

## Brother, Can You Spare a Dime

They used to tell me  
I was building a dream  
And so I followed the mob  
When there was earth to plow  
Or guns to bear  
I was always there  
Right on the job.

They used to tell me  
I was building a dream  
With peace and glory ahead  
Why should I be standing in line  
Just waiting for bread?

Once I built a railroad  
Made it run  
Made it race against time  
Once I built a railroad  
Now it's done  
Brother, can you spare a dime?

Once I built a tower  
To the sun  
Brick and rivet and lime  
Once I built a tower  
Now it's done.  
Brother, can you spare a dime?

Once in khaki suits  
Gee we looked swell  
Full of that Yankee Doodle-de-Dum  
Half a million boots went slogging thru Hell,  
I was the kid with the drum!

Say, don't you remember  
They called me 'Al'

It was ‘Al’ all the time  
Say, don’t you remember  
I’m your pal?  
Buddy, can you spare a dime?

**lyrics by Yip Harburg  
music by Jay Gorney, 1931**

### **Those Winter Sundays**

Sundays too my father got up early  
And put his clothes on in the blueback cold,  
then with cracked hands that ached  
from labor in the weekday weather made  
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
and slowly I would rise and dress,  
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,  
who had driven out the cold  
and polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
of love's austere and lonely offices?

**Robert Hayden, 1962**

## Devastation (from The Plow that Broke the Plains)

Baked out – blown out – and broke!  
Year in, year out, uncomplaining they fought  
the worst drought in history  
their stock choked to death on the barren land...  
their homes were nightmares of swirling dust  
night and day.

Many were ahead of it – but many stayed  
until stock, machinery, homes, credit, food,  
and even hope were gone.

On to the West!

Once again they headed into the setting sun ...  
Once again they headed West out of  
the Great Plains and hit the highways  
for the Pacific Coast, the last border.

Blown out – baked out – and broke ...  
nothing to stay for ...nothing to hope for...  
homeless, penniless and bewildered they joined  
the great army of the highways.

No place to go...and no place to stop.

Nothing to eat...nothing to do...

their homes on four wheels...their work  
desperate gamble for a day's labor in the fields  
along the highways...

The price of a sack of beans or a tank of gas ...

All they ask is a chance to start over ...  
And a chance for their children to eat,  
to have medical care, to have homes again.  
50,000 a month!

The sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter  
in American agriculture.

Pare Lorentz, 1936

## Dust Storm Disaster

On the fourteenth day of April  
Of nineteen thirty-five  
There struck the worst of dust storms  
That ever filled the sky.

You could see that dust storm comin'  
The cloud looked deathlike black  
And through our mighty nation  
It left a dreadful track.

From Oklahoma City  
To the Arizona line,  
Dakota and Nebraska  
To the lazy Rio Grande.

It fell across our city  
Like a curtain of black rolled down,  
We thought it was our judgment  
We thought it was our doom.

The radio reported  
We listened with alarm,  
The wild and windy actions  
Of this great mysterious storm.

From Albuquerque and Clovis  
And all New Mexico,  
They said it was the blackest  
That ever they had saw.

From old Dodge City, Kansas,  
The dust had rung their knell,  
And a few more comrades sleeping  
On top of old Boot Hill.

From Denver, Colorado,  
They said it blew so strong,  
They thought that they could hold out,  
But they didn't know how long.

Our relatives were huddled  
Into their oil boom shacks,  
And the children they was cryin'  
Aas it whistled through the cracks.

And the family it was crowded  
Into their little room,  
They thought the world had ended,  
And they thought it was their doom.

The storm took place at sundown,  
It lasted through the night,  
When we looked out next morning  
We saw a terrible sight.

We saw outside our window  
Where wheat fields they had grown,  
Was now a rippling ocean  
Of dust the wind had blown.

It covered up our fences,  
It covered up our barns,  
It covered up our tractors  
In this wild and dusty storm.

We loaded our jalopies  
And piled our families in,  
We rattled down that highway  
To never come back again.

**Woody Guthrie, 194?**

## Pantoum of the Great Depression

Our lives avoided tragedy  
Simply by going on and on,  
Without end and with little apparent meaning.  
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.

Simply by going on and on  
We managed. No need for the heroic.  
Oh, there were storms and small catastrophes.  
I don't remember all the particulars.

We managed. No need for the heroic.  
There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows.  
I don't remember all the particulars.  
Across the fence, the neighbors were our chorus.

There were the usual celebrations, the usual sorrows  
Thank god no one said anything in verse.  
The neighbors were our only chorus,  
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.

At no time did anyone say anything in verse.  
It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us,  
And if we suffered we kept quiet about it.  
No audience would ever know our story.

It was the ordinary pities and fears consumed us.  
We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.  
What audience would ever know our story?  
Beyond our windows shone the actual world.

We gathered on porches; the moon rose; we were poor.  
And time went by, drawn by slow horses.  
Somewhere beyond our windows shone the world.  
The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.

And time went by, drawn by slow horses.  
We did not ourselves know what the end was.

The Great Depression had entered our souls like fog.  
We had our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues.

But we did not ourselves know what the end was.  
People like us simply go on.  
We have our flaws, perhaps a few private virtues,  
But it is by blind chance only that we escape tragedy.

And there is no plot in that; it is devoid of poetry.

**Donald Justice, 1995**

### **from Let Us Now Praise Famous Men**

The land, pale fields, black cloudy woodlands, and the late lamps in the central streets of the rare and inexpiable cities: New Orleans; Birmingham; whose facades stand naked in the metal light of their fear:

the land, in its largeness: stretches: is stretched:

it is stretched like that hollow and quietness of water that is formed at the root of a making wave, and it waits: not a leaf, not a grass blade, trembles even: but is stretched: stretched: stretched: and waits (the blood stream stridence meanwhile coursing): waits (the whippoorwill has established in a much nearer tree; one almost knows the feathers that work at his larynx; but he is uncertain):

not suddenly, nor with fright, but certainly with no line of crossing, no beginning, there has been a change in the air, a crisis passed in sleep; for now, that in the same instant it seems was so enchanted still, there is a nearly noiseless trembling of every leaf of the vegetation of all this part of the world, so delicate a turning in fright of sleep as that needle which records a minute disturbance on the far side of the thick planet, and so nearly noiseless, yet so unanimous, it is the indistinguishable and whispered sigh of all the generations of the dead, the crumbling of a world-long wave so distant, that one yard more removed, could not be audible:

yet that shuddering: that of a body hopeless standing, though the air is mild: does not break, but rather intensifies the waiting (this is happening not only here but in a stripe, a few miles wide, straight up through Canada, and down the Andes): the air darkens to black violet, and the stars refresh:

and casually, and with rending triumph, the signal is delivered on the dusk: the sure wild glittering yell of a rooster: light on a lifted sword.

He is some distance away, it seems infinite miles, the utmost ledge of the universe, to the east. He has a little while ago awakened, full awake immediately, and intensely aware, as one wakes and is aware, in the total darkness, of someone alien in the room, and his round eye has sharpened on the dark a fierce button, the head cocked, and whole being listening; what is it: what is it: tightening with excitement and premonition, a sort of joyful fear, the hackles roughed with it:

And with the brusqueness of an epileptic seizure a power much stronger than himself has taken him whole; it must be the voice of another rooster, who received it from another, and so to the brim of the continent, where the first, their bright backs warm and splendid in the light, are stabbing at corn; he is taken whole; he clenches the whole strength of his body and his fiery soul into one fist, and strives it at the sky, all his strength shuddering:

and it is heard: and distant though it is, it cleaves in its full fortissimo: so valiant a noise as rescuing bugle, or tenor broke his throat for: and no answer:

and then the answer: deep, steep back behind beneath my prostrated head:

(the violet grays; the gray walks through the walls) silence:

the whippoorwill; pleading; deploring:

the first again, much fiercer:

and, almost interrupting him, a third, beyond the woods:

('whip-pawill! whipp-awilll!')

The second again; at last, our blond, his androgynous voice chortling with fake confidence: a fourth: the first (the country is taking shape): another: now the third (it is emerging like a print in a tank; I see distinctly the walls of the room, and on

the earth the medallioned cities): three new ones now: another: now another: strain on their horn toes and shout.

**James Agee, 1941**

### **Joe Hill**

I dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night  
Alive as you and me  
Says I, "But Joe, you're ten years dead,"  
"I never died," says he, "I never died," says he.

"In Salt Lake, Joe, by God," says I  
Him standing by my bed,  
"They framed you on a murder charge."  
Says Joe, "But I ain't dead," says Joe, "But I ain't dead."

"The copper bosses shot you, Joe,  
They killed you, Joe," says I.  
"Takes more than guns to kill a man,"  
Says Joe, "I didn't die," says Joe, "I didn't die."

And standing there as big as life  
And smiling with his eyes  
Joe says, "What they forgot to kill  
Went on to organize, went on to organize."

"Joe Hill ain't dead," he says to me,  
"Joe Hill ain't never died.  
Where workingmen are out on strike  
Joe Hill is at their side, Joe Hill is at their side."

"From San Diego up to Maine  
In every mine and mill  
Where workers strike and organize,"  
Says he, "You'll find Joe Hill," says he, "You'll find Joe Hill."

**Earl Robinson, 1936**

## Two Tramps in Mud Time

Out of the mud two strangers came  
And caught me splitting wood in the yard,  
And one of them put me off my aim  
By hailing cheerily "Hit them hard!"  
I knew pretty well why he had dropped behind  
And let the other go on a way.  
I knew pretty well what he had in mind:  
He wanted to take my job for pay.

Good blocks of oak it was I split,  
As large around as the chopping block;  
And every piece I squarely hit  
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.  
The blows that a life of self-control  
Spares to strike for the common good,  
That day, giving a loose to my soul,  
I spent on the unimportant wood.

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.  
You know how it is with an April day  
When the sun is out and the wind is still,  
You're one month on in the middle of May.  
But if you so much as dare to speak,  
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,  
A wind comes off a frozen peak,  
And you're two months back in the middle of March.

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight  
And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume,  
His song so pitched as not to excite  
A single flower as yet to bloom.  
It is snowing a flake; and he half knew  
Winter was only playing possum.  
Except in color he isn't blue,  
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom.

The water for which we may have to look  
In summertime with a witching wand,  
In every wheelrut's now a brook,  
In every print of a hoof a pond.

Be glad of water, but don't forget  
The lurking frost in the earth beneath  
That will steal forth after the sun is set  
And show on the water its crystal teeth.

The time when most I loved my task  
The two must make me love it more  
By coming with what they came to ask.  
You'd think I never had felt before  
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,  
The grip of earth on outspread feet,  
The life of muscles rocking soft  
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

Out of the wood two hulking tramps  
(From sleeping God knows where last night,  
But not long since in the lumber camps).  
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.  
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,  
The judged me by their appropriate tool.  
Except as a fellow handled an ax  
They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.  
They knew they had but to stay their stay  
And all their logic would fill my head:  
As that I had no right to play  
With what was another man's work for gain.  
My right might be love but theirs was need.  
And where the two exist in twain  
Theirs was the better right—agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation  
As my two eyes make one in sight.  
Only where love and need are one,  
And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
Is the deed ever really done  
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Robert Frost, 1936

## Rough

My parents kept me from children who were rough  
and who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes.  
Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street  
And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron  
And their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.  
I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys  
Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.

They were lithe, they sprang out behind hedges  
Like dogs to bark at our world. They threw mud  
And I looked another way, pretending to smile,  
I longed to forgive them, yet they never smiled.

**Stephen Spender, 1932**

## Express

After the first powerful, plain manifesto  
The black statement of pistons, without more fuss  
But gliding like a queen, she leaves the station.  
Without bowing and with restrained unconcern  
She passes the houses which humbly crowd outside,  
The gasworks, and at last the heavy page  
Of death, printed by gravestones in the cemetery.  
Beyond the town, there lies the open country  
Where, gathering speed, she acquires mystery,  
The luminous self-possession of ships on ocean.

It is now she begins to sing—at first quite low  
Then loud, and at last with a jazzy madness—  
The song of her whistle screaming at curves,  
Of deafening tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts.  
And always light, aerial, underneath,

Retreats the elate metre of her wheels.  
Streaming through metal landscapes on her lines,  
She plunges new eras of white happiness,  
Where speed throws up strange shapes, broad curves  
And parallels clean like trajectories from guns.

At last, further than Edinburgh or Rome,  
Beyond the crest of the world, she reaches night  
Where only a low stream-line brightness  
Of phosphorus on the tossing hills is light.  
Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced,

Wrapt in her music no bird song, no, nor bough  
Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal.

**Stephen Spender, 1932**

## **Slough**

Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!  
It isn't fit for humans now,  
There isn't grass to graze a cow.  
Swarm over, Death!

Come, bombs and blow to smithereens  
Those air-conditioned, bright canteens,  
Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans,  
Tinned minds, tinned breath.

Mess up the mess they call a town-  
A house for ninety-seven down  
And once a week a half a crown  
For twenty years.

And get that man with double chin  
Who'll always cheat and always win,

Who washes his repulsive skin  
In women's tears:

And smash his desk of polished oak  
And smash his hands so used to stroke  
And stop his boring dirty joke  
And make him yell.

But spare the bald young clerks who add  
The profits of the stinking cad;  
It's not their fault that they are mad,  
They've tasted Hell.

It's not their fault they do not know  
The birdsong from the radio,  
It's not their fault they often go  
To Maidenhead

And talk of sport and makes of cars  
In various bogus-Tudor bars  
And daren't look up and see the stars  
But belch instead.

In labour-saving homes, with care  
Their wives frizz out peroxide hair  
And dry it in synthetic air  
And paint their nails.

Come, friendly bombs and fall on Slough  
To get it ready for the plough.  
The cabbages are coming now;  
The earth exhales.

**John Betjeman, 1937**

### God Bless the Child

Them that's got shall have  
Them that's not shall lose  
So the Bible said and it still is news  
Mama may have, Papa may have  
But God bless the child that's got his own  
That's got his own

Yes, the strong gets more  
While the weak ones fade  
Empty pockets don't ever make the grade  
Mama may have, Papa may have  
But God bless the child that's got his own  
That's got his own

Money, you've got lots of friends  
Crowding round the door  
When you're gone, spending ends  
They don't come no more  
Rich relations give  
Crust of bread and such  
You can help yourself  
But don't take too much  
Mama may have, Papa may have  
But God bless the child that's got his own  
That's got his own

Mama may have, Papa may have  
But God bless the child that's got his own  
That's got his own

He just don't worry 'bout nothin'  
'Cause he's got his own

**Billie Holiday and  
Arthur Herzog, Jr., 1939**