TAMPA'S SUPERMEN: THE EPIC OF LONGSHOREMEN'S LOCAL 1402 BANANA HANDLERS UNION

Children,

Listen, while you eat

Your ripe bananas, peeled and sweet

& I'll explain, so you can see,

how what you're eating came to be. . .

I'll tell you true, of stalwart men/ and women

Working days-on-end,

In the bellies of freighters, fulfilling young dreams

Of bananas and cornflakes, drowning in cream!

& This is what I heard men say,

at a circular table, on a somber day

With a mason jar of water & a glass of gin

In a room that let no sunlight in:

"A broken foot & a cut off hand. . .

Put that on the tab!

Banana spiders, snakes & sand. . .

Put that on the tab!

Twisted arms and aching backs

Broken legs and heart attacks

Boats that bring, but don't take back. . .

Put that on the tab!"

For, a humble, superhuman breed

Of human beings with the Sacred Creed

Of Union Labor, strong and true

& the legacy "1402". . .

Amidst the tiresome toil and noise,

Is known by the name "Banana Boys,"

But a boy needs never apply with them

For, the work they do is done by men

& full-grown women who do not mind

a manner of work that is seldom kind,

or remotely forgiving, if one should fall

in a freighter's bottomless, gaping maw,

to be digested. . .broken down

& helpless, 'till somehow they're found

by disbelieving EMT's

who won't accept the horror of what they see!

But listen what Banana Boys say

About their lives and the price they pay:

Said a lone Longshoreman, a man named Scott,

Of his brothers and sisters, on the dock,

"Wake up, each morning 'fore the sun,

Head down to the docks, like we've always done!

In our right minds and thanking the Lord,

We have to ask the Header, can we come aboard!

'Say, 'Tex, the Header, cain't you see?

Have mercy on ol' Cigar, Mule & me!

Remember poor Russell is your friend.

Let him, me & Black Tarzan in!'

& When we climb aboard, we're bound to see

Dark angels working endlessly

With bending backs in a stifling hell

Of big banana freighters packed over-well!

A unique breed, you'll see, down there

As if they were without a care. . .

With a special language that is known

By Banana Boys & God, alone!

I watch them toil & am inspired

As they do far more than what's required

Of any man made of flesh and blood

Or a woman, mired down in freighter-hole mud.

For, it takes a particular hand to throw

A 'hundred pound bag, or, bending low,

lift up more than 500 pounds,

yet, still find strength to laugh and clown!

Oh, sure, you'll witness words of rage

From folks, like tigers in a cage

But those of us who choose this way/ to live

Know anger seldom stays!

& If it does, it better be strong/ 'cause

in the hole, hate just don't last that long. . .

Not here, where workers share their lunch

& Beat the time-clock to the punch. . .

Not here, where Brotherhood survives

As the one life-line that is known to save lives

For, what compels a Stevedore unto death

Is to love one-another as you love yourself!"

A Banana Handler gave to me,

At the end of a fellow Longshoreman's wake,

A poem he said, would help me see

The truth of a Longshoreman's fate. . .

An inner-peace few would believe,

In a place where Caribbean freighters breathe

Their noxious breath in hopes to defeat

What stows away with the fruit we eat.

Yet, names were spoken that must be set

In place, lest ears and tongues forget

Both Perry Harvey and his son

Who worked to make Longshoremen one. . .

A force that must be reckoned with. . .

Whose membership would work and live

With dignity, for all to see,

In an urban-South community. . .

To do what others wished they could

To work toward the Common Good

A car that worked, a cozy home

& A promise not to die alone

A little money in the bank,

As they worked their way up through the ranks

Of numbing cold and stifling heat. . .

As bruised hands prayed their souls to keep/ &

If they should die before they wake,

May the Good Lord come, their souls to take

To a Heaven where the freighter holes

Were filled with bananas peeled with gold

Where wine was served, ten-hundred proof

& the bar-keep smiled with a golden tooth

& The ones they loved so tenderly

Were waiting inside Eternity,

In the arms of the Sacred, Righteous One

Who welcomed workers home, when their jobs

were done!

So, Children,/

Remember as you eat

Your banana pudding, spicy-sweet,

That sweaty arms and aching backs

Are responsible for the food you like

& Were it not, for their noble sake,

You would have no bananas with your crisp cornflakes

& The docks that helped build Tampa Bay

Might have settled on another shore, far away.

But we shall count our blessings

& celebrate our friends

Though some call them “Banana Boys,”

We’ll call them “Supermen!”

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