

## THE STOKEHOLD

I passed a big ship steaming - into a heavy sea,  
Powered by steam engines - to some a mystery,  
She had a `woodbine` funnel forcing up the draught,  
So I knew the `Black Gang` were working at their craft.

Trimmers kept fuel coming, with barrows full of coal,  
Often from the `tween-deck `an the vessel on the roll,  
Firemen fed the furnaces making constant steam,  
Choking and half roasted, eyes smarting to extreme.

Several of those ovens under their command,  
In non-stop roar of engines and boiler's fierce demand.  
Attired in vest and blue jeans, sweat rag duly clutched,  
Leather belt worn backward or buckle seared when touched,

Iron doors hinged open - facing fervent heat,  
An art to shovelling coal trying to keep your feet,  
Raking and a `poking to stop clogging of the bars,  
Sweating bodies shining over tattoos and the scars.

An eye upon the gauges to keep things just precise,  
Striving with their working tools - devil, rake and slice,  
Used to sort the clinker out `afore eight bells applied,  
Trimmers hauled the ashes up and dumped `em overside.

Well beneath the waterline these men earned their pay,  
Supplying red hot caverns, two hundred tons a day,  
I passed that big ship steaming - many years ago,  
Knowing that her `Black Gang were slaving down below.

Joe Earl