make by the sale,  
so he backed off,  
yet still planned to close four plants.  
The "sacred management prerogative"  
to absolutely control jobs, lay-offs and plant-closings  
had crumbled before the workers'  
militant struggle.  
But the hacks,  
ever alert to an opportunity  
to kill struggle,  
bragged of "their" victory,  
and the media gushed about  
"Marc Stepp's victory"  
and together they buried the strike  
and abandoned the workers of the four plants.

And the workers,  
aroused but unorganized,  
simmered with indignation  
at the abandonment of their brothers and sisters.  
And,  
in ones and twos,  
respecting the Party's long work,  
they came around to  
the Marxist-Leninist Party  
as their only true friend  
to actually organize the struggle.  
There was a new crack  
in the ice.  
It joined the cracks  
made by the Jefferson work stoppage,  
the Curry wildcat,  
the contract wildcat three years ago....  
It was only a crack.  
Immense hard work remained.  
But distrust of the hacks  
had grown,  
the ice had  
definitely cracked.

-- April 1988

# Elegy for Becky Bell

Murdered by "Right To Life," Sept. 16, 1988

The Indiana summer nights are green  
And perfumed with a joyous, blooming life  
But in their shadows stalks a right-wing fiend  
Howling like a hound of "Right-to-Life."

A young girl, Mama's darling, fell in love  
And love upswept her, in its current, a bit too far;  
To shatter in her parents' eyes her too-pure image  
Was altogether more than she could bear.

The law was stern: a child would be  
Forced to bear a child unless  
She could face her father's rage  
And mother's disappointment, and confess.

Or go before a judge and bare  
The inmost secrets of her deepest love  
Before this cold and callous vulture  
Who would presume to judge her from above.

Thus the door she faced was locked too tight:  
At 17, alone, she could not unlock it.  
No matter where she turned, how hard she tried,  
No words would come, no key would fit.

"A party" was the tale she told her Mom  
And in the Indiana evening she went out  
And took her desperate action in the town  
And came home pale and shaking; no one found out.

Then came the purest torture: for a week  
She worked and studied, dying all the time.  
Until death she kept her lips sealed  
To pay for what she deemed a crime.

O hypocrites of "Right-to-Life!"  
For this young woman did you give a damn?  
You scream "murder of the fetus!"  
While murdering young mothers: what a sham!

And you Republicans and Democrats,  
You bankers, brokers, Chairmen of the Board,  
Grabbing gold while young girls die,  
Always hollering about a "Lord,"

You are the ones who take away  
The right of women to decide.  
You want them held in second place  
For you and your damned vulture class to ride.

Yes, the Indiana summer nights are green.  
The streets and mills and factories teem with life.  
Young women, workers, are learning from your crimes.  
Someday they'll turn on you a revolutionary knife.



# Poem for China

*On the Occasion of the Massacre at Tienanmen Square*

**I saw them kill you  
on television.  
What were your names?  
Lacking your names,  
I will name you  
to fight the falsifiers.**

Wang Chen,  
Fung Shu-chih,  
Han Po,  
slaughtered,  
all three of them,  
Wang Chen by a peasant soldier told he was fighting counter-revolutionaries,  
Fung shu-chih by an officer with a pistol,  
Han Po by a tank-tread in Tienanmen Square before the Great Hall of the People.

Wang Chen,  
Fung Shu-chih,  
Han Po,  
assassinated,  
all three of them,  
Wang Chen as he called on the peasant to defect to the people,  
Fung Shu-chih as she defended her patient's IV tubing,  
Han Po as he defied the tanks sent by the capitalist-roaders.

Wang Chen,  
Fung Shuh-chih,  
Han Po,  
dead,  
unburied,  
all three of them,  
Wang Chen as an example displayed by the students,  
Fung Shuh-chih a name scrawled in blood on a hospital wall,  
Han Po stacked in a pile "like fishes" and set afire  
by the Army that "belongs to the people."

Wang Chen,  
Fung Shu-chih,  
Han Po,  
martyred droplets in the river of struggle,  
all three of them,  
Wang Chen by an unwitting tool of the false men in power,  
Fung Shu-chih by an avaricious officer who wanted to prosper with the regime,  
Han Po by a tank commander loyal to the fake communists  
who have betrayed the road of Marx and Engels.

Wang Chen,  
Fung Shuh-chih,  
Han Po,  
figures burned into our brain tissue,  
three hundred of them  
(at the *lowest* report),

three hundred Chinese mountains,  
three hundred young giants,  
three hundred unformed fighters of the people  
among the one billion Chinese searching  
for a way towards socialism with democracy.

Deng,

Li Peng,  
the brass of the People's Mutilation Army,  
like flies,  
dung-loving,  
searching for death, and putrefaction, and decomposition,  
dragging China backward, restoring capitalism  
with its profiteering, its gross hucksterism, its arrogant brutal wealth,  
its teen-age girls working for pennies in Shanghai garment factories  
and sleeping in shifts in their beds like the Irish workers  
in 1840 capitalist England.

Deng,

Peng,

and the brass,  
three vicious flies on the back of working China  
biting to get slapped.

Three flies,

two

and a drone,

I saw them rape the Chinese Revolution  
for a stinking dollar bill,  
for a villa with servants, for a banquet with 12 courses,  
for a U.S. education for their grandchildren,  
for a Japanese-made VCR,  
for a memory in the minds of the people  
that stinks like a three-day old corpse.

Three fascist flies,

two

and a drone,

they killed the students  
who sang the *Internationale*  
and those who mistook America for democracy,  
they killed the workers who burned troop transports,  
they killed the schoolgirls who built barricades,  
they killed  
Wang Chen,  
they killed  
Fung Shu-chih,  
they killed  
Han Po,  
but for every one they killed  
ten thousand will take their place.  
History and the class struggle  
are hard teachers.

The Chinese proletariat  
sheds blood like rain once again  
to throw the blood-sucking flies  
off its back.  
Mao's alliances with the bourgeoisie

could not slap these worshippers of dung.  
The Gang of Four  
wanted to fight  
but could not break with Mao  
to rely on the working class.  
None could see a truly communist revolution.  
None could help the workers themselves decide their duty.  
None could carry the fight to the end.

But now,  
from the blood on the dust of the square,  
from the names scrawled on walls at each corner,  
from the flames that devoured illusions in the "socialism" of the capitalist-roaders  
(and from critiques of the "democracy" of the rich in the West)  
must arise  
the knife-straight fighters,  
the new proletarian revolutionaries,  
with stainless steel courage,  
with organization hard as rock,  
with consistent Marxism-Leninism,  
with fists  
and teeth-like barricades  
and red bullets.

And when the soldiers come,  
sent by the new bourgeoisie,  
breaking down doors, pulling hair triggers,  
splattering militant brains, geysering defiant hearts,  
they will never suck all the blood of working China,  
the parasite will never defeat its host.

Like flies,  
one day  
the working folk will crush them.

# To the Iraqi dead

There will be no memorial wall  
in Washington for you,  
just as there is none for the Vietnamese,  
none for the Grenadians,  
none for the death squad victims in El Salvador,  
none for the people thrown into mass graves  
in Panama.  
Like them, you were too non-white,  
too non-American,  
too non-rich  
to be considered human.  
The generals, the oil barons, the media  
the Democrats,  
the Republicans,  
didn't give a damn about you.  
They made their soldiers bury you alive.  
Their pilots got a bang  
out of blowing up your water system.  
"It was a job and we did it," they said,  
They shot you down on Kuwait expressway  
"like fish in a barrel."  
When you rose against Saddam  
they let him kill you, too.  
You were their target,  
not him.  
They blamed Saddam  
but killed you.  
He and Bush  
bully on  
but you rot  
while your families mourn.  
You weren't people;  
you were "targets."  
They didn't "kill" you  
when they killed you;  
they just "degraded" you.  
They called killing you  
"collateral damage"  
but, in fact, it was  
the kind of damage they wanted.  
They killed you because  
you are what they fear:  
you are the non-rich  
nobodies,  
the non-elite  
nothings,  
the nowhere  
men,  
the nowhere  
women,  
the nowhere  
children,  
"Ay-rabs",  
like "niggers"  
"spics",

“bitches”,  
so insignificant,  
so unimportant,  
that they had to spend  
billions of dollars  
killing you  
and millions more  
hiding the fact.  
You,  
the non-entities,  
had to be negated  
and then the grave had  
to be hidden  
and the newspaper revelation  
denied,  
and the TV report  
killed,  
the protest march  
never mentioned.  
When they killed you  
it was so unimportant  
that they could not admit  
that they did it.  
They could only use a  
non-word:  
you were “attrited”.  
Killing you  
was so insignificant  
that they spent  
24 hours a day  
and millions of dollars  
not saying they did it.  
And now it has been a year  
and they are still  
not saying it,  
vigorously.  
100,000 nobodies  
died in Iraq.  
But this is a contradiction.  
If it cost so much to kill you  
you must have been somebody.  
If you were really nobody  
then the Establishment  
could admit it.  
They could say:  
Nobody was killed in Iraq.  
But this lie is too big  
even for them.  
So to us  
the American nobodies  
they beat around  
the Bush.  
We are not supposed to know  
that our fellow nobodies  
have been killed.  
We might think of  
Rodney King,  
Bensonhurst,  
Willow Run,  
Los Angeles.  
It might remind us that we too

are treated as nobodies  
in the land that we built.  
We might think of  
the Black chattel nobodies  
brought here on slave ships.  
We might think of  
the Native nobodies  
slaughtered for gold, or land,  
the Asian nobodies  
worked to death,  
interned,  
the Mexican nobodies  
stoop-labored, pesticided,  
the white indentured nobodies  
bought and sold too.  
We might think of  
the children nobodies  
in the mines,  
in the mills,  
the immigrant nobodies  
worked to death,  
deported for radicalism,  
the women nobodies  
raped, assaulted, beaten to death.  
We might think of  
all the worker nobodies  
slaughtered by machines,  
mine disasters,  
fires,  
shot for organizing.  
We might think of the Denmark Vesey  
Nat Turner  
John Brown  
nobodies,  
the Emmet Till nobodies,  
the lunch counter assaulted  
nobodies,  
the Freedom rider beaten  
nobodies,  
the Birmingham fire hosed  
nobodies,  
the Bull Connor dog bitten  
nobodies,  
the church bombed little children  
nobodies,  
the assassinated Malcolm,  
the assassinated Bobby Hutton,  
the assassinated Fred Hampton,  
the assassinated George Jackson  
nobodies,  
and all the assassinated  
communist nobodies  
when communists were really communists  
and not phony bureaucrats.  
We might think of  
the Triangle Shirt Waist Fire nobodies,  
the Ford Hunger March nobodies,  
Reeltown nobodies,  
Republic Steel nobodies,  
Haymarket nobodies,  
Kent State nobodies,

Orangeburg nobodies,  
Greensboro nobodies,  
Wounded Knee nobodies,  
Miami nobodies,  
Detroit nobodies,  
Watts nobodies,  
LA.

We might think of  
all our nobodies  
who the Government, the Military, the Police,  
the Capitalists, the Media  
killed  
wiped out  
turned into dead bodies  
just as they killed  
wiped out  
the Iraqis.

Yes!

We *would* think of them!  
We would realize that  
with the poor of the earth  
we have mingled  
our blood.

Spit upon by the rich,  
we, the working class,  
will rise and overthrow  
all the militaristic tyrants  
because we are sick and tired  
of being treated  
as nobody!

We owe this to  
the Iraqi dead.

# How I am

After a few minutes  
with your warm voice on the telephone,  
I am filled with optimism about life.  
I have come through hard trials.  
I have walked into the den of the enemy  
and looked him dead in the face.  
I have persisted in the hard path I have chosen.  
And tonight,  
as I look out at the full moon  
over the whispering trees,  
as it shines on the dark roofs housing  
my brothers and sisters, the workers of Detroit,  
resting after the day's labor,  
I remember our conversation  
and the sweetness of knowing you  
and I am glad to be caught here  
on this turbulent planet,  
fighting for the oppressed,  
working, creating, loving.  
A breeze cools my body.  
In the deep grass behind the house,  
the crickets saw at their tiny crystal violins.  
Softly,  
a fountain of pure joy  
springs up within me  
like a young deer  
clearing a fence at one bound,  
strong, clean, and graceful.