

The Immolation

The statue's firm silhouette arrested the dull, grim light of the glowing furnace, his sinewy legs positioned in a powerful stance, sturdy arms swiveling monotonically, feeding iron into the beast. The cloudy heat of its eternal feast illuminated his resolute face. Two intent eyes embedded in a ruggedly handsome face, gleaming fiercely under the shadow of furrowed eyebrows, swept back and forth, guiding shovels of iron into the furnace's mouth. Those fierce eyes belonged to Dean Louis. A passionate and eloquent man, he held his convictions close to his heart and defended them forcefully with his agile mind. With every passing moment, he seemed to burn more brightly – a glowing ember amid a world of darkness. Wearing his thoughts plainly on his thoughts and in his words, he granted the world plentiful access to his mind. Another man – indeed, most men – would have considered this a great disability, their insecure selves fearful that any more of a mediocre mind be the subject of public knowledge and quiet mockery. Dean Louis, though, had all his mind to give to the world with plenty to spare.

It was amid this centerpiece of unfaltering confidence that Charles Smith carried his mediocrity and hesitancy. In the glow of the blackened hearth, Charles' silhouette, pudgy and unsure, never resolved where illumination ended and human began. Short, with light eyebrows and perpetually questioning eyes, Charles Smith presented little to take note of, save for some sympathy or concern. He knew that he felt more comfortable in the dark. Where there is darkness, fire does not burn, and light does not blind; the mask of night shadows all that fall within in it in a predictable cover of cool concealment. And though he sometimes urged himself to march into the flames alongside Dean and other impassioned spirits, he found the burn and the instability of the flame – its random embers like a spray of bullets, its infinite arbitrary arms clawing at something, anything, to burn – were, to him, a convincing reason to be cautious of it. However hesitant he may be, Charles Smith was not a dumb man nervous about his wits; it was instead that he calculated his risks and gains carefully, finding great anxiety in their fluctuation and subjectivity. He would passionately subscribe to a point of view, then upon a moment of deep thinking, equally passionately subscribe to another opposing point of view – his anxieties plagued every calculated decision

he made, resulting in an extreme inconsistency. But it was all in an effort to find the ultimate calculation – the Truth, he would say – so perhaps it would not be hard to forgive him, or at least to understand.

Dean Louis and Charles worked next to each other, feeding iron ore into the furnace one after another; molded by the intensity of the flames, the resulting product would be processed into steel. Furthermore, it was also their responsibility to routinely switch and empty the buckets used to catch water that leaked from an unfixed crack in the ceiling over the mouth of the furnace every two hours. The manager had insisted upon it but did not tell them why – nor did Dean or Charles think to ask. It was simply a given; one among many hazards minor and major one could only address by being very careful. Yet, it was not common for such a cautious attitude to break its steadfast grip during the lengthy workdays and the dismal conditions.

Despite this – always in such close proximity to Dean – Charles found himself eager to resolve his anxieties, to be convinced one way or the other. Although Dean did not have any particular inclination or attachment to Charles, he was always willing to share his mind in that easygoing, poignant way of his.

That particular day in May, though, Dean seemed more predisposed to conversation than usual. Swiftly placing the newspaper onto an adjacent metal pipe with a radius wide enough to be functionally flat, Dean shot a glance at Charles, who was beginning the daily ritual of feeding iron into the furnace's gaping mouth. Charles could parse the bold headline: "*All Frisco Unions on Strike!*".

"You know," Dean remarked, his eyebrows raised in a hopeful amusement – Charles cocked his head to indicate he was listening – "a whole lot's going on right now down in 'Frisco. Things are changing. Workers are going on strike and unionizing, paving a pathway for their betterment. They're rising up, everywhere, fighting for the rights that rightfully belong to them."

Instinctively, Charles eagerly nodded, like an avid student does when a teacher asks them a rhetorical question; despite that he'd heard that type of talk several times before, he made sure to nod a bit slower and more thoughtfully, to demonstrate at least that Dean should find it worth it to go on.

Dean inhaled a large breath of air, one that rose in the mountains of his chest and fell with a slow, wistful gust of wind. His face contorted into a subtle frown, three vertical creased wrinkles in his forehead bookended by knitted eyebrows. “Workers are rising up,” he repeated to himself. This reiteration seemed to be the conclusion of a long stream of thought, one that stretched beyond days, weeks, and months.

Then, to Charles, in a smaller volume but no less assertive tone, he stated blankly, “We need every man here – including you, Charles, to join the strike and the union.”

Although Charles mindlessly kept the metronome movement of his work, his surprise would have escaped no observer. His eyes widened in aghast, his nose flared as air rushed his empty lungs, and his mouth opened just slightly before just as quickly firmly sealing it – lest anything rash be spoken. He knew, as most workers in that mill did, that Dean was a stealthy but avid organizer. But this request – or rather, this demand – was too direct, too forceful, too unexpected – although on second thought, there was no reason not to expect it to come. As he clamored for words to utter, he found none, moment by moment. Once standing a distance from that glaring blaze, he was now rushed towards that blinding fire, its shapeless arms twisting, grasping, beckoning.

“We’re joining the Steel Workers Organizing Committee,” Dean continued hopefully. He ended abruptly in the middle of that breath, for Charles’ bizarre expression more than warranted stopping.

Guiding the growth of a fire is hardly a task easily executed. Once the small, flickering spark is lit, it must feed continuously on the vigorous exertions of others – the energy spent collecting wood to burn, the breath spent blowing and coaxing the dainty grasps of fire higher. At a certain threshold, the fire has matured in size such that it burns and grows by itself. It becomes highly resistant to water, to extinguishment; it is antifragile – it grows menacingly from attempts at its destruction. Before this threshold, though, if such exertion is not sustained and does not rise proportionately to match the young fire’s growing appetite, it is smothered by malnutrition, by neglect, and by isolation. Charles knew that Dean wanted – needed – Charles to exert his share of energy into the development of a young, fragile fire.

Passivity smothers early fires. But oh, how fiercely fires young and old burn! The skin, burnt to a crisp, screams in torture. Yet in the darkness, it is the light that is most alluring – and most everyone knows that the light is brightest at the heart of the fire. The pain and the light, the agony and the radiance: it was not that Charles had not pondered these in his calculations prior; it was that to mark any decision was too difficult, too bold, too risky – an onerous decision is always best thought out tomorrow.

Finally, increasingly conscious of seconds slipping into the irretrievable void of suspicion, his thoughts converged on honesty – for there was nowhere and nothing else to converge upon.

“I don’t know, Dean,” he sighed in exasperation. “I just don’t know what to do.”

A subtle but visible wave of disappointment rolled across Dean’s face, which had already been masked by a stern concern. For several seconds, he said nothing, diverting his effort towards the work at hand. If one looked closely, one would observe his sharp eyes engulfed again by that eternal flame, that bright flame that reflected in his eyes whenever he stood in front of the furnace but that no one was quite sure was only a reflection. He was pondering *something* – betrayed by the grinding of the teeth, the thoughtful distortion of the eyebrow.

Then, suddenly breaking the silence: “What are you scared of, Charles?” It seemed that the thinking had worn away at Dean’s usual expressions of confidence, of hope, of rage. Instead, it was replaced by a certain thoughtful weariness. Such was a novel development to Charles; there was both something alarming and disarming about this response.

“Well,” Charles began tentatively, trailing off as silence clogged his scratched throat. He awkwardly chuckled almost humorously, seemingly in an attempt to alleviate the oddness of this sudden course of events.

Then, more seriously and thoughtfully: “It’s a dangerous operation. I’ve... I’ve... heard and seen of people getting shot and killed, and if not so, well... still, badly hurt.” After a pause, and with a breath, he ejaculated – “And what for? Are the small victories – if there are victories to be scored at all – worth

the... the pain, and the violence?” Seeing Dean’s mouth opening as to suggest a reply, Charles rapidly shot out a following statement, in anxiety that perhaps his impassioned points would too easily be dismissed and refuted, “And... and... even if you do win the strike, do you win the war for liberty? I’ve read a lot about... er... the Communists infiltrating the union leadership; the union leaders... some of them are corrupt folks, too, encouraging criminal activity and such, using our fight and our dollars to fight personal battles and to amass personal power. Is this... this whole ordeal not simply a substitution of power?”

“Why do you listen to a damn thing the newspapers say?” Dean immediately fired back, his face contorted even more furiously in a rage, putting an abrupt halt to Charles’ short-lived moment of freedom and relieving honesty. “You *know* that the newspapers are the media outlet of the corporations. They’re instruments of antilabor propaganda, so plainly so; they’re turning rank-and-file workers against their common interests! And they’ve gotten to you, too,” he thundered.

“But,” Charles protested slowly, “not all the papers are like that. For instance, take... take... Victor Riesel – he’s a friend of us working people. And he cares, he really does, about the success of reasonable unions and workers. Riesel’s written a lot about corruption and, well Communism and other forces impairing unions. His work’s convincing, I must say, I...”

“They’ve gotten to you,” Dean interrupted, shaking his head. “Why, listen to yourself! I can’t tell the difference between you and the corporate heads hammering on about the Communists, the corruption, the God-knows-what-they-can-throw-at-us-next. It is all done hastily, messily, viciously, to crush us.”

“Don’t you care about corruption and the rest, though?” meekly questioned Charles.

Dean paused a moment. His tightly knitted eyebrows eased, and he raised his head at a slight angle towards a dark corner in the room. At that moment, it seemed that Charles’ final prod had poked a small chink in Dean’s well-armored convictions – albeit, one that was quickly repaired. “I *do* care – I can’t think of a man who doesn’t,” he responded, “certainly, corporations are more corrupt than some...”

trifles in union leadership. You don't mean to tell me you've got it in your head that the employers are purer than union leaders? Must you follow only angels?"

"I suppose not," Charles replied, with an inflection that raised hopefully into the clouds of thought before such a brief episode was concluded with a firm interjection by Dean.

"You're an honest man; all honest men must climb the staircase towards liberty, towards justice. The stairs are slick with sweat and dotted with blood, blocked by the ruling classes and the standby nogoodniks. But even so, will you take at least a step? Or will you stand reluctantly at the bottom forever, staring wistfully at what might be?"

"Well, yes; er... no, I suppose. A step."

"A step, yes. And if every man takes a step, they can only get out of the way or step back. Don't you see? There is only one direction to go on the staircase – forwards, upwards."

"Forwards. Hm; yes." Charles nodded – not out of the same instinctual eagerness as before, but more honestly, more truly. Yes, yes: indeed it was true, the steel barons had gripped enter towns like this one with a tyrannical rule that needed to be broken. No moral talk so holier than thou could refute this fact. Indeed, the actualization of such a fact seeped into the workday life so clearly now.

Dean looked intently at Charles, his passionate glinting eyes staring deep past worry and suspicion, past fear and anxiety. "So, you will take the step, yes?" After a brief pause, and upon physical reaffirmation from Charles, the verdict: "The strike will occur tomorrow, eleven AM."

Two calloused hands shook.

“Dammit,” Charles mumbled as he stumbled towards the rickety door of his small apartment. On the walk home, he had been thinking, thinking – darkness was especially conducive to his long trailing thoughts – *perhaps it was not so. Perhaps Dean was wrong.*

Drowning in wave after wave of Dean’s targeted questions, Charles reflected, he had – in that conversation of a few minutes – solidified a decision to a question that had been unresolved for years. That decision, too, in hindsight, had been made in the suppression of those wide-reaching calculations he esteemed so salient in his judgements. Now, the rage of those calculations – those elusive fluctuating risks and gains – came back to haunt him, to roar in decrying its neglect. Dean had made it all sound so simple, so unambiguous. The only direction was forward, of course... but no! Of course, not; seldom anything beyond time pushes unrelentingly, eternally, justly forward.

Charles’ room, despite its small size, possessed a wealth of information. Stacks of newspapers and a few books he could afford to buy were lined neatly along the edge where the pasty wall joined with the dusty floor. How else could such a calculating, hesitant man reliably construct evidence for a hypothesis, then immediately find – rather, *seek* – counterevidence to fault it?

A pamphlet lay on the table. “Ah,” Charles murmured – for there was the pamphlet Dean had quietly given out at the mill about a month ago. Palming through the worn pages, Charles was reminded again of the feeling of being swept away by eloquence and vigor, of feeling invigorated by seeing through the obscured vision that reveals only path forward. Line after line of printed text retold the victorious story: in that wretched factory, every man on the line stiffened and gulped, but despite their qualms, linked arm-in-arm with brother in strike, in defiance of the employers’ oppression, greed, lust for power. As production ground to a halt, there was cheering, great elation, and joy, as the workers reveled in the power of their unity. Then, on the next page – a message from John L. Lewis of the CIO himself, concluding this warming tale of success with a warning that the media, the lapdogs of the antiunion corporations and politicians, were working vigorously to shut out the voices of unions and to turn the

public against workers. Vigilance and aggressive action, like of those striking men, would be needed to combat this steeply uphill war.

But – oh, the memory screams to be heard – Lewis was just on the mainstream radio broadcasts campaigning to the public for the CIO, promising that unions were a reasonable and natural companion to free enterprise! Yes – there it was, the deposit in that memory compartment waiting to be withdrawn.

“Unionization, as opposed to communism, presupposes the relation of unemployment; it is based upon the wage system and recognizes fully and unreservedly the institution of private property and the right to investment profit.”

Why, Charles thought as he recollected this, *that's odd*. Lewis had predicated the CIO split from the AFL on a more aggressive push for labor. It was common knowledge that the Communists were the engine behind the massive confrontations that the CIO attributed so much of its newfound success and praise from. Here, Lewis was denouncing them. Perhaps he was right, Charles thought. On Communism, he had usually found himself convinced by Victor Riesel – yes, the Communists that infiltrated the unions were up to no good. They were a real threat, too. But Lewis's denunciation nevertheless seemed disingenuous.

Then, the memory was led so naturally to Philip Murray – yes, another high-ranking CIO official, him – who had insisted perhaps most strongly that the entire journalistic establishment was a propagandistic effort against unions. Meanwhile, though, there was credible talk of Murray's friendly relationship with several reporters and editors of the large newspapers. Why, who was it? Er... there, Edwin Lahey for the *Chicago Daily News*, yes, they met often, it was said. He had written numerous columns in support of the labor movement and the CIO. And others, too, could be recalled...

Pacing around the room of contradicting headlines, Charles grew in his suspicion of Dean and the CIO. Why, what was John Lewis doing in the very commercial media he decried, and speaking two messages to the public and the workers? And Murray, how could he pit the entire media as the voice of antiunionism when he was meeting for dinner with – and *influencing*, perhaps (the mind runs riot in speculation here) – Lahey and others? Perhaps corruption is too heavy an allegation, but certainly

dishonesty seemed apt. Dean defended them blindly, too; the whole operation was a bureaucratic and manipulative scheme!

His pacing quickened. In his frenzied state, his foot – wavering precariously outwards his path – destabilized another messy stack of newspapers in the dark corner of the room. As he rushed to strengthen it, the headline on the top drew his attention.

“Otis Jones had his spinal cord severed by a bullet in the back,” the *Daily Worker* newspaper piled on top of the stack grimly read. On closer inspection by a paled Charles, it appeared to list the dead at a strike before a Republic Steel plant. It continued:

“Kenneth Reed bled to death in a patrol wagon. A bullet had sliced through his back and into his abdomen. Joe Rothmund was shot far down in his back. Lee Tisdale died of blood poisoning from a wound. Anthony Tisdale died of blood poisoning from a wound. Hilding Anderson died of peritonitis. Alfred Causey was shot four times and he died. Leon Francesco was another shot in the back. Sam Popovitch was not shot but his skull was battered to pieces by police clubs as he ran, an old man, trying in vain to shield himself. The police ran after him and they beat him when he was down.”

So on and so forth, the gruesome deaths of seventeen were recorded. As Charles read each word intently, clutching the newspaper with whitening knuckles, he died seventeen painful deaths. He was riddled with sharp bullets, beaten sore, his blood vessels bursting into the musty air in excruciating pain and dread.

After the ordeal was completed, he sunk into a flimsy three-legged stool, his weak knees somewhat alleviated of the gravity imposed by a heavy, afflicted mind. A heavy cloak of dread draped over him.

Dean, in all his smooth-talking, expressive ways, had offered no reassurance against violence. “The stairs are slick with sweat and dotted with blood,” Charles whispered mockingly, his voice curling into raspy silence, in the disbelief of betrayal. Perhaps the ocean was a dot to Dean – and why wouldn’t it be? He was always thinking beyond, further, higher, larger, bigger, onward.

Charles could envision the conversation as it developed should be raise such a concern to Dean. “Why,” he would thunder, “what sort of cowardice is this? Thousands have given their blood to the cause, but you are beyond such?” Or, “If you do not join the fight now, you will force generations of future boys to suffer.” If Dean were feeling a little less fiery, perhaps he would simply advise: “Fight the good fight.”

Yes, yes – his logic was not faulty; authoritarianism is to be confronted and resisted, not to be cowed to. And now, the dread-laden coal was lit on fire by the flame of fury. Why, it was exactly this sort of tyrannical intimidation and death-bringing that united the cause in the first place! Indeed, the crooked politicians were in bed with the corporate heads; it was them, yes, them, scheming to suppress the masses that would threaten their corrupt wealth and power. Yes, perhaps Dean was right, indeed it was so. So what if there were Communists? The Communists breathed life into the revolt, no? Perhaps, too, the newspapers, which themselves seemed to have an interest in antiunionism, were by dint of the system inclined to label people Communists left and right. He solidified a certain firmness in this thinking. That brief excursion half an hour ago into contrary thought was silly, yes, silly! Those qualms about the corruption, the Communism, and whatnot: are they more real than the brutality the worker is subjected to?

His elated project stopped as he remembered Lewis and the condemnation of Communism in the unions. Dean, too, was clearly uncomfortable with that topic; he followed Lewis and other labor idols for guidance on those difficult questions. *What is Dean leading us to?* With nothing remaining of invigorating spirit to fill up the mind’s vast chambers with enthusiasm and determinedness, that seeping dread returned, its creeping talons biting into the body.

The calculations then begged, demanded: even if resistance is justified, is it futile? Decades of struggle had seemed to have brought far more bloodshed than gain. Charles gazed around his square room – at the bare table, at the worn stacks of newspapers, and the rickety door, at the ceiling, at the floor, at the walls, at the reality. The room was plain; he could not afford lavish embellishments and décor. He lived by himself, and he scraped by fine enough, without extreme excess nor dearth. He pondered: is a bullet in the body or the soul worth raising the clasps of the flame centimeters higher?

And, Charles reflected, how so can one resoundingly answer “yes!” when fire itself is vague, ambiguous, aimless? If the fire is to have a purpose, it is to consume and to burn, to emit the enchanting radiance of light as it reduces all taller than the ground to rubble.

Where are we going? What are we leaving? Is it worth it? Is it worth it? The calculations taunted Charles throughout the long night. The next-door tenant could hear, throughout the sun’s retreat into slumber, the hysterical laughing at the stupidity of the world, the sorrowful murmurs elicited by the confrontation of morality. He continued searching, searching, calculating, embittered by distrust and deception, invigorated by the nobler causes of society and justice, relieved at the embrace of information and vision, fervent at reflection of his dismal life. The mad search to exhaustion continued even the nocturnal moon retreated below the horizon.

The sun was so sober as not to cast its radiant light on the land in the morning. In the mill, where the sun never showed its rays anyway, the atmosphere was darker, more nervous. The furnace hummed its eternal hum as it continued to digest shovel after shovel. In the hours leading up the eleventh hour, the day unfolded as a replica of all other days. Slowly, though, although the talk did not decrease nor increase in volume or tenor, its content shifted ever so slightly. Increasingly, looks were shot towards Dean – looking for guidance, for the moment.

As the clock hit eleven, Dean took a step back from the furnace. He looked at Charles, who wordlessly stopped as well, although his mind – despite his exhaustion and poor rest the previous night – was still whirling in its calculations. The beast grew hungry, deprived of its usual constant fare. As nods, looks, and quick remarks spread through the mill, some stepped away more enthusiastically and quickly – these were the ones that had figured it out, whose convictions bit back ferociously at hesitancy. Others were visibly more doubtful, if not confused; yet, in time, the entire operation ceased nevertheless.

Dean stepped away from the furnace towards the center of the mill. Charles numbly sat down on a ledge next to the rumbling mouth; he could tell Dean had begun addressing the crowd of sitting men. No doubt he was back at his impassioned speeches, to continue working vigorously for the cause. To Charles's mind – drained by the raging battles of calculation – the rousing words blended together in a slur: “to fight for the worker ... liberty ... fairness ...” But the movement had begun, the mass of workers moving as one mechanical body.

Drops leaked from the crack in the ceiling – each passing second, a small round globule of transparent, liquid crystal formed, and upon reaching its critical mass, reluctantly let free of its birthplace to fall through the air into the dirty bucket. The drops were birthed briskly, like bullets feeling flight for the first time in rapid succession. Minute by minute, the bucket grew fuller. *Drip, drip.*

With a jolt, Charles convulsed from his stupor – the bucket, the bucket! It was to be replaced every two hours, yes, the manager had insisted upon it. He stumbled to his feet, wobbling upwards the small staircase leading to the platform from which the bucket rested upon a firm metal mesh.

An enraged voice howled in a terrifying tenor: “Charles!” It was laced with a spontaneously erupting embitterment, an enmity beyond enmity. Charles turned around, greeted by a sea of faces – of which many were hostile. “*What the hell are you doing, you scab?*” they seemed to demand. And the expression on Dean's face – it bit fiercely, it glared so forbiddingly. Indeed, many had, wrapped tightly in Dean's grand speeches of unity, immediately recognized Charles' first movement towards the furnace as one of strikebreaking, of a defiance of sorts against the cause.

If Charles had some more strength in him, perhaps he would have objected and made a plea for his case. But he was weary and his mind had been broken into discontinuous strands of thought too wispy to be articulate. Ah – his thoughts weakly caught onto a twisting idea floating by. “If every man takes a step, they can only get out of the way,” it read. So be it, then – it was true enough. He faltered down from

the two steps of ascension he had secured and sat down slowly in his original position. His mind was blank. He soon forgot why he had gotten up, then that he had gotten up at all.

Drip, drip. The drops fell almost silently, pawing through the air.

“The sit-down strike is a unified effort,” Dean continued, with a cautionary glance at Charles, “and embedded in our unity comes a great power to change our conditions.”

Drip, drip.

“The tyrant who attempts to fight against our unified surge of this human effort, now being embraced by the hearts of thirty million workers, is a madman, a fool!”

Murmurs stirred in agreement.

Drip, drip.

“The workers of this nation are tired of waiting for the corporate industry to right their economic wrongs. The voice of labor will sing music to the ears of justice!”

With this, a slow clap broke out, and an emboldened look swept across many emboldened faces.

Drip, drip.

Finally, the body of water poked its curious head beyond the contained world of the can, its arms curling over the rim, embracing the alluring call of gravity.

Another drop, newly birthed, whistled through the air and plunged deep into the center of the bucket’s circular mouth. The ripple spread outward, the body pulsating with movement; its infinite arms reached again over the rim and trickled down in modest currents down the side of the bucket, their spherical arms grasping for a place below. They fell, first in drops and then in streams, into the furnace.

The water, upon their first encounter with so ferocious a beast, vaporized instantly into an angry, swelling steam; the watery gas flew upwards in a furious frenzy. The bucket – worn past its lifetime –

finally collapsed under such a forceful confrontation, and its drowsy, shapeless contents were emptied into the mouth of the furnace. Instantly, from the hearth emerged an enraged cloud of vapor, swirling and expanding with great intensity, desperately occupying all the space that had not been touched. It occupied the molten metal bath brewing inside the furnace, it occupied the refractory brick lining the furnace walls, it occupied the metal railings and platforms workers stood on.

Whatever it occupied with great fervor, it displaced with equally great energy and ferocity.

Metal shrapnel and sharp angles of burning brick sprayed the sitting workers; the molten metal grasped outward, digesting anything in its touch with its tremendous heat. Layers in the coat of brick enclosing the furnace began collapsing under the immense pressure, a tsunami pushing against a flimsy dam. The familiar low rumble of the furnace exploded into a roaring fire that rushed eagerly through the broken skeleton of the structure it was once a prisoner of. The beast that resided in that contained pit now towered to an uncontrolled height, its long, arbitrary arms furiously twisting, grasping, beckoning.

The transpiration of these events – from the birth of the instigating droplet to the raging fire – in a time measuring less than a second, for nothing but time rushes forward so persistently, so unregretfully.

A screaming piece of metal lodged itself deep into Charles' leg, slightly above his left knee. Another shot into his ribs, the intense torridity howling as it penetrated skin and bone. Bright red blood ejected in a violent burst from his aching body across the floor. The flames danced higher, higher, mockingly admiring their bright and vivid selves in the reflection of the pooling blood. A reach of molten metal, violently discharged from its confines, draped over his calves, boiling away at skin, muscle, bone; waves of tremendous heat emitted by the towering fire rolled over his racked body. In excruciating pain, Charles screamed a cry of unconstrained agony, of the insufferable collision of tender man and raging fire. Soon, this cry turned raspy itself, a mindless drain of energy in a body without much to begin with.

Many of the other men, who had sat and stood closer to Dean in the center – enthralled by his promising and stimulating words – upon sensing this horrific spectacle, rushed madly to the door, located

opposite of the furnace. A few, like Charles and others that were situated further away and too close to the furnace, attempted to grasp towards escape, but were immobilized by their searing wounds. Screams and yells punctured the air as a violent swarm of beings clamored out of the opening, water sloshing desperately through a funnel.

Dean, in the center of all those men, was pushed forward by the throng away from the smoke and the fire, into the air. He turned his head, for a second, almost regretfully, back. But the fire engulfed too much, and the blackened silhouettes of cremating bodies seemed burnt beyond repaired function. With frantic men behind him rushing forward, forward, quickly, now!, he strode into the free air. The workers poured out onto the street, where a fire brigade was assembling and a military force had been waiting. The grating discord of erupting conflict could be heard through that doorway to the dismal, open world.

What remained of the blast furnace was collapsing. The refractory brick fell in great deluges from the side of the furnace, and the now completely unrestrained inferno gloated over the destruction of its victory in bright red shrieks and yellow sparks. Charles lay doused in a state of agony so excruciating it burnt and dismembered the voice and the mind. His ashes fluttered alongside the fire's bright embers.

His calculations had finally been resolved.

Author's Note

This narrative is intended not to be a criticism of unions and striking of the 1930s, but instead one of a simplistic and triumphant reading of the struggle. Although the victory of strikes beckons the loudest fanfare and is most easily portrayed as triumphing over every barrier in stride with foresight of the future. However, in this short story, I seek to cast a different light on striking and unionization – specifically, although not strictly limited to, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and its most prominent face, John Lewis. I seek to portray the relationship between the charismatic leader figure, Dean Louis, named for its homophonic relationship to “Lewis”, and Charles Smith, ranking near top of the 1930s most common first and last names. Through interaction between these two characters, I argue that the worker was subjected to a chaos of conflicting information and narratives, and that the CIO offered one alluring pathway forward through a strategy of concealment.

To begin with, the source *Labor's Untold Story* by Boyer and Morais, telling the story of the rise of the CIO, is used as a framework for the narrative that unionization and striking was, under the bold and vigilant leadership of John L. Lewis, always making the right and well-reasoned move that would prove effective defense against the hailstorm of attacks, unifying the brave workers in successful strike. A paraphrased excerpt from *Labor's Untold Story* is placed in one of the pamphlets Dean passes out that Charles rereads. Similarly, the description of Boyer and Morais of John L. Lewis is the inspiration for the cliché immediate introduction of Dean Louis as the handsome, strong, eloquent leader. Dean also paraphrases several lines from Lewis's speeches, and thus acts as a vessel for exploring not only Lewis as a historical figure but as a narrative.

Although Charles Smith is a steelworker, his character is best thought of as an embodiment of an amalgamation of multiple substrata of the working class. Through him, there is no one coherent voice, but instead forever a hesitancy, a struggle to make sense of conflicting signals and ideas that never seems to win out. In this sense, it is important that Charles is not indicative of an “average individual” – the

average individual was unlikely to act in the ways Charles does – but instead a group that moves as a collective entity to dispute and understand. | 9:40

Charles's thinking is shaped by several influences. He is shaped and often convinced by Dean's persistent and eloquent arguments, especially those outlining a moral vision or justification for what is right – although Dean does not truly address many of the lingering doubts Charles has, which are later unearthed after more thought. Charles is also shaped by the newspapers and the broadcasts; he cites Victor Riesel and Edwin Lahey, two journalists in the journalistic establishment, as contradictions to the CIO's sweeping claims of anti-unionism. He is confused by the contradictions of the CIO's own media outlet, with John Lewis and Philip Murray. The positions and background of these figures are derived from Philip M. Glende's *Labor Makes the News: Newspapers, Journalism, and Organized Labor, 1933-1955*. The third major influence is fear; the excerpt from the newspaper article he reads of the seventeen killed at a strike before the Republic Steel Plant is one cited in *Labor's Untold Story*. While it was not historically published in the *Daily Worker*, such an incident, however indisputable the facts of the situation are, is presented in pro-labor context. The battle between these conflicting messages haunts him and never resolves. Thus, his thinking is discontinuous and unsure; this is due to the exposure of *too much* information, rather than less. His ideas encompass those of the radical Communist organizers at times, at other times resemble those of the more conservative member the public, and sometimes even in agreement with Dean and the bureaucratic vision of the CIO he represents.

The explosion of the blast furnace, finally, is the culmination of Dean's neglect and Charles' weariness. The resulting explosion causes the fire, which has been referred throughout the story as a metaphor for unionization and striking, to burn its brightest, killing Charles, but crucially – “resolving his calculations.” That is, the shards of metal that burst from the exploding furnace immobilize those closest to it, or those farthest from Dean's enchanting speeches. Merging the critique presented in Mike Davis's “The Barren Marriage of American Labour and the Democratic Party” of the bureaucracy of the CIO with the arguments and evidence presented in the works of Glende, Boyer & Morais, Dubofsky, and

Stromquist, this concluding scene culminates the argument that the flame of the CIO burned brightest when all immune to the subscription to their vision of achieving labor success – both to the right and the left – are burnt, obscured by the fire. Dean's enforcement consistently is enacted to make actions fall within his preset range of allowed activities and behaviors; hence he carries a certain neglect (perhaps willing) in understanding Charles' thought and behavior. Thus, this story argues that the CIO bolstered the appeal and support behind their cause by engaging in the chaotic battle for minds of the 30s with sweeping campaigns designed to narrow the ideological population to a range that would ensure a high level of allegiance to the CIO.

Of course, such maneuvers may have been necessary – although this analysis of necessity is, for the most part, outside the scope of this project. The CIO was a collective effort to advance labor-leaning interests, and in order to balance practicality of achieving labor successes, there was a certain bureaucracy and political maneuvering that needed to take place: double-dealing with journalists, attempting to appeal both to the more hostile public and to tame the Communist wings of the CIO while benefitting off their militancy. Charles is the least chained to any one ideology; it is he who continually seeks the most information, and hence one could argue that he has agency in being informed. Yet he is the most inactive and indecisive character; he pursues knowledge constantly, including potentially incorrect or mis-portrayed: it comes in such a chaotic and contradictory torrent that he loses his agency in acting. There is a double-sided notion of agency in which the question is not how much agency an individual has, but which type they have – in information or action. Hence, it is suggested that an organization's battle – that of the CIO, other labor organizations, and anti-union institutions alike – to control the information space is key to maximizing the agency of its constituents to act.

Finally, I will note consciousness of several continuity errors. For instance, the San Francisco General Strike occurred in 1934 and Riesel's formal career began in 1937; greater unionization in the steel industry with the rise of the SWOC began towards the end of the 1930s. While the chronology does

not align completely accurately, all are within the fundamental focus of 1930s discourse and environment around unionization.

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