

Songs for Folks in a Fix

A Chapbook

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Author's Note

This chapbook celebrates solidarity with the marginalized, the rootless, the dispossessed—those for whom the struggle for dignity is a way of life. Three of the poems—“World on the Run,” “Not My Problem Joe,” and “Beggars Would Ride”—are song lyrics. These additional poems have been previously published:

“La Lucha Continua” in *Blue Collar Review*

“Jerry” in *THEMA*

“For the Stonecarvers of Barre, Vermont” in *Last Leaves* and *Blue Collar Review*

“Le Combattant Espagnol” in *Adirondack Review*

“Crow” in *The Five-Two*

“Song for Rosa” in *Mediterranean Poetry*

“The Woman with the Hoe” in *Bloom*.

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La Lucha Continúa

Words for music perhaps.

We have sung them in crowded rooms
where kids strummed guitars
and whisky drinkers waited too politely
to return to the piped-in menu
of danceable tunes

Sung them on frantic streets
where the suits rushed by
and people with ratty shoes in Union Square,
the old Red Square,
would toss us change sometimes
for smokes and beer

Songs for folks in a fix,
one way or another, who lacking bread
are on the hunt for cake,
who back the surefire winner and shake
their heads each Monday when, once again,
it's not their time

Good Friday, 2011

I cannot not drive him to East Austin.
He could roll or kill or infect me it happens sometimes
but he is blind and black and exuberant in distress.
I pick him up tapping his cane near Thundercloud Subs

In the twenty-minute ride I learn the following:
He comes from Kansas City his name is Nate
He can tell it's the 23 Bus by the sound of the engine
He works as a trainer sometimes, Guide Dogs for
the Blind but he's not working now they've run out of puppies.
Yes he has always been blind—"I'm not sure
I'm black"—cackling as he says this touching my arm.
He knows a way to avoid the Fifth Street traffic—
"Are we at the corner yet turn left"—he needs
eighteen dollars today or they'll kick him out
but don't give him any money in front of the house.

I hand him two fives and a ten "Yes, that's the ten"
and drop him a block away from a pack of his pals
shaking hands with one eye on the rearview mirror
and easing the truck away just in time.

Stop Light

Darker than café con leche, leather skin.
Eyes rheumy as sea spit at eventide.
Flak jacket, crutches, leg gone at the knee.
He takes the dollar asking,
“Have you heard this one?
Whaddya call a midget psychic escaped
from jail?” The spit eyes crinkle.
“Small medium at large.”

Before the light changes he throws me
another. “Guy writes his ma. Says, Ma,
I’m on the street, can you send me something?
Get on the sidewalk, she writes,
you’ll get hit by a car.”
Like café con leche, but darker,
Working the line.

Jerry

“Happiness is a cheeseburger” reads the sign.
A giant with blazing eyes, an exuberant beard,
like a cross between Grizzly Adams and a time-tossed Viking
just making the turn from pillage to cadge.

We trade names, a rare civility at these junctures,
and he says, “Need those double A batteries for my
transistor radio. You know God and Satan’s demons
are at war in the world. My radio’s going all night,
keeps the demons away.”

He takes the bill cheerfully—“We really appreciate it”—
then adds, by way of explanation, “I’m a Christian.”
I wonder if “we” means a local partner or
an ethereal comrade in the Archangel’s army.
OK by me either way. Let the car behind me get him
that burger. You’re fighting Satan with batteries,
you got my vote.

Homeless in December

I wonder if under the trestle the wind slows down
so he can huddle tight as an ice ball
till morning comes

I wonder if the sun descending will dance to his cavern
and if he will smile to see it, like a light
in the hall

I wonder if the 2AM freight will rouse him briefly
and if the coats he has gathered about him
will repel the cinders

I wonder if the shopping cart will be there in the morning
and the vagrant bits he has left there, untouched
by fortune

I wonder could he imagine himself as the vanishing point
of a landscape beautifully composed when observed
from afar



Photograph by Jeanne Wilkinson for Rattle Ekphrastic Challenge, December 2023

How Not to Talk to Old People

“Are you retired yet?” That foul word *retire*, from the French for “retreat,” has almost the sting of a waitress’s patronizing “Sweetie.”

Do young folks suppose, with your paycheck gone, your back no longer up to pitching hay, that you see the lack of work as a reward? As if the point of fifty years’ labor is to measure out your life in watered highballs or doze over acrostics, petting the dog? News flash, kids. When I’m ready to retreat you will read it in granite: *Aquí reposa* and then my name.

May whoever orders these things hear my prayer. I do not ask to leave the vineyard early. I am not a leaf, its spunk and chlorophyll gone, dropping gentle to the forest floor; nor Ulysses seeking a better world. I am for now, Sweetie, not done with this one.

Brooklyn Bridge

How many workers fell as the towers rose?
Did the J R Roebling Company keep score?
Did the city fathers, cheerleading Progress,
honor those immigrant bones, reveal
to gawking Iowans what it cost
to make that eloquent span
a postcard icon?

You who are settled now in Gotham's bosom,
do you think of that vaporous tally, that smear
of names, winking from the Gothic towers
to tell generations on
that we bled so this city might
dazzle the world?

That you might, a century on, point out the span
to a visitor from muscled Chicago
and say that here my ancestors stirred the concrete,
mopped their brows at noon
300 feet above the river,

and fell to Brooklyn's pavement, those luckless few
the blameless and ill-begotten to become
numbers without names
in the history of America.

For the Stonecarvers of Barre, Vermont

Hunger brought you here.
From the foothills of the Alps to granite Vermont
you came for steady work, *pane sicuro*,
to put bread on the table
and keep landlords from the door.

In Viggiù you worked outdoors,
showing your children proudly where your *scalpello*
had freed from rock the statues of Milan's Duomo.
In Barre the weather ruled. In airless rooms
power drills vaporized stone, surrendering you at fifty
to the *mal d'America*.

Trapped in that silica storm,
did you dream of chestnut tagliatelle and Grana Padano?
Did you read *Il Proletario*, sing "Bandiera Rossa,"
ask San Clemente to carry you home
before the fog had swallowed your last breath?

Labor choked you silent
but the song of the *scalpellini* rings out still
all across your adopted country
from angels in churchyards, Madonnas in grottoes,
olive branches encircling cenotaphs,
fish and Cupids gracing bistro fountains.

Pane sicuro you sought
and in seeking it brought beauty
to places where they do not know your name,
do not understand that stone was bread,
have not heard the chanting of labor's children
or the sound of granite dust taking a life.

Rimpiattino

The Uffizi Palace courtyard in high tourist season. In a two-hour line to see the Botticellis, boredom is relieved by hide-and-seek, or what in Florence they call *rimpiattino*.

The hiders in this case are African vendors, displaying their goods on collapsible tables and gesturing to the museum goers in the cries of the *souk*. The seekers are a pair of languorous cops,

still called *carabinieri* though they carry no rifles. They stroll into the plaza twice an hour, with the demeanor less of guardians than of boulevardiers, and the Africans, at their approach,

instantly scatter. Throwing wind-up toys and fake Guggis into duffel bags, they fold the tables quickly and slip behind columns until the strollers, pretending to look for them, pass by.

With the cops out of sight the tables go up again, the bazaar reopens, and the show is run again in half an hour. The dance is theatrically genteel. In less public parts of the city, not so much.

The darkening of postcard country is not to everyone's taste, and there are cries from the Right for a purified Italy. The Left calls for a rainbow coalition— a *lotta di mille colori* against racist

oppression. The immigrants, starved at home, say they just want to work. They have come to Dante's Italy, one might observe, for the same reason the *scalpellini* went to Vermont.

Le Combattant Espagnol

In a small museum in the Languedoc town of Castres
so enamored of Goya that it takes his name
a huge canvas hangs in a backroom gallery
awaiting the visitor who dutifully follows his guidebook
to a humdrum Picasso on the adjacent wall.

The painter, unknown to me, is one Javier Bueno.
His subject is a friend, a peasant soldier
with a darkly elegant name, Nazario Cuartero,
who somewhere near Madrid in 1938
fell for the Republic to a Fascist bullet.

You notice first the expression of dumb surprise
as he contemplates his hand, a massive fan,
the blood coursing jagged into his poncho,
the eyes star-struck, glassy, dead already,
stunned that despite his prayers it ends this way.

The black spot on his temple tells the story
while the cloth, falling in folds, and the head bent low
hint that Bueno has imagined a wind from Calvary
singing through the reeds of a Spanish hillside
to bear this luckless peasant from his luckless land.

He stands upon a wasteland dark in shadow,
his bare elephant feet each missing a toe,
as if on the point of ascending into heaven
he denies the Caudillo's opium and Rome's complicity
to pledge his final moments to the earth

where his fathers tore the soil
for their betters' enrichment
and he dreamed the dream of ages
for the struggle to end.



Waiting

I dreamed of you last night, Robert Jordan,
your body against the rock, your heartbeat thudding
like faint artillery. In your head the scent of pine,
a *copa*, Maria's hair. Your hand on the barrel tightens
as you wait, fighting sleep, for the enemy advance.

Frozen in that position for eighty years, you are
with us still. Hero they called you and dreamer.
It did not matter so long as the people were served.
With *flores y canciones* they remember you now
as one of them, the voiceless, those who wait.

We are dreaming of you still, Robert Jordan,
not as a writer's fancy but a blood-strong
memory, a pillar not yet crumbled of those wrecked
years. Europe's last moment and America's too
to imagine the struggle for freedom as romance.

Crow

*On the murder of the poet Peppino Marotto
in his home town of Orgosolo, Sardinia*

An old man of regular habits, he walked every morning
to the corner, took coffee and a paper, fed a dog
like the one who scattered wolves when he was a boy.
The shadow of a crow above his shoulder.

He became a communist because in 1945 children
were starving. A poet because that was the voice
of this land. A singer because he could or had to.
These roles gave him a certain distinction.

The reports said five or six shots. Identity and motive
were unknown. Perhaps he knew his killer
or knew of him. Perhaps it was a distant male relation
of someone he had offended long ago.

The answer is being washed away just now by two
carabinieri with fire hoses as the dog makes its way
to another table in a town whose name looks like pride
and crows outlive old men.

When I Die

When I die, don't say a mass for me
but remember me as your friend
and bring me a flower
a flower big and red the color of blood

When I die, don't think of me as dead.
Tell everyone what I told you
and don't feel alone.
Even in the grave I will not leave you

When I die, sing my songs
Don't forget them. Sing them for others
and think of me sometimes
who died on a cross, without a voice, for this land

When I die, bring me a flower
a flower big and red the color of blood

My English version of "Quannu Moru," by Sicilian folksinger Rosa Balistreri (1927-1990)



Song for Rosa

Where are you singing tonight, Rosa Balistreri?
Where is it echoing now, that voice of the voiceless?
Can we hear it in Licata, in the cries of the market,
where the sea, jealous lover, caresses the coast,
where the bellies are empty and promises are full,
where honor is a shower of stones,
where those who saw into your gypsy heart
gave your voice its incandescence?

Where are you singing tonight, Rosa Balistreri?
Can we hear you at the Café Dante,
where comrades first gave you hope
in that spring where everyone had a dream?
Can we hear you in Palermo, where you returned,
prodigal daughter, redeemed by fame?
Can we hear you in Licata? Are there posters
on the corner where you worked?

You asked us to remember you “When I Die,”
to remember the withered flowers and low voices,
to listen to the old struggle, darkened by breezes,
and we responded: Yes, we will remember.
We will hear you in the Little Sparrow’s cafes,
in the alleys of Lisboa where Amalia sang,
in the Florentine piazzas, where the people sang,
and in the streets of Licata, where girls sing still.

Where are you singing tonight, Rosa Balistreri?
Send me some tickets on the wind.
I will bring you the world.

The Woman with the Hoe

She is singing a song she does not know is a song,
dropping the seeds in rows, a pinch to a foot,
wiping her face and neck with a torn bandana.
She catches a rattle of squirrels, a robin's whisper,
and answers in three-note phrases, going nowhere
in particular but nuzzling into her heart,
a mother's croon. *La la la* she sings, going
up and down scales, like a child going
up and down stairs oblivious of fatigue.

She handles the hoe with deference, working
each row slowly, not hacking as if at a snake
but breaking clods gingerly, lest an earthworm
or forgotten memento be the victim of haste.
Beans will be good this year, the almanac says,
and the three notes *la la la* sing *cassoulet*,
the old man's favorite before sickness took him.

In Millet's painting *The Gleaners*, peasant women
bend over, picking through the leavings of a landowner's
harvest. This woman, in her own field, is not bending
over. She is singing *la la la*, straight up with the hoe.



Conundrum

When he died, their father had two requests.

First: feel the loneliness of those who roam
the earth and treat as you would honored guests
those seeking food or shelter in your home.

Then: shun the company of wayward men,
their passions fevered and compunctions cold,
who drag their spoils to a wolfish den
and pave the road to Hell with bricks of gold.

His children nodded, vowed, until one day
a bandit scarred with living found their door
to ask for sanctuary from the fray
and spend a night upon their kitchen floor.

The puzzle's not to say which charge is true
but with a starving thief what would *you* do?

Not My Problem, Joe

There's a wreck on 51.
Some damn fool jumped the gun
The EMTs are shooting the breeze
on the long midnight run
out to Highway 51

There's a boy caught on the wire
cursing friendly fire
and the ghastly bird hears every word
snaking down the gyre
to the boy caught on the wire

There's a woman on the run
from a lover with a gun
He vents his rage at the empty cage
as she hides from the sun
the woman on the run

The wolf looks at the sheep
as the ragged children weep.
With bloody palms they beg for alms
while the shepherd begs for sleep
and the wolf looks at the sheep

But it's not my problem, Joe
It's not my problem, no
I'm busy today, have you asked Ray
I got somewhere to go
and it's not my problem, Joe

World on the Run

Let's drink to the ones with time on their hands
vagabond lovers with reckless plans
the carny, the drifter, the confidence man
Let's drink to a world on the run

Let's drink to the ones with hounds at their heels
palmers of aces and salters of fields
slick operators with dubious deals
and fabulous guarantees

Let's drink to the ones with stars in their eyes
who run up the banners and block out the cries
of the good-hearted women and fortunate guys
paying the price to be free

Let's drink to the ones with nothing to lose
tin pan alley cats faking the blues
brokedown palace guards lacing the booze
planning for yesterday

Let's drink to the mill girl out on the town
with the markets up and the plants shut down
checking her makeup, adjusting her crown
for a punk who will sell her out cold

Let's drink to the one who sits all alone
in the backyard weeds of his childhood home
watching the fireflies dance to the tune
of you can't go home any more

Let's drink to the ones who reached for the light
Let's drink to the ones who stayed in the fight
Let's drink to the candle that won't last the night
Let's drink to a world on the run

Beggars Would Ride

If I had a hammer and some three penny nails
I'd knock down the billboards and board up the jails
pitch me a tent on the broad open plain
to shield desperados from rain

If I had my way and a bushel of seeds
I would sow this whole valley with renegade weeds
blossoms so big and the colors so bright
they would stagger the armies of night

They say it's not your land, they say it's not mine
They warn you to heed the No Trespassing sign
but who owns the river and who owns the air?
Ask the lawyers snug in their lair

Where are the grasses that once lined the trails?
Where are the breezes that lifted our sails?
In a boardroom safe under padlock and key
protected from you and from me

I looked for a flower of impossible blue
I listened for tower bells ringing out true
I wished for a horse that had never been tied
If wishes were horses beggars would ride

As the Cross Bends

When the sailor tossed on tropical waves
Scans weary the depths of night
He sighs to find in the winding stars
The Southern Cross pearl bright.

At midnight the cross begins to bend
As the dizzying world shifts course
And a starry finger upon the dial
Rewinds the universe

Though no bell rings glad tidings then
All sailors understand
That the worst of the dark is passing
And the watcher's rest is at hand

May workers and watchers then take heart
And trust that the cross may bend
May they look to the midnight passing
And to joy at dawn in the end

*My verse rendition of Eugene V. Debs's famous address to the court
before beginning his prison sentence for sedition, 1918.*

