

Who's Your Favorite Poet?

1973

I was sent from the union hall to a high-rise job, the Holiday Inn at Pine & Van Ness. It was an intimidating twenty-six stories high. The contractors were a family of brothers & dad from San Jose. To us City carpenters they seemed like cowboys. San Jose... They had no old-world flavoring, no culture. Just sergeants and lieutenants trained at Fort Ord with a terrible sense of humor. For example: there was a company man from Norway, of middle age and irascible when pickled...which was always. Especially Mondays. One Monday he didn't show up until after lunch, still drinking. The boss's son put him to work anyway. Gave him the nailgun and told him to work by himself going up thru areas nailing down loose plates. Then they provoked him, teased him and played on some drunken score he felt unsettled in the crew of regulars. I saw them at the elevator & heard some of the agitating...*"That's right Thorvald...you can't trust these assholes. Ray might've told me something, sure he might have. Fact is any of these guys would tell me anything I need to know about you. But you're such a coward Thorvald. Disgrace. Always talking that shit how you'll make him pay someday. Bullshit."* and on like that. Thorvald left with his nailgun and a box of 22 caliber shells. The Steward said, *"I don't think Thorvald ought to be roaming the job with a gun that way, as soused as he is."* The boss' son came right back; *"Oh come off it. He won't do anything. And what if he did? that'd be fucking wild, shoot a guy with a nailgun! Like to see that."* Big guffaw. Maybe he was drunk too.

These big-city jobs were riven through by the tone of the Boss. Often they were one family or even one-man businesses. So the tone here was that of ex-GIs from the sticks. The foremen were 'pushers' rather than deeply experienced carpenters who had risen thru skill & merit. There was a reactionary, punishing political sensibility in all conversation. At one of the weekly safety meetings I ventured to raise a serious issue. All previous meetings had been conducted by the Foreman rather than the job Steward, a breach of the contract in itself. Safety meetings were mandated to comply with the State & Union in trying to cut down on the accident rate. We were supposed to bring up things we'd noticed during the week that needed correcting. Maybe a bunch of loose boards in the scaffold rail. Or even more serious matters that the Steward might need to look into.

So on this day I had been brooding about something in the newspaper regarding the use of asbestos in the fire-protection cladding sprayed onto the steel framework throughout the building. Before the rooms are framed in, each floor is just a steel grid with a concrete floor, and all those exposed beams & girders with the soft fire-retardant coat were shedding it in the wind and the dust was blowing all around us as we worked. I asked the steward if he could bother to find out: *"is there asbestos in the spray? Because it said in the paper yesterday that stuff will give you lung cancer"* The steward said, *"well, um, yeah I could..."* and was interrupted by the Boss's son: *"What the hell do you want know about that for? What do you think we're going to do, supply you with oxygen masks? Haw! Look, this meeting is over, get back to work!"*

I was pretty unhappy in that crew until they partnered me with a carpenter who was simply quiet. There was a period when they had us 'laying-out' the wall plan on the concrete floors up above the twentieth. It was less supervised and a big relief. We ended that assignment on the roof, the 27th floor. Working our way along the extreme edge striking lines for the parapet wall that would be

made by others. Mostly we crawled, out of respect for the 300 feet of space below us, but it was thrilling...a kind of little Everest for a young carpenter.

Next we were working in a more general crew of ten, in the basement, creating a concrete stairs & flooring... with a nasty foreman. No chance to talk with the bastard standing right near us all day, occasionally barking out something like *“Hey, we’re not paying you to pick your nose, buddy!”* If you asked him about the blueprint he got grouchy to conceal his ignorance of stair geometry, and you’d have to just figure things out on the fly. I’d noticed some new hires from the Hall, and one in particular who I had been teamed with one day, a new apprentice named Allen French. He was clearly a little out of synch. His hammer was inappropriate, his overalls brand-new. It’s easy to discern an educated voice even when it’s just asking for a handsaw. (You might hear it say “discern”).

We finished moving a load of posts and had a moment to ourselves out of range of the boss. We exchanged some basics, like... married or not, kids, years in trade, last job. We were clearly edging outside the vocabulary of proletarian San Francisco. He said it first: *“Did you go to college?”* “Yeah”, I admitted. *“Where?”* *“SF State, a couple of years.”* *“Oh yeah? What did you major in?”* *“English.”* I thought at this point he was testing me. Maybe thought I was stretching the truth. He sounded a little sarcastic and he was grinning with a sly eye. Then he says *“Well, what especially did you study in English?”* So I thought: *This guy is going to get the truth and to hell with him if he thinks me weird.* *“Well, if you really want to know, it was poetry.”* *“Oh yeah?”* he says, and now he really looks like he’s *on to me* and is about to pounce. *“Who’s one of your favorite poets then?”*

Now I’m feeling against the wall. Probably this guy is caught up in the Tone out here, the mocking, provoking ‘know-nothing’ style. Wants to draw me out and then laugh in my face. I’m the elder here though, and the experienced construction man, no matter what I sound like... so I muscle-up my voice and say a little defiantly, thinking, *if you’re a callow youth you won’t even know who I’m talking about, and I’m not going to talk down to you either, so :*

“OK, you want to know? my favorite poet is Gerard Manley Hopkins.”

He stares at me with that same mischievous grin. Several beats go by as he lets me swing out there at the end of my limb. Then he just says or rather intones,

“You mean: ‘I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon...”

and I finish it for him: *“in his riding of the rolling level underneath him steady air...”*

“Yeah, that Gerard Manley Hopkins!”