

# **JOURNAL OF ORDINARY THOUGHT**

## **Twenty-Four Hours**

### **Spring 2005**

*JOT* writers from Bezazian, Hall, King, Mabel Manning, Rogers Park, and West Englewood Branch Libraries, Deborah's Place, Project Hope, Pausa on the theme of Work and Labor.

Photography by Jason Reblando.

Introduction by Joe E. Gutierrez.



**TWENTY-FOUR HOURS:** *JOT* Writers on Work and Labor  
*With oral histories from Chicago workers*

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

When I was growing up in Northwest Indiana, the sky around Lake Michigan was painted red, and on a regular basis a mean north wind carried silvery particles that glistened in the sun and scattered greasy graphite that dirtied clean clothes hung out to dry. Coughing smokestacks from steel mills surrounded the lake and silhouetted the sky, spewing mountains of multicolored monsters that stampeded the region, coating everything a rusty red. My dad said the picture the smoke painted was of men working.

My father was from Mexico and worked hard all his life. He went from tending cattle on a cold mountain in Guadalajara, to pushing motors on Mr. Ford's assembly line in Detroit, to working in Joe Block's Open Hearth in East Chicago, Indiana. During five years of walking on fire with the wooden soles of his work shoes smoking and burning, he paid a man 50¢ a week to teach him how to weld. Once he became proficient, he informed his boss in proud but broken English that he was a welder and wanted to work in his trade. The man put him on a scarfing dock burning scrap. My father turned in his equipment. The boss said, "You can't quit! The war's goin' on! I'll have you arrested!" My father quit anyway. He was a welder and wanted to weld. He walked away and only returned years later as a pipefitter welder hired by Inland to weld, a special job requiring special talent. My father was one of the first Mexicans in his union. His local number was 597. He worked on the space shuttle. And he paid a man 50¢ a week to teach him how to weld.

My mother was from Tennessee. She and my father had fifteen children. Thank God for us, Margaret Sanger and her Planned Parenthood Federation hadn't found a home on our street. My sisters said our mother was pregnant for eleven years and one month of her life. She was 87 when she died. Both of my parents were self-taught. My mother's formal education ended with the third grade, and my father only completed first grade. He was a voracious reader but could only write his name. He learned English and my mother taught herself Spanish. Like many of the writers in this journal, she worked as a waitress, a maid, and a cook. She learned how to sell shoes, and she loved people. She was a wonderful, beautiful lady who went back to work two days after she had a baby. She worked 24 hours a day and she worked her fingers to the bone. Their history encouraged me to advocate the elimination of entry level testing which was selective and discriminatory. If my father had to take a written test to learn how to weld, he would have died burning scrap in an open hearth.

Growing up in a family of fifteen, I learned that work was more than a word. I was seven years old and couldn't wait till I was eight, so during the winter, I could carry coal from the shed up two flights of stairs like my older brothers. I wanted to work! After I turned eight, I wished I were seven again. In our house, work was as much a part of life as play. I grew up with a work ethic that affected my whole life. St. Joseph

the Worker was my hero and still is. Work is part and parcel of our nature. Everybody works. Whether you're rich or poor, you work because you must.

The stories you are about to read exemplify the soul of working people. They read like parables and are literary road maps to and from those lessons and desires of working people who hunger and strive for recognition and dignity, from the housewife raising children to the working single mother. These stories capture the concerns and fears of first-time workers to older workers losing their jobs. These wonderful words, written by these beautiful authors, exemplify truth and the key lesson of good writing— write what you know! Everybody has a story and deserves to be heard. The *Journal of Ordinary Thought* is a means and a voice for those cries in the wilderness.

**Joe E. Gutierrez**  
**May 2005**

*After spending four years in the seminary studying to become a Carmelite priest, Joe E. Gutierrez (Lil' Joe) began working at Inland Steel in June, 1959. He worked the last 14 years of his 43 years at Inland working full time at USWA Local 1010 Union Hall as a base-rate chairman. Joe became serious about writing through his involvement with the Institute for Career Development (ICD) in Indiana and after meeting and working with poet Jimmy Santiago Baca. His work was published in *The Heat: Steelworkers Lives and Legends*, a collection of stories written by steelworkers, and Joe has finished writing his first book, *The Neighborhood*. He has been writing all his life.*

## **BEING WITHOUT**

**Stephan Urbanski**

A job is like  
Being without a shadow.  
You aren't there; dogs walk by  
Without a bark, no cause to lift a leg.  
Proceeding through the alleys, pushing a wheelbarrow,  
Picky neighbors notice the noise, but are heedless of you  
Who's making the noise  
Tired of walking the alleys, home for lunch  
Where there's nothing cooking; the dog has his dog food,  
The cat his cat food, but you, no longer a son of toil,  
Have nothing.  
Time will pass with a nap,  
But unwanted thoughts swarm into the mind.  
Ten Hut! Come To! Merely sweat in the corner of your eye.  
Back to the alleys, now populated with kids at play  
More purpose and meaning to their play  
Than you with your wheelbarrow.  
Pushing that wheelbarrow as if up a very long hill,  
Pushing, prodding yourself, you have as your destination  
One devil of a drop.

## **TATTOO FROM SCRATCH**

**Lisa Simons**

It's amazing how many ways you can be creative while locked up in jail. Here's one way:

I always wanted a tattoo. I was doing county time at the Department of Corrections. Six months. I was working at the jail, cleaning out the offices, so I went through the garbage and found carbon paper. I also got a newspaper that had special ink and a plastic little bottle, and then I went in my cell. I poured water and burned the newspaper and carbon paper. I put the ashes in the bottle, put in a little water, and stirred it up. Then it came to be ink. I had a safety pin and used thread from the sheets and a pillowcase. Then I made sure I had alcohol pads, which we got from nurses, along with hydrogen peroxide. I cleaned the safety pin and my arm. I had my roommate write my name: LISA. Then I took a thread and wrapped it around the safety pin, dipped the safety pin in the bottle with the ink I'd made, and tattooed my arm. After a while my arm was numb

and it didn't hurt as much. I tattooed over the letters slowly. I stopped. Every day I would make sure I kept it clean. Then, after it healed, I saw that when I used soap and washed it, it wouldn't come off. I was happy because I did a tattoo from scratch and it worked. I said, "Oh my God, it worked. I did it."

## **FOR JEWEL**

**John Kastholm**

The young woman  
With the bloody lip  
Stands in the doorway

The ELevated hovers over her  
Like a screaming pimp

The Payless plastic bag  
She twirls by her side  
Holds inside  
Some secret, some regret  
Forgotten innocence

She doesn't hear  
Her child crying

In Gramma's bed

Praying for her safe return  
Asking God to tell her  
How much she is loved

Is she wishing  
She was someone  
Somewhere else

Or just waiting  
For the cold  
Chicago rain  
To stop stinging

## **MAPS AND ME**

**Dennis Sook**

I have been a...cartographer too, too long. My entire existence is up and down and right and left. Two-dimensional only. Vertical and horizontal. That's all there is for me. No depth! I have no...third dimension. My life has no...depth! I've been at this job too long. Year after year. Everything is...flat. With...lines. And measurements. It's...two point five inches from Chicago to Memphis. It's four point two five inches from Chicago to New Orleans. It is that same, precise, exact distance from St. Louis to New York. And then from New York to Los Angeles, California, it is twelve point zero inches. My only living relative...a crazy, bipolar, bisexual sister...called me to say that she's flying to Poughkeepsie, New York, from where she lives in Portland, Oregon. That's eleven point seven five inches. Her round trip will be twenty-three point five zero inches...that is if she decides or remembers to return to Portland...Oregon! I see from the newspaper that the President's parents are driving from Bangor, Maine, to Boston, Massachusetts. That will take them precisely one point zero inches. So, there they are...and here I am. So many folks going so many places. And I've never been anywhere. Not even an inch!