

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?

Pantom 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
Spare 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**