

MAG CITY 14

—Edwin Denby Issue—



FOR RENT
FURNISHED ROOMS
400 South STERLING ST.
400 MADISON AVE.
Phone MA 8-3798



MAG CITY 14

—Edwin Denby Issue—

The Sonntag Gang, A Play Opera	1
Esau and the Angel96
Interview by Mark Hillringhouse	101

Photographs by Rudy Burckhardt on cover, opposite page 1, on 95 & 119
Photograph on page 100 by Mark Hillringhouse
Drawing on back cover by Alex Katz

For their help in making this issue possible we thank:
Rudy Burckhardt, Ron Padgett, Katie Schneeman, Nellie Villegas,
Annabel Levitt and special thanks to Edwin Denby and Alex Katz.

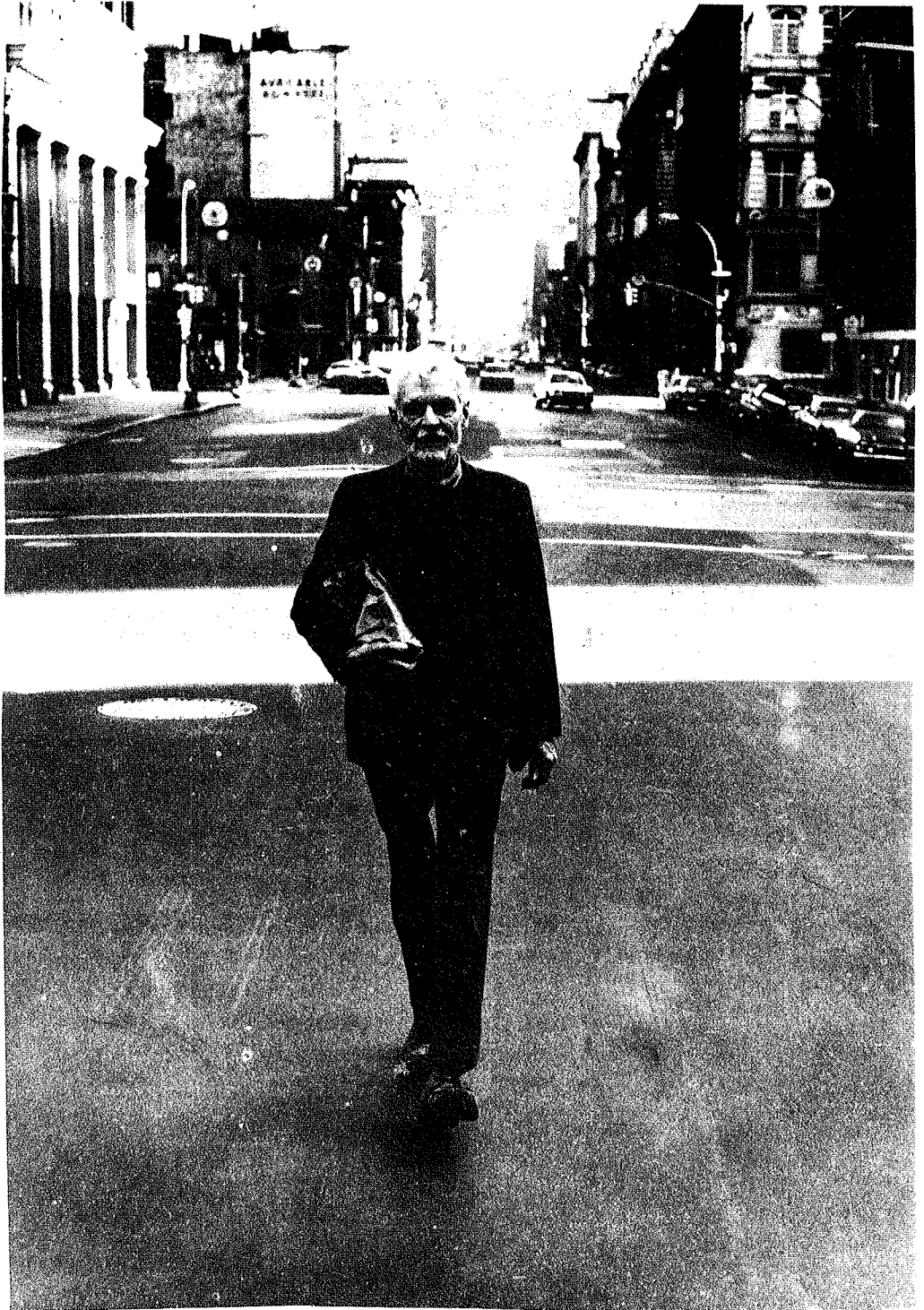
Editors: Gary Lenhart
Michael Scholnick
Greg Masters

Mag City
437 E. 12 St. #26
NYC, NY 10009

Made possible in part by a grant from the Coordinating
Council of Literary Magazines which it has made through
funds received from the NEA and NYSCA.

Copyright (c) 1983. All rights revert to authors & artists.

\$3



The Sonntag Gang
a nineteenth century legend

A PLAY OPERA

ACT ONE

Shallow stage.

Curtain. Left half (seen from front) is curtain color of sacking; right half is backdrop of board shack, standing under cotton tree with low Sierra in background, effect dusty. In front of shack stands practicable small step and porch, with little roof on two posts. Morning light. SUSAN BOWLES, pioneer, thirty years old, sits on step, sewing. SUSIE BOWLES, eight, stands in angle, eating carrot with one hand, and holding old white mongrel with the other by a rope, tightly.

Susan

(Sung)

I've got the floor scrubbed, and the bread in the oven with the beans. And now there ain't any more to do till Earle comes home and the menfolks won't be back till it's near night.

So Sister Susie'll get a new dress
A new dress for my little jackrabbit
A pretty little calico for Susie
Who likes carrots just like the rabbits do.

Susie

(Spoken)

I ain't no jackrabbit. I'm a girl.

Susan

(Sung)

Ain't it quiet and Sunday like with the menfolks all gone, and all the time, all the time, all the time till they've their shootin' done and come back home ready for beans and Earle to talk about Jackrabbitday. Jackrabbitday, Jackrabbitday,

You're pa's gone ahuntin
The ol' granpa rabbit
With his jumpy leg and his sour old puss,
His family's too big and he eats our stuff because it's easy,
He's just an ol' tramp.

Susie

(Spoken)

And that's where he gets stung.
(She throws away carrot and holds
on to patient dog with both hands)

Susan

(Sung)

It sure is a nice place, this little town. We've got a shack to live in and a good bit of land. The land ain't much for farmin but the men folks say it will be when they get their irrigation finished and we'll pay up someday and own it for our own, Earle's a good worker, and we'll stick and Sister Susie'll get another kid brother to play with for the one she lost. Yes I'm thinkin' the worst is over, yes the worst times is past now.

Susie

(Spoken)

If I didn't hold Royal just as hard as this he'd be off huntin' jackrabbits like live lightnin'. Pa told me as how I ought to hold him, and that's what I'm about.

Susan

(Sung)

(During speech of Susie's)

Hmm. Hmmmm hmmm.

(After speech)

—another kid brother to play with for the one she lost. It's a good fair country though I weren't born here, and the folks are a good sort. I bet the men are skylarkin in the hills, joshin little Merkmeyer for missin' the ol' rabbit last year that scared him by runnin' right at him so he thought it was a rattler. He said he heard that rabbit rattle its tail.

Susie

(Sung—to a tune of her own)

(Two or three times during Susan's
last speech, regardless)

Get a kid brother
Bring him up
Wipe his face
And wash his cup.

(Enter crossing stage, RHEBA MERKMEYER, forty, vigorous; followed shortly by ELIZABETH, her sister, a few years younger, weak)

Rheba

(Spoken during music)

Susan Bowles, listen to me, listen to what I'm goin' to say to you. I'm troubled in my mind. I'm thinkin' that it might yet happen. I've seen injustice in Kansas and in Troy, New York, and I'm thinkin' I'll see a bigger piece of it right here in Johnson, California. Here's my sister Elizabeth won't believe me, but she's a weak sort of woman who couldn't keep her husband either.

Elizabeth

(Spoken during music)

Rheba, they wouldn't do it, it's not a right thing to do. Susan tell her that it couldn't be, the S. P. people wouldn't do it to the likes of us.

Susan

(Sung)

I was just settin' thinkin' of your husband, Rheba, little Merkmeyer, how he seen a rattler rabbit and run, he was standin'—

(From here on simultaneous with first part of Rheba's following speech)

—out on the big hill behind a sage bush and he got scared of an old jackrabbit.

(From here on no music)

Rheba

(Spoken)

They'll do it to us same as they would to a Greaser if they can and they can. They've posted notice and it's according to law and if it's the rankest kind of thieving they can do it now. They can turn us out now the land is worth stealin'.

Listen, the S. P. Railway had this land when nobody lived here. They sold it to us at a fair price and on easy terms. But in that contract there was a little joker. If the land was to be worth more in ten years and we hadn't paid it up by that time, they could raise the price, raise it to ten times what it was when we moved in. And demand full payment in six months. And that's what I'll bet they'll do, raise the price on us now we've made the ground worth it, raise the price and drive us out cause we can't pay it. They'll keep what we paid already and our shacks and roads and irrigation works and sell the whole town over again besides.

Susan

Rheba Merkmeyer, always ready for an injustice, that's what Earle says, Rheba expects there's a joker about gettin' in to Heaven, after you've been good all your life, Ol Saint Peter'll point to a joker in the contract you didn't know about.

Elizabeth

(From here on perhaps spoken)

Well it's true what sister Rheba says, and she's seen a heap of sorrow, too.

Susan

Listen Rheba, they might raise the price on this land if we could pay; or if there was gold here or diamonds, but there ain't. There's only the same old corn and turnips they've got everywhere else, and if we can pay at the rate we've been payin' it's all we can do, Lord a mercy, it's almost a bit more, ain't it so.

Elizabeth

Well, you're right there, Susan Bowles is right, ain't she, Rheba.

Rheba

I'm a goin' down the gulch to find the colt; like as not he's given himself a colic eatin' devil grass.

(Exit)

Susan

Goodbye, Rheba Merkmeyer.

Elizabeth

Well, I hope nothing happens.

Susan

I hope so too.

(Curtain—also of brown sacking—descends covering the half stage, backdrop and prop just used. Curtain up on other half showing backdrop of hillside, a few sagebrushes, two or three laurels in a clump. About ten MEN seated, FARMERS with guns, some WESTERN. Same light, or noon.)

(YOUNG MAN sings real Texas song, loud, without shading)

Texas

The sun was sinking in the west
And fell with lingring ray
Through the branches of the forest
Where the dying ranger lay.
Neath the shade of a palmetto
And the sunset silvery sky
Far away from his home in Texas
They laid him down to die.

Hi-yi -whoopie - yippi - yappi - yi - yi - yay.

Frank Sonntag

(35, quiet, healthy, not married)

(Spoken)

That ought to scare them jackrabbits out of a year's growth, Texas.

(The scene is all spoken till indicated)

Texas

California rabbits ain't nothin' but tenderfeet. Down in Texas we stand
our Jacks a barrel of liquor before startin', so as to give 'em an even
chance against a rangerboy.

Pete Sonntag

(25, dashing)

I guess you cowpunchers are better at ketchin' rabbits than ketchin'
anything else, like girls for instance.

Texas

Say, Pete Sonntag, what do you mean. Spit it out straight, or I'll blast
it out of you by Judas.

Pete

They tell me up at Tike's Barrow how a Texas kid came up to see
Bessie, but when she says, How much have you got on you, he didn't
have six bits left in his pocket. So's he rode back home again, glum
as a peckerwood.

Texas

You slickedup dirty tin horn dealer, next time I'll catch you slippin' out
that extra ace, and then Bessie won't have to buy no more gold watches
and chains, cause there won't be no Pete Sonntag left, for her to hang
'em on, sure as I'm a Texian.

Pete

When you're quick enough to catch me handlin' that ace, I'll pass on my watch to you, Texas, with Bessie's compliments.

Texas

Someday you're goin' to do one dirty trick too many, Pete, I'm a warnin' you, Pete Sonntag.

Frank

I guess my brother Pete is just too shinin' handsome. It's like enough to addle his brain now and then, like he got a sunstroke. But if he tries any dirty tricks around here, he knows what's comin' to him. We settled that back in Salt Lake eight years ago. Jeez, you ought have seen him then. Seventeen years old, with a face like peaches and cream and the women ready to plug each other for his sweet sake. The rest of us hog-faced critters just haven't to cope with so much luck as him.

A Man

How do you do it, Pete, geez I'm a goodlooker myself and I don't get no gold watches for it.

Pete

I just stand and let the women come round
I just look at them and they feel like they drown.

No woman in the world is worth keepin'
Soon as I get rid of one another comes creepin'.

Show me the high-stepper I can't ride
When she feels my spurs, she gets tears in her eyes.

A woman ain't got no feelings at all
When I treat 'em rough they hug me and they bawl.

I give 'em a smile when there's nothing better on my mind
I know what they're good for when I feel inclined.

But I don't go soft all through when she turns up her face—
The rest of you ain't men enough to keep 'em in their place.

Another Man

(Spoken)

The best luck you've got, kid, is that brother of yours to keep your ears back.

Pete

I know what's good for me.

(Exit)

Old Man

Never saw a boaster yet was any good cept with the police to back him up.

Another Man

Say, who's seen Merkmeyer?

Another

Left him over there in the gully, two hours back, snorin' away.

Snorin'?

Another

Another

Guess Rheba kept him up ascoldin'.

Frank

Don't you kid yerself. Little Merkmeyer's got plenty o' kick in him. Him and Rheba get along better'n lots of doublebarreled woollies do.

All

(The following piece is divided up among
the whole group, freely)
(Sung, maybe some shouts)

I got a home, I got a wife
Ain't goin' roamin' no more
A derved old hog gruntin' round the kitchen door.
Rangin', rangin', them times was free
Jerked beef and croton coffee, that's what the boss gave you and me
But I got a farm in the valley that's most paid up;
With a wife who's a settin' at the door.
Some of us ain't got none yet,
But she's acomin' don't you fret
Cut-cut-cutah (hen and rooster noises imitated)
That's yours truly, that's what I got for breakfast
Sleepin' in a bed that's ourn for good
Nobody kin take it away
And no flees to fight either
In two or three years, you watch me,
William Kennedy, 270 acres,
Set down right in the State Record,
Nobody kin take it away
No boss to figger me out of me pay
No more sleepin' on the dry ground—lonely as a star in the sky
To kick me around, roamin' over seven States,
I've driv' my stakes, I've settled on a purty spot,
The purtiest spot in all of the United States.

All (Cont'd)

No boss but the little wife
And the darn potato-bug
The purtiest bug, the purtiest wife
The purtiest hog I seen in my life
The kid's acomin', the company I'll pay
Yippi—Nobody's goin' to take it away.

A Man

(Spoken)

Here's Abe Merkmeyer, all woke up like a dew washed daisy.

Another

(Spoken)

Say, Frank Sonntag give us the song about little Abe.

Frank

Sure.

Little Abe Merkmeyer, born in New York City,
Married in Albany, It shore was a pity,
He brought her a license, all wreathed up in smiles,
She took it and driv' him three thousand miles.

Chorus:

Out to California where the sagebrush grows,
Where the rabbits is a settin', and turnin' up their nose.

Rheba, she was an edicated woman,
She told him the way the rabbits steal, ain't hardly human,
She gave him a gun, and told him to go out and fight
Like an honest citizen standin' up for his rights.
Out in California where the sagebrush grows
Where the rabbits is a settin' and turnin' up their nose.

Little Abe never had no dirty habits
He could stand up to any ol' rabbit
The only two critters could make him quake
Were his big wife Rheba and a rattlesnake.
Out in California where the sagebrush grows
Where the rabbits are a settin' and turnin' up their nose.

Say, what's a matter, Abe lets out a yell,
You'd have thought it was Rheba come to give him hell,
Twas an' ol' jackrabbit came asnakin' up the trail
And he looked at Abe ferocious, and he rattled his tail
Yes, he went rattle rattle ferocious with his tail
Out in California, etc.

Abe

(Suiting gesture to words)

When he heard that rabbit tail rattle, well, I'll be blown,
Abe plumped on the ground and he rattled his own.
The jack up and ran for life, till he was out of breath—

Another Man

But I guess what Abe was rattlin', was his set of false teeth.

Chorus:

Out in California where the sagebrush grows,
Where the rabbits is a settin', and turnin' up their nose.

Another Man

Them jacks is pretty smart, they don't get stuck,
Let us hoe the garden, they eat the truck.
The S.P. Railroad's smarter than them
Once we've improved the desert, they take it back again.
Out in California where the sagebrush grows
Where the rabbits is a settin', and turnin' up their nose.

(The rest of this scene is spoken)

All

Take it back! Take them ranches back! We won't let 'em take it back.

Texas

I'll plug that S.P. Railroad so full of holes the passengers won't have
a square inch left to set on. They sold us the land, didn't they.

The Last Singer

They've got a legal right. That notice been posted about Boston Ben's place

Frank

I don't think they'd be skunks enough to try. Anyhow, what's the use of
talkin' about it. Let's get those damn jacks, them pests we can shoot
down leastways. You boys go right, and beat up toward the arroyo.

(Curtain as before comes down on this half
of stage. Goes up on other half, showing
same scene as the first. Chorus of WOMEN
in front of curtain, audience left. SUSAN,
ELIZABETH and ANOTHER WOMAN on
Susan's steps. SUSAN holdin' SUSIE. WOMEN
all looking in one direction, panicky)

Chorus

Oh ohh oh
oh ohhh
ohhhhh.

It's Black Bill
Look, he's driven her out
Look he's doing it.
What's anybody going to do
Where's somebody to help us
He'll shoot us if we try to stop him
It's Black Bill the sheriff, and those three men are his posse.

Susan

(Spoken)

Esther, you take little Susie while I go over and help old Mrs. Frazer. She's needin' someone. And get Liza here to quiet down, Black Bill's the kind that gets his nerve up when he hears an old maid screamin' like a baby.

(Exit)

(Piano)

Chorus

He's driven her out.
It's Black Bill and his possee
Look, he's pushin' her.
And old Mrs. Frazer, Boston Ben's ma, who don't understand it right.
The roof from over us, the roof from over us
What's anybody goin' to do now
He's yellin' and wavin' his gun, look
And the posse is nailin' up the door
Where's he goin'
What anybody goin' to do.
Oooh.

(ONE WOMAN comes forward and explains to audience, speaking. (Meanwhile ELIZABETH sobs hysterically now and then, also drums maybe.):)

The S. P. Railroad Company chose Jackrabbitday, when they knew the menfolks of Johnson would be far from town all day, to carry into effect a threat legally posted several months earlier. According to a clause in the sale of the land. The S. P. besides retaining the title to the land until the settlers had paid the full price, had the additional right to increase this price up to tenfold, should the land meanwhile increase in value. Invoking this clause, the company had posted notice of an increase in price of 300 percent, with the threat to evict for

One Woman (Cont'd)

nonpayment. This action was so obviously unjust, that the farmers had not taken the threat seriously. The company however sent the sheriff of San Jacinto, known as Black Bill, to evict one of the settlers, in order to establish a clear precedent. The women of Johnson were panicky and Black Bill posted further eviction notices.

(Re-enter SUSAN with MA FRAZER)

Susan

(Spoken)

Don't you fret Mrs. Frazer. You and Ben can come and stay with us till this clears up. Don't you fret. You'll have a home with Earle and me and Susie. Ben's not done anything, tain't his fault, surely not, don't you fret he'll be back, Ben's a good son to you, someone else done this for spite, but never you fret yourself, we'll take care of you both right well.

(To the chorus)

I wish the President of that Railroad Company could see her this way.

(Exit, with MA and another WOMAN from chorus)

(CHORUS shrinks, enter BLACK BILL)

Black Bill

(Spoken)

What are you women so scared about, I ain't hurtin' anybody. You've got six months to pay up. I'm just postin' notices, as it's my sworn duty to do, seein' as how I've been elected sheriff and U.S. marshall, it's my legal duty.

(Silence)

Three Women

(Quickly, each one sentence. Spoken)

That's a lie.

You're stealin' our homes from us.

You're a thief, Black Bill a plain thief.

(ELIZABETH screams: COOHHH)

Bill

(Takes out his gun)

You good-for-nothing lazy females! Who calls me a thief! That's contempt of court! I can put you in irons for that! Which one of you said it? It's thieves you are, squattin' on property that ain't yours, that you can't pay for, that you ain't intendin' to pay for, though you know it's agin the law of this State and the United States. Nobody's going to call me a thief and get away with it, and if you git my blood up you'll be seein' how tramps is treated in the sovereign State of California. Where's the Bowles shack? Let me through.

(Goes through, gets ready to nail notice
on Bowles porchpost)

(Re-enter SUSAN BOWLES)

Susan

You ain't going to nail that on this post, Black Bill.

(She stands in front of post)

Bill

Susan Bowles, get off'n that.

Susan

If you want to post that notice up, you'll have to drive the nail through
my livin' body.

Bill

Susan Bowles, I'm the law in this town. Right now I'm as good as God
Himself.

Susan

Black Bill, the law isn't meant to do an injustice with. If it isn't justice,
it isn't law.

Bill

By God, I'll drive this nail right through your head.

Susan

I'm waiting for that.

Bill

(To posse)

Drag her away.

(To Chorus)

Stand off, you.

(Shoots gun)

(Exit SUSAN and POSSE)

(From here on music and singing)

Chorus

Oooh ohoooh
ooohhh.

Ma Frazer

(Through door)
Ben, my son Ben. Where are you, hidin' from me, hidin' from my trouble
you don't see.

Chorus

ooh
They're going to drive us out, out of our own, out of everything we have
They'll take away what we have to live by
What will we live by
When they take it, when they take it, ooh
Here's Rheba, Rheba and Susan, don't you get him sorer, Rheba!

Rheba

(Enters with SUSAN)
Black Bill he wasn't handsome,
But he sure was tough
He waited for the day when the men was gone,
For the women he was brave enough.

He waited till the men were ahuntin'
And there wasn't a gun in town
With only a posse and a pair of six-shooters
He wasn't scared to ride 'em down.

Bill

(Also sung)
Rheba Merkmeyer, I've nailed one of them notices on your front porch.

Rheba

And I wonder could it have been this one.

(Holds up torn paper)

Bill

If you tore it down, Rheba, it's five years in prison and \$500 fine.

Rheba

Comin' to think of it, must have been the wind then, that blew it away
so gently.

Bill

I'll have you jailed.

Rheba

When you find a witness.

Bill

And your place will be sold, cause the notice was legally posted.

Rheba

And you'll be shot,
If our menfolks find you here
If you want to get out alive
You'd better get out now.

Bill

Nobody's going to scare me,
Nobody's better try
I'll do my duty here in Johnson
If every damn one of you die.

(From here on more or less simultaneously
with following song of Rheba)

Bill

I'm the law in this county,
If every damn one of you die
I'll do my duty here in Johnson
Or I'll know the reason why.

Nobody's going to stop me
Or tell me what I can do
You've got to take it and like it,
And you know it plenty, too.

I'm here to enforce law and order
You've got to take my say
I'll shoot anybody I got to
And you're the folks that'll pay.

Rheba

Black Bill, you yellowbellied coward
Just stay here just you try
When the men folks come with the rifles
You'll run like a rabbit or die.

You're going to scoot, you coward,
Yea, scared of what the men 'ould do
Cause they'll shred you with buck like a rabbit
And it's a death that's too good for you.

You can take our curses with you
They'll rot your innards away
You yellowbellied mongrel coward
With your soul in hell you'll pay.

Susan

(Alone)

Black Bill in your heart you know it's a lie,
Take down those signs for the S.P.
They want to rob us of the homes we made
Help us, you're a farmer the same as we.

Elizabeth

(Screams)

Ooohhh.

Bill
and
Rheba

Nobody's going to stop me, etc.
You're going to scoot, you coward, etc.

(After RHEBA's line:
Shred you with buck like a rabbit)

Another Woman

Shred you to bits with twenty shot
Puckerin your belly like a sieve on a pot
And you know every word of it's true.

(After RHEBA's line:
You can take our curses with you)

Other Woman

Curses from the homeless, the hungry, the sick
They'll choke in your mouth, choke you and stick,
You can never wash 'em away.

(At conclusion joining in)

Chorus

You cowards are scared to stay,
Scared of what you started today
With your soul in hell you'll pay.

Men of Posse

Let's get our horses and get away
You folks are the ones that'll pay
Don't want no massacre today.

(Exit BLACK BILL and POSSE)

(Curtain as usual over half of stage where the Bowles place was. Up on other side, showing backdrop interior of Sonntag cabin, lamplight and night outside, ten men sitting around, including SONNTAG BROTHERS, BOSTON BEN, TEXAS and LITTLE ABE. RHEBA is also there (or enters later).)

Frank Sonntag

(This whole scene is sung)

Here we are, able-bodied men, and there's forty seven of us here in Johnson, that built this town and made our homesteads, and what are we going to do when they want to drive us out of our ranches which we made.

Pete Sonntag

What'll we do?
I'll tell you what to do,
And it ain't sittin here
The likes of you
Like a bunch of scissorbills
Sittin on a fence
A hemmin and hawin
And none of 'em's got sense.
A pack of scared farmers
That's what you are
You let 'em knock you woozy
And beg 'em for some more,
But I'm going to show you
We're not the kind to quail:
I'll ride to San Jacinto
By the Spanish laurel trail
I'll walk in smilin
Into the Golden Gate Bar
And shoot Black Bill right in the face
That'll show 'em who we are.

Texas

Pete, you've got it in you
I sure had you wrong
And if there's any shootin
I'm going to come along
That buzzard's gettin a ticket to his home address
That'll take him to Hell by the first express.

Old Man

When the folks in San Jacinto see him bleedin on the floor
I guess he's not the kind they'll go in mournin for

Old Man (Cont'd)

But it seems most likely there'll be another cuss
Who'll stick Black Bill's badge on his vest—

Young Man

The next sheriff!
We'll scare him stiff.

Old Man

Who'll stick Black Bill's badge on his vest, and the S.P.'ll start a fuss.

Another

Sure, the S.P.'ll start a blazing fuss
And it won't be a help to getting the ranches back to us.

Pete

You're scared the whole pack of you
Every one of you but me
Plug him that's what I'm goin to do
And it's murder in the first degree.

I'm the only one here got any pride
And that's one thing I mean to keep
I won't let nobody say about me
They could drive me where they want like a damn sheep.

Ben

Shootin sheriffs ain't no good
They'd send in the army, sure they would
This ain't no wild Arizona hills
It's a State in the Union with all of them frills.

Pete

So they kick you out
Beat up your mother
You take it on the snout
And ask for another
If that's the kind you are, Boston Ben
You don't belong in Johnson, where there's men.

Ben

You act like you lived in a story book
Braggin your head off, like a two penny crook.

Pete

I ain't goin to have no cowards around
It's cowards like you that won't stand their ground.

Ben

Say, you whippersnapper, shut your face
Or I'll shut it for you right in this place.

Pete

Makin trouble, all you do is yell and shout
When I've beat you up, I'll throw you out.

Rheba

Stop crowin like a fool rooster, Pete
Don't you know it's the S. P. Railroad we've got to beat?

Frank

Looks like Pete is on the side of the S. P.
They don't want Ben here, neither does he,
But before you boys get started on your bout
Remember there ain't no Johnson left, cause we're all of us kicked out.

A Man

(This speech only is spoken)

Shootin a lone sheriff won't do much to the S. P. Railroad. According
to what I hear, they own half the State Legislature and the Governor
to boot.

Abe Merkmeyer

(Speaking)

I know something about that S. P. item.

(Singing)

My sister up in Frisco
She works in the office there
She says they handle a million dollars
Any month of the year.

And any old month so easy
On the night train to Santa Fe
They stack 20,000 in silver, she says,
The men out there for to pay.

Just for fun I've been afigurin'
How much we're supposed to owe,
Well, the whole town could buy the bloodhounds off
For a mere sixty thousand or so.

How them railroad financeers figure
It puzzles me for sure,
They're fixin' to strip the last shirt off our backs
But they'll endow an institution for the poor.

Abe Merkmeyer (Cont'd)

I guess every man knows his business,
You and me knows to milk a cow,
But if it's milkin money off a prickly pear
It's the S. P. directors knows how.

Like the boss in New York used to pay me
Six dollars a week sewin straps
One day he has to lower my wages
Cause he lost some money shootin craps.

When a railroad makes out its balance sheet
We don't understand how it's done,
But it's simple enough when they take it out on us
Cause they do it like a bandit with a gun.

Pete

Well I can't see what you're gettin at.

Rheba

Abe was just thinkin.

Pete

What's the use of that,
I suppose you think there ain't nothin to do
Cause your sister in Frisco can fix it up for you.

Rheba

Take that back you dirty little pup!

Abe

Shucks, Rheba, the kid's wrought up.

Old Man

Listen, Pete Sonntag, you're just spoilin for a scrap
If you want to shoot Black Bill go ahead but shut your trap.

Pete

I'll go the S. P. to the man on top
And I'll wring the money out of him, drop by drop.

Boston Ben

Looks to me like it's over
Hitch up to the load
Set mother on the wagon
And head on down the road.

Boston Ben (Cont'd)

She's addled, poor critter,
She'll fret and scold,
There ain't nothin to help it
It's the way we are gettin old.

She and I worked together
Ten year to have the farm
Now they've snitched it out from under
So I'll look for work in town.

We came out from New England
Three thousand miles from here
But I kind o' like this country
And I'm sorry to leave.

Frank Sonntag

Listen to me, Boston, and what I say is as true as I'm Frank Sonntag.
You and your ma's stayin here in Johnson, you're both stayin here as
long as any of us stays. You and she were here at the start and you're
goin to be here at the finish. What's the use of havin a town if it don't
mean you're goin to live together and keep goin in bad times when bad
times is bound to come every once in so often. We'll move your truck
in here tomorrow where your ma can do the cookin for us men and
you'll work with me and Pete and share and we'll get even with them
S.P. bandits, I swear. And now you get some sleep and see your ma's
all right.

Boston Ben

Thanks.

(All but PETE, ABE, RHEBA and FRANK exit
from house. Brown curtain on other stage half
goes up, revealing deep stage, all dark (black
curtain unseen) except for stars. CHORUS
stands there, and those who exit from house
join it. Light dim in shack, does not go up
till indicated.)

Frank

It's here we belong all of us, it's here we belong
I know it's true in my heart, as true as the stars above us
And every one of us feels it inside, the same in all.

Chorus

This is our land
This is our sky
It belongs to us
Till the day we die.

Chorus (Cont'd)

First it was empty It was big and empty
When we came
We made a place
And gave it a name

Standin here and there
In the summer sun
It's not like thinkin
What you or I done.
Lookin out across the fence
If the corn would grow
It's a feeling all over
Without thinkin it's so.

In all of us together
Like it's sure we know
Through the big and empty night
That we're here to grow.

It belongs to us together
Cause we made it that way
And it's something no stranger
Can come and take away.

(Women)

But what will we do
When the fight begins
We can die if we want
But it's the Railroad wins

Call it a trick
Call it a crime
But they'll drive us out on the road
In six months' time.

Frank

(Spoken)

Pete sort of had an idea a while back.
Say, Abe, I seem to remember you're tellin us

(Sung)

Just for fun you'd been afigurin
How much they said we owe

(ABE joins in for this and next two lines)

The whole town could buy the bloodhounds off
For 60,000 dollars or so.

And any old month so easy
On the night train to Santa Fe
They stack 20,000 in silver

Frank (Cont'd)

(Breaks off)

(Spoken)

and I seem to recollect this, also:

(Sung)

"Jesse was a man, a friend to the poor
He never would see a man suffer pain
And with his brother Frank, he robbed the Chicago bank
And stopped the Glendale train."

(Spoken)

Looks like I had an idea, don't it? What about it, Pete?

Pete

Frank!

I knew you'd not take it
Lying down
You've beat the S. P.
And saved the town.

I ain't a farmer
It suits me fine
Robbin the train
Shootin up and down the line.

The Sonntag brothers
Rode down the track
And in the S. P. coin
They paid the S. P. back.

Abe

(To the Jesse James tune)

Abe Merkmeyer was a man, but a short one, for sure,
And his false teeth gave him a pain
He put a black handkerchief in front of his face
And stopped the Santa Fe train.

Frank

(Sung)

Say, we three would make some gang. But what does Rheba say to
lettin little Abe go and get a rope round his neck, most likely, for wages.

Rheba

Well, I wouldn't be so good on a gallopin cayuse
So I'll stay to cache the grub and keep you posted with news.

Rheba (Cont'd)

(To audience)

Yes, folks, that's about as much as we spoke
That night in the Sonntag shack we made it sound like a joke
We weren't such fools as to do it for fun
But there didn't seem anythin else could be done.

Pete

Who else are we goin to take in the gang?

Frank

We three are enough.

Abe

Three's enough to hang.

Frank

(To Front)

A man's heart is easy
When he's found the thing to do
And it suits him all over
So he knows it's true.

(Also ABE)

It suits him all over
And inside too
Like you take a good drink
And feel brand new.

(Also PETE)

A man's heart is easy
When he knows he's right
So's he feels his strength
And he's ra'rin for a fight.

There's no doubt about it
When you're on the right track
It's your grief that tells you
And you can't go back.

Pete

(Alone)

The folks 'll be tellin
Far and wide
Of the Sonntag gang
And how they could ride.

Pete (Cont'd)

Neck to neck
With the speedin train
They robbed it in the night
And were off again.

The S. P. directors
Were down on their knees
But those three masked men
They never did seize.

Abe

That the old S. P.
Can beat three men
Any fool can tell you
But he can't tell when.

The S. P. tricks
Get under my skin
So so long, Rheba,
And watch us win.

Rheba

A man's heart is easy
And he sure looks swell
When his mind's made up
And he's headin' on for hell.

Quartette

(Words as above)

A man's heart is easy
When he's found the thing to do
And it suits him all over
So he knows it's true.

It suits him all over
And inside too
Like you take a good drink
And feel brand new.

(Also CHORUS)

A man's heart is easy
When he knows he's right
So he feels his strength
And he's r'arin for a fight.

There's no doubt about it
When you're on the right track
It's your heart that tells you
And you can't go back.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Bright light, half-stage drop:
A handsome old style office,
1875 map of U.S. MR. McTREVOR
standing dictating to a SECRETARY.

Mr. McTrevor

Take this. To his Excellency the Governor of California. Dear Steve, —Yours at hand suggesting to me as President of the S. P. Railroad that my company abandon eviction proceedings in Johnson followed by two pages of sentimental twaddle. Well, Steve, I am as softhearted as the next man, but I will not stand for any interference in my business from any quarter whatsoever. Guided as I am by a conception of my business as a public trust, it is nonsense for me to justify any minor incident like this one. May I remind you that in 1827 Astor threatened to evict settlers from a third of Putnam County in New York on a manifest technicality and made half a million doing it. You know it is the settlers not me who are making the trouble over this eviction. Steve, once and for all I will not budge an inch. What the hell is going on in California. Since when are you licking the boots of irresponsible outsiders. You were elected to enforce law and order, and I am going to see to it that you do so. This is a free country and it's got to stay free. Yours truly.

There's nothing like gettin' sore to put you in a good humor. —Don't forget, a gross of American Beauties—you know—to my wife.

(Exit SECRETARY)

McTrevor

(Sings—suavely)

People admire me, wherever I go
They love a winner, you know that's so.

I built an empire, do you think that's easy
I'll boast about it wherever I please.

Did anybody help me get where I'm at?
They kicked me in the face, and I kicked back.

McTrevor (Cont'd)

I kicked harder and I took better aim
And that's what's made me a leader of men.

I keep my head above water, but if I sink
Would anybody help me? What do you think.

My wife is a darling, my daughter's a dear
But if I go bankrupt, I'll be out on my ear.

Are we all just a pack of snivelling fools?
We're all out to win, and to hell with the rules.

What the blank do I care, a fight is a fight
Every man for himself. Am I right? Sure, I'm right.

Do you think I ought to have a soft spot for those farmers?
What do you think I am, a business man or a snake charmer.

Look here, I'm even legally justified, too
But I won't press that point with an audience like you.

Is sixty grand chicken feed? Do you think you're funny?
Whoever said that doesn't know the value of money.

Watch out for the pennies, said the sainted mother who bore me.
Listen I'm running this business, and no one's running it for me.

Well—

Everybody admires me anywhere I'm at
Money, they love it—what's wrong about that.

(Exit. Blackout)

(Stage all black. Whole stage used.
Rails barely visible, coming straight
forward to foots on one side (left).)

(Sound of horses, tethered. Coyote howl)

Frank

She's near due now.

Abe

(Listening at rails)

Can't hear nothin'.

Frank

Sure is cold waitin'.

Abe

Waitin's the coldest thing a man does.

(Enter PETE)

Frank

How's the ponies?

Pete

Boy, jumpy as cats. They'll bolt, all right. He'll be mad enough to fry when he finds 'em and don't find us. Say when do you think he'll get here?

Frank

Take him six seven hours from the time we stop the train.

Pete

What you so glum for?

Frank

Get this, Pete. We don't want no murder. First we go for the train crew, then you keep back the passengers, while Abe and me take off the payroll. And keep your mouth shut. Don't give 'em no clue. We got two more jobs to pull after this one, and we got to be unrecognized.

Pete

Listen, Cole Younger said there wasn't nothin' to a train holdup.

Abe

He said, not to the holdup. He said the tough part is waitin' before and hidin' out after.

Pete

Guess Cole was an old woman like you, Abe. That hidin' out afterward is what I'm goin' to like. Geez, it's a trick they'll be tellin' in every bar in California. The Railway Trestle at Bones Gulch. Just a mile from the holdup. Sheriff Black Jim lookin' everywhere but in that trestle. And us sprawlin' on the crossbeams, with 20,000 bucks, while he'll be sweatin' and swearin' overhead. Black Jim's goin' to look red as a fool, when a hure just says, Bones Gulch Trestle, and if it's twenty years from now.

(Drinks from bottle)

Frank

Take it easy Pete.

Abe

And don't gab so. Geez, it's like you was drunk.

Pete

Don't you say I'm drunk. I ain't scared of nothin'. Sure takes nerve to hide out so close to the hold up. That's what they'll all say, when they tell it. That's what I got nerve, even if you two sandlappers are scared bloodless.

(Sings)

Mama mama mama, have you heard the news
Daddy got killed on the C. B. & Q. 's
Shut your eyes and hold your breath
We'll all draw a pension upon papa's death
Upon papa's death, upon papa's death
We will all draw a pension upon papa's death.

(During song he wanders off)

Abe

He'll be all right.

Frank

Long as he don't shoot no one accidental like.

Abe

(Listening at rails)

There she is.

Frank

(Ditto)

I can hear her. Pete! —Light the lantern, Abe. Pete!

Pete

(Re-enters)

Did you hear her.

Frank

Tie it on. Got the gags, Abe? Don't shoot wild, Pete, don't shoot wild.

Abe

Not unless the womenfolks mob you.

(Waves lantern, headlights appear)

Pete

Here she comes.

Frank

All right, boys, you let me handle that damn hogger.

Pete

Here she comes, judas, this is swell!

Frank

Get down out of sight! I'll do the shootin'.

(Locomotive comes, stops)

(Behind headlight)

Hands up.

(Darkness, shots)

(Half stage shows sideview, from right to left, of exterior of locomotive interior of locomotive-cab, exterior of tender, interior of baggage-car. Floor of interiors is floor of stage, lower part of wheels does not show in exteriors. One feeble lantern each in the two interiors. In locomotive engineer is already bound, fireman is hands up. In baggage car is a safe, one man sleeping, another looks around frightened, listening)

Frank

(To fireman)

Turn around. Put your hands back.

(Ties him)

Abe

(Who is trussing engineer on floor)

Sure was a wallop, Frank, he's clean knocked out.

Frank

(Trusses up fireman, PETE holds revolver)

How many men in the baggage car?

Fireman

Two.

Frank

Gag him, Pete. We're going to heave you out on the track, where we can keep an eye on you.

Baggageman

(In car)

Wake up, Tim, wake up. It's bandits.

Tim

Wha-at?

Frank

Lift him, Abe.

(They start lifting engineer)

Take the lantern, Pete.

(Blackout)

(During darkness, FRANK's shout: "Round the other side, Pete, shoot the lock." Two shots.

The lantern in baggage on)

(PETE is inside at one end, FRANK and ABE at other. TIM, the guard, is near Frank, the BAGGAGE MAN is near Pete)

Frank

We've got you covered. Stick up your hands.

(FRANK—not Pete or Abe—puts away Colts)

We ain't goin' to hurt you if you don't move.

(GUARD draws suddenly and shoots. So does PETE. But FRANK grabs Guard's arm so shot goes wild, gives him punch, GUARD collapses)

Geez, what a bum shot.

(To Baggage Man)

You there, you got the keys to this here safe?

Baggage Man

Nnno, I wish I had.

Frank

(Gives it a kick)

Shoot the lock. It's nothin' but tin.

(To Abe)

Got a scratch, I guess. Pete take him with you. And by God don't shoot wild, I told you before. You knicked Abe, I guess.

(PETE takes Baggage Man roughly, saying: "Come along and no tricks".

ABE shoots at lock. Darkness. Several shots. Perhaps again 15 sec. music)

(Lights go up with right half (from audience) of stage now curtain. Left half backdrop of passenger coaches. First sleeping car, then part of day coach. Passengers are being huddled out of pullman into coach by PETE)

Woman

Ooooh, but I'm not dressed.

Pete

Sorry lady, next time you travel this line you go to bed with your fixin's on.

Man

Young man, you'll hang for this.

Another Woman

Such a pity, he's so well set up, too.

Pete

Thank you, Ma'am. I'd like to show you my face, but not tonight. Come on, everybody who's rich, throw your val'ables down here, to my feet. But if anybody makes a move, I've got you covered, and this iron can shoot—see?

(Shoots, tinkle of glass)

A Woman

Oh my God! He didn't hit me, he hit a window.

A Man

Say, kid, you can't get away with this. The ground outside's soaked and they trail your hosses. They'll string you up by noon tomorrow.

Pete

Your watch, too. Hurry up.

Frank

(Enters)

Come on, Pete.

Pete

I've got another couple of thousand dollar's worth here. Pick it up, while I hold 'em.

Frank

You goddamned dirty skunk, Pete, you been thievin'. Let that junk lay or I'll knock you the other side of hell. I ain't no thief, and I ain't goin' to have you dirty up this business. Get out or I'll shoot you right now. Get out!

(Blackout)

(BLACK BILL appears before the curtain, and speaks, like a witness deposing)

Black Bill

As sheriff of San Jacinto County I appeared on the scene of the \$23,000 train robbery about six hours after it had happened. There had been a little rain the afternoon before and a blind man could have picked up the tracks of three horses leading away from that spot. We followed the trail about two miles and found them there cayuses grazing peacefully in the open. But no sign of a human, no footprints, no hideout anywhere around. I was right sore. I encamped on the railway tracks and sent out search parties to the ranches thereabouts as well as up and down the line, but to no avail.

(Embarrassed)

I was stumped all right.

(BLACK BILL exits. CURTAIN RISES, showing backdrop of a camp in a ravine. FRANK, ABE, PETE, BOSTON BEN, TEX and INJUN JIM, are lolling about after an afternoon meal)

Pete

Well, Abe, how's the back? Don't you feel swell after that feed. Better than that damn sowbelly and mush we used to get down in Johnson. Tomorrow I'm going to catch them trout with my bare hands. This is the life. Hell, this makes up for them thirty hours we hid in that Bones Gulch Trestle, stuck in them beams, crucified like.

Boston Ben

You didn't have any water for all that time?

Pete

Two nights and a day. No water, no food. But the water's worse. Abe delirious half the time, moanin' and whimperin', "Water, water, Rheba, Rheba," like a damn kid. He fainted. And Frank just glum, not sayin' nothin'. And the night cold as ice, and the day hot as blazes. And you couldn't budge. Bet you couldn't have held out, Injun Jim, what about it?

Injun Jim

There are things you cannot bear. Thirst and fever are hard to suffer.

Pete

-Hn. Hell, we'd had water enough if Frank hadn't used it all up washin' out that damn wound of Abe's. Sure it was me knicked him, but that baggage car was so blasted black you'd have shot yourself and not known it. Anyway, he's all right now. The last night in that trestle, if I hadn't held Frank back by force, he'd have clumb down and looked for water in the mud below, and given away the whole show. He was out of his mind. Black Bill was settin' only a couple of hundred yards away.

Frank

As I remember, Pete, it was just the other way around. I had to hold you back.

Pete

What's the difference. So I suffered more. What's the difference?

Injun Jim

How. (Indian grunt)

Frank

When you're full of trout and beans like now, and a drink handy, it's kind a pleasant to think about.

Pete

Yea, and they got nothing on us. Geez, that holdup sure was sportin'. Easy money, what?

Abe

You're right there, Pete. Somehow, I thought there'd be more to it. Sure is queer to get money so easy. Well, why not, for a change.

Boston Ben

I was readin' about the Pacific railroads, there was a government investigation. I don't know if the money's easy, but the figures was all in millions, millions of acres of land grants, millions of government loans they won't pay back, millions in bonds and watered stocks, it's so big it don't seem like real money. And now they're competin' with an Eastern road for the line through Arizona, and they need extra cash for their lobby in Washington. Or maybe it's for a new line they're buildin' up north.

Abe

Or maybe it's for somethin' else. They always say big business is beyond the understanding of a bunch of farmers.

Boston Ben

Remind me of what a nigger boss once told me in Haiti. He says he wished he was white himself, 'cause white people could cheat better than niggers.

Frank

It ain't beyond our understanding when they try to cheat us out of our ranches.

Tex

We may not be as smart as the S.P., but we sure can enjoy a fight. They're startin' to raise posses to comb the country, but they ain't nothin' but outsiders joinin' up. They suspect you boys, but they'll never get you.

Pete

Sure, California knows what a dirty bunch the S.P. is. Cheat the government on one side, and us on the other. If the Californians would join us and gang up on 'em, we could run 'em right out of the State. We'd have a right too. Hey, I know a new song.

(Song)

My uncle was a peaceful man, he never moved a jot
He lay in his bunk on a twelvemonth drunk contented with his lot
Hey you ticks and brother bedbugs, here you can stink and thrive
Till as he lay there came a day when they et him up alive.

Break in the door, rip up the floor, listen to it crack
To drive the lousy varmint out, you've got to wreck the shack.

My grandma was a gentle soul, she couldn't kill a mouse
So she let one play and she laughed all day as it skittled through the house
Hey, rats and brother weasels, here you can stink and thrive
Till they sniffed and crept and as she slept they chewed her up alive.

Break in the door, rip up the floor, listen to it crack
To drive the lousy varmint out, you've got to wreck the shack.

We rid out here to stake a home and turn an honest hand
And if we could collar a lonely dollar it went to pay for the land
Hey, senators and railroads, here you can stink and thrive
You've turned the West to a rich man's nest and you chew us up alive.

Break in the door, rip up the floor, listen to it crack
To drive the lousy varmint out, you've got to wreck the shack.

(CURTAIN)

(DARKNESS)

(behind previous drop)

(Next scene, on audience right is exterior of Bowles cabin as beginning of Act I. (Practicable porch steps and door) Chorus of women stands more or less center, moves left in front of brown curtain on second stanza, on last stanza back in front of house. Light is first twilight, on second stanza, night, on last stanza it returns to twilight. This is long musical number with music between stanzas, because there is pantomime during stanzas 3, 4, 5.)

Chorus of Women

It looks just the same, the sunset along the porch
The days going by as they always do
With the menfolks some in the fields, some up the range with the cattle
And us in the kitchen or the yard like there was nothing new.

But it's not so peaceful as it was, not inside us
When we stand in the sun, or put out the lamp at night
Cause we're watching for a sight of the Sheriff suddenlike
Or we're listening for a certain knock—knockknock in the lonely night

(Here pantomime begins: Sound of horses coming up, stopping. SONNTAG GANG enters, knocks at porch post. Man with dog comes out, makes friendly sign to the three, in silence, goes off with dog. WOMAN comes out with plates of food and coffee, men eat, she returns with parcel, they leave, nothing is said, horses leave, man returns with dog, woman remains awhile with him at door listening like)

(This covers next three stanzas)

Chorus of Women

There's coffee on the stove, there's always some bread and bacon or beef
Ready every time for that knock-knockknock to come
We hear it sleepin', we're wide awake, we don't speak nor light the candle
And our men go outside with the hound to watch the road.

Susan alone:

It's two train robberies that have happened now to the S. P. in 2 months
And the loot been taken the papers say is 41,000 dollars
And the insurance companies won't insure the S. P. payrolls
any more
So they say, for less than 80 percent of value
And we've four months left, remember

Chorus

We don't name no names, we don't ask no questions like women want
We give them all we have and listen as they ride off listenin' anxiouslike
And listen to the silence of the hills a long time, our own husband
for a shot
lying awake beside us
Because we know it's for us folks three men are risking their death.

(End of pantomime, chorus moves over as if
to shield house)

We know it for sure like you know it for sure when you love and
are loved in answer
We don't want no speeches and no proofs, we're afeared for them
and we're full of thoughts for them
It's something we can tell no stranger, it's a secret we protect
like you protect a single love
And we're always on the watch against the Sheriff coming, or other
S. P. enemies, to seize them.

(CURTAIN)

(CURTAIN RISES showing scene same as last
in Act One, i. e. interior of shack, and other
half stage empty, black and with stars.
Inside shack is ABE in bed; with RHEBA,
ELIZA, PETE, FRANK, and a DOCTOR)

(This scene is spoken without background music)

Frank

Here's a hundred, Doctor. And you'd better remember this is a
professional secret, cause we can remember if you can't. When he's
all well again you'll find another hundred on your parlor floor.

Doctor

Thanks. He'll be all right. You wouldn't think so to look at him, but
that bullet must have been in there three or four months already.
He'd best stay in bed a spell.

Abe

That's what I'm aimin' to do.

Doctor

Now if you gentlemen will direct me back home

Frank

Guess you don't mind being blindfold again, Doc? Just till we're out of town.

Doctor

Go ahead boys; reminds me of the old days in Tombstone, Arizona. Good money I made then.

(Exeunt)

Abe

Say, Eliza, would you step over and get Boston Ben and his crazy ma. I've a plan for passin' out the money I want to tell him; count of his crazy ma it might work.

(Exit ELIZA)

Rheba

Abe, are you going to risk staying here?

Abe

Geez, Rheba, I never knew this bed of ourn was so soft and sweet. It's like—I guess it's like heaven. Come and sit down in heaven with me.

Rheba

Abe, I'm scared Black Bill would come in.

Abe

Well, we're married ain't we? Listen Rheba:

(ABE sings)

I don't want to be no bad man, no bad man, no bad man
Cause then I kint love my Rheba

I don't want to hold up no payroll trains
Nor get no bullets in my brains
Nor hide in the sierra in the goldurn rains
Cause then I kint love my Rheba.

I don't want to watch till dawn in the glen
Sittin' there all out of tobacco again
And nobody snorin' but a couple of men
Cause then I kint love my Rheba.

I don't want to get all mangy and thin
Jumpin' a mile at the drop of a pin
And nothin' to eat but the louse on my chin
Cause then I kint love my Rheba.

Abe (Cont'd)

Poor he was before, now he's worse
A hunted man's wife has a life like a curse.

Give a man a family, a crop, and a shack
He'll work and his wife will till they break their back
Shack, crop and family is as far as they both see
You rich in your houses, can't you let poor people be.
Would you eat this mush, would you sleep on this sack
Would you touch this gingham you're willin' to strip from Rheba's back
What'll you get by starvin' us you bigbellied crooks,
Rheba can break her heart, so you can balance your books.

I'm wise to it, sure, it's the way men live
The more you take, the less you give,
Big eats little till they both are dead
And whinin' don't butter a nigger's bread.
But every so often, —Rheba, you ought to know,
The blood in anybody gets to givin' him a glow
He's just as good then as a king with a crest
And that's how Rheba likes her lovin' Abe best.

If a man and a woman was all over just the same
Rheba darlin', you'd be callin' it a shame
It's the love we feel that sweetens the blood
Makes the day be wide and the night be good
And it seems like that strength is the same in each
In man or woman far as reckoning'll reach
It holds them all, they acknowledge it as right,
And when they feel that strength, if they can't love, they'll fight.
(say, Rheba how I seen you fight)

Loneliness comes like the silence in the stars,
Like time in your bones creepin' up unawares
Your arms get heavy, hate burns you like a sun
You eat your own sweat, and don't tell none.
You've spoken truly tonight for us both
And now it's spoke we can feel another truth
We're both of us here, my heart is like your heart
The strength is too big to keep us apart
Like we grow together, like they say one flesh
And the easy breath of freedom comin' steady afresh.

Fate, fate of a kind no force'll tether

Both

Loving and fighting for loving together
And a fierceness inside us that's big as life
Makes us one body like you could cut it with a knife
Together growing and again apart
Dying of loneliness and an empty heart

Both Abe and Rheba (Cont'd)

And again grown together and never alone
It's a beating in the mind joining dead and livin' bone
Strength from the living, strength from the dead
Strength from people unborn, that's the fate to which we're bred.

But here and now, you and me side by side
Sitting by a lamp with the dark outside
It's just us two and a single hour
Like two roots joined and widening out into a flower
Two sitting in the lamplight, don't know what's to come
But an hour stays true and a lamp stays home
Wonder of love that will not be afraid
To spring up in the dark by a light a man has made.

(Shot in distance, then horse-galloping)

Rheba

Listen.

Abe

Douse the lamp.

(There is moonlight, a streak of it, outside)

(ELIZA enters running)

Eliza

It's Black Bill and a posse. They got the house surrounded.

Rheba

Hush. Don't you scream. Run.

(Exit Eliza)

(Shot nearby, horse gallops up)

(Enter at side opposite house BLACK BILL)

Black Bill

Come out of there. We've got you trapped. Come out with your hands up.
In the name of the law.

Voice

(Across empty darkness)

Say Bill, they ain't in there. Jake's just seen 'em, all three of 'em,
ridin' up the Snake Spring trail. He's after 'em. Come on.

Black Bill

You're a liar, Red-Eye. They're here in this cabin.

Red Eye

Black Bill, you're another. Jake sees 'em. Three men, lopin' easy, and he not recognizin' 'em in the moonlight, hollers out, Is that You Black Bill, Then Frank Sonntag hollers— We ain't seen Black Bill, but if he's gone to Johnson for the Sonntag gang, you can tell him he's too late, cause we're gone. Jake knows Frank's voice and shoots. . . .
Whoa there.

Other Voices

Come on Bill, you're lettin' 'em slip, you fool.

Black Bill

I come to search this house, and I'm going to search it—
(Calls to shack)
Hey there! Come out with your hands up, or I'll fire.
Light the lamp in there, so I can see you!

Rheba

(As at window)
For God's sake come in, Black Bill, I'm skeert to death.
(ABE makes horrible sound. RHEBA shrieks)

Chorus of Voices

(Horse-sounds)
Whoa, whoa there!

Black Bill

(Starting back)
What in all b'lazes was that?

Rheba

Oh save me. It's Boston Ben's ma who's gone stark crazy this night.
(ABE makes his roar)

Black Bill

Come on boys, a couple of you rush her.

Rheba

Come in all of you, she's got two loaded six shooters and she's going to kill me and every living one of us.

Red Eye

Bill you gumhead, you losin' the Sonntag Reward messin' up with a crazy woman, come on afore we lose 'em.

(Shot in the distance)

(Re-enter ELIZA)

Eliza

Rheba, Rheba, Boston Ben's ma ain't—

Rheba

Eliza, Eliza—

Abe

(Roars, then in falsetto)

I want to kill, ha hahahaha.

Black Bill

By jeezus, I'm goin' in myself. Here I come, Rheba.

Rheba

Watch out she's acomin', she's acomin', she's acomin' and she's aroarin' to kill.

(Shots and screams in between. Also RHEBA aims a gun toward back through the window)

Voices of Posse

Geez, my hat, watch out, let her go.

(Sounds of galloping off)

(BLACK BILL also shot at throws himself down on his face. ABE rushes out and off in nightgown and shawl, shooting, RHEBA follows with boots)

Rheba

(To Eliza)

Hold him here Eliza.

Black Bill

Jeez, that was worse than a pack of Comanches. Where'd she go? Hey boys, come on! Where's my posse.

Eliza

They aren't as brave a gentleman as you are, Black Bill, not a single one of them.

Black Bill

Of all creation's critters, why it's Eliza.

Eliza

O Black Bill, you look so stalwart in the moonlight, won't you stay with me a little all alone. I won't leave you here. Come on inside with me.

Black Bill

Eliza, you crazy too? Hey, boys! Where's my posse? I better find 'em quick.

(Exit and gallops off)

(Coyote howl)

Eliza

Please God, please! Oh I ain't gonna scream.

(Goes down on her knees): (Hymn tune)

(No orchestra) (Cricket sounds)

Thou in whose sight we are the same
no matter what our earthly fame
Thy children wandring in the dark
Protect them from the murderer's mark.

(4 more women come on, kneel together
and repeat over)

(CURTAIN)

(CURTAIN up shows a back drop hung further back than up till now, and in the center; it does not have to fill whole width however. It represents interior of dance saloon at Tike's Barrow, cheap. A bar to one side, a piano, chairs, two tables; two girls are sitting at one, playing cards, with Dutchy, the barman and proprietor. Piano plays and PROFESSOR sings—

"Laws amassey what have you done
married the ol' man instead of his son, etc.")

(TEX moves a table up forward, and two chairs, seats BESSIE in one, then he sings)

Texas

Say Bessie you're my honey
Will you marry me if I get some money
If I get a shack and twenty chickens
Will you marry me, Bessie, and love me like the dickens.

Bessie

(Spoken)

Sure, Tex, but you ain't got none.

Texas

Say, Bessie, it looks that way
Going to get a place where you and me can stay
All paid up in U.S. money
So marry me regular and be my one and only.

I'm a poor lonesome cowboy
I'm a poor lonesome cowboy
I'm a poor lonesome cowboy
But I won't be for long.

(PROFESSOR goes on playing "Laws a massey what
have you done", during following speeches)

Bessie

Tex, you're crazy, all you folks down Johnson way's going to be
evicted by the S.P. in six weeks time.

Tex

Bessie I'll tell you a secret. You know Boston Ben's ma that's crazy.
Seems she has a treasure hid somewhere and she's goin' to buy the
S.P. off. Don't tell no one, because it might be incriminatin'.

Bessie

Tex, what's a matter with you. Boston Ben's ma ain't got no treasure.
She's been here ten year. Everybody'd know about it.

Tex

Well, she's crazy ain't she?

Bessie

All you folks down there's crazy since Frank and Pete and Abe started
train robbin'.

Tex

Say Bessie, don't you carry on that way. Nobody's recognized them robbers. There ain't nothin' proved.

Bessie

Well, it's proved enough so's the Reward out for them been raised—
(Points to reward notice)
it's a thousand dollars for each one of them, and Black Bill's snoopin' around here this night after 'em, right now.

Tex

Listen Bessie, them three's the finest bunch that ever was.

Bessie

Ain't I sayin' so? Squeezin' some money out of that S.P. pack of bloodsuckers is enough to get anybody a front seat in Heaven. That's what everybody's sayin'. More luck to 'em.

Tex

Say Bessie, are you in love with Pete Sonntag? You used to be.

Bessie

Listen Tex, are you askin' me to marry you? Here my promise to you.

(Sings)

Never mind what happened before
Cause I'd like a place where you can close the door
Close the door when the night gets still
And your thoughts is quiet and your dreams begin.

O dreams don't you wander
Dreams don't you roam
I'm keepin' you home
Cause I'm shuttin' my door.

I've 300 dollars Tex, in the bank at Salt Lake City
And I can fix up a place real nice and pretty
And we can have children for me and you
I know you're on the level and I'll be too.

O don't you wander no more
Dreams, dreams don't you roam
I'm keepin' you home
Cause I'm shuttin' my door.

Tex

Geez Bessie, whoopee-tee-yi-yowuu-
My honey, she's an angel, my honey she's divine

Tex (Cont'd)

And if you ask me the reason sir, the reason is she's mine
Come on professor, come on all you girls and boys
Bessie and me's to be married, so let's make some noise.
Whoopee - tee -

(Interrupts)

(Enter SONNTAGS, ABE and ten more men)

(A certain amount of piano playing during
following scene)

Frank

(Drawin' Colts)

Hands up everybody. - - - Hands up while we kiss the bride,
we heard you all right, Tex. Pound 'em, professor, you coyote.
Come on out Dutchy.

(This to frightened barkeep hidden behind bar)

Drinks for everybody. It's on the house.

Those in Saloon

Well if it ain't the Sonntags and little Abe. How you boys, etc.

Pete

We been listenin'. It sure put a bullet right through my heart.

Bessie

For God's sake, Pete, Black Bill's snoopin' for you.

Pete

I ain't scared of anybody. How's about us two takin' a walk outside?

Bessie

Cut it out Pete, I'm engaged. Say Tex, help me with the drinks.
(Goes behind bar.)

Pete

Christ, Dutchy, gimme another. Ain't nothin' but booze left when
your girl goes back on you. Hi, Lil.

Dutch

You've got some nerve, boys, ridin' around open like this.

Abe

(Tipsy)

We wuz drinkin' over at 2 Bar W and we ride over to see the girls.
How'ya Mamie, geez, you look big as life with all them extra attractions.

Dutch

(Simultaneously)

Left anybody guardin' the road boys? You know you're worth a thousand
a piece these days.

(Points to notice)

Abe

No, look it, here's a reward posted for us.

Pete

(Simultaneously)

They hain't got nothin' on us. We been prospectin' up in the sierra.

Frank

Guess we're among friends here, Dutchy.

Dutchy

Black Bill's been snoopin' around this night.

Bessie

Say, Tex, let's you and I go out and watch the road for a spell. Guess
Tex here'll want to do some joyshootin'. You'll know what's up if you hear it.

(Winks)

Strictly legal.

Pete

(Simultaneously)

Aw Bessie, stay awhile let's have a shotish.

Frank

Thanks Bessie, we'll know if we hear you.

(Sings)

Give me some liquor cause I want it
Give me some more cause I like it
you feel more nat'ral, you feel more fair
you start feelin' friendly with everybody there
It makes you happy and you ain't got a grouch
But how too much of it can spoil you—ouch!

Pete

Give me a fight cause I want it,
Give me another cause I like it, etc. Chorus joining.

Mamie

Give me some money, etc. with Chorus.

Abe

Give me some lovin', etc.

(Shots outside. Silence a moment)

Frank

It's Black Bill comin'.

Dutchy

You three duck down behind the bar. Rest of you bunch up in front.
He'll get out again quick when he sees it's a gang from Johnson, the
coyote. Come on professor, "Give me a fight," easy everybody.

(Half way through stanza enter BLACK BILL,
REDEYE and GONZALEZ, with drawn guns)
(not hands up, though)

Black Bill

Howdy, folks, you ain't seen none of them blarsted railroad bandits
around here, have ye?

Mamie

We don't know no bandits, unless you've turned into one, Black Bill,
on the side like that Sheriff in Benson, Idaho.

Redeye

Shut your trap, Mamie, or I'll smack you.

Mamie

You're the dirtiest rat around here, Redeye, and everybody knows it.

Black Bill

You stay at the door, boys.

(This to his two men)

(He very slowly makes a tour of the room)

So you don't know none. You didn't see that Reward—\$1000 a piece for
Frank and Pete Sonntag and Abe Merkmeyer.

One Man

(Ironic)

Money don't mean nothin' to me, Black Bill, I just ain't interested in \$1000.

Another

How d'you know them three was the three masked men of the S.P. holdups. Nobody knows.

Another

You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Black Bill, trailin' them three innocents what's gone up in the Sierra for their ailin' healths.

(Meanwhile BLACK BILL has made his round
and gone back to where he came in)

Black Bill

So long boys. --Put 'em up, boys, up over your head and I mean it. Red eye and Gonzalez go over and relieve them gentlemen of their hardware, which is against the law in saloons, so we don't have no misunderstandin'. I know them three enemies of society is hid in this shack, and I'm going to find 'em. —

(To his men)

Don't take all night, either.

(Enter BESSIE, behind Black Bill)

Bessie

Oh, Black Bill, it's you, handsome, it sure is.

(Puts arm around him)

Black Bill

(Tries to shake her off)

Get away.

Bessie

Ain't you got no manners, Black Bill, you're spoilin' my party.

(She holds him by the neck, TEX jumps in,

knocks pistol out of Black Bill's hand.

TEX throws Black Bill down)

Frank

(Simultaneously jumping up)

Get 'em, boys.

(All three are knocked down and trussed)

Bessie

Don't hurt 'em boys, we don't want no hard feelin's at Bessie's party, Dutchy give me a drink for Black Bill. Mr. Sheriff, we couldn't help this cause Frank over there had his gun on us, which makes us innocent.

Gonzalez

(Terror)

You ain't goin' to kill us?

Black Bill

(Simultaneous)

I'll get you for this, all of you. It's aidin' and abettin' with assault and battery and an officer in the exercise of his duty.

Bessie

(Simultaneous)

Come on, take a drink and laugh it off, nobody's hurt.

Black Bill

Get away, you painted harlot.

Texas

Say Black Bill, no goddamned nobody's got a right to use an improper word of my promised bride here, who's a lady and I'll prove it with a gun. Come on, untie him, so I can shoot this bastard.

Bessie

Let him be, Tex, he didn't know we was engaged yet. Give me a drink.

Black Bill

It's agin the law.

Dutchy

Well, it's agin common sense for you to come in here when there's all Johnson inside. You're lucky as you are, and you know it.

Pete

We could sure crack him up for good right now.

(Pulls gun)

Take a long aim and—

(Clucks tongue)

Abe

Wake up, professor, this is a party.

(ABE sings—very fast, almost no melody)
Black Bill wuz a sheriff, as big as they come
He wasn't so honest, but he was plenty dumb
He saw \$3000, and to grab 'em he tried
But he couldn't quite reach 'em, 'cause his hands was tied.

Chorus

Don't take it so hard Bill, there's worse things can happen.

(This is like a high shout)

Frank

The S. P. had a hold up, and Black Bill come,
He'd thought he'd get famous, but geez, he was dumb,
He picked up the bandit trail, the ground was soft from rain,
And he proved it weren't no humans had held up that train.

A Voice

It was them hosses done it, why didn't you arrest 'em?

Chorus

Don't take it so hard Bill—there's worse things can happen.

Pete

The S. P. has itself to blame for startin' this war
But Black Bill's on the S. P. side, 'cause he's promised money there
We ain't aimin' to help him to it, and we're warnin' him here
We're tougher than him, and he'd better keep clear.

Chorus

(Jovially)

Don't take it so hard Bill, there's worse things can happen.

Black Bill

Your bustin' up the law
Helpin' thieves like you do
And you'll be sorry for it
When they go to robbin' you.

Gonzalez

Don't shoot me, don't kill me!

Black Bill

(Simultaneous)

That's murder you did, Bessie, and you'll swing for it.

Dutchy

Hustle him out boys, before he commits suicide. Put him in the barn with Gonzalez. What about Red Eye?

Frank

Dead. Straight shot.

Dutchy

No loss to nobody. Take him out. I'm shutting up for the night boys.

Bessie

Texas, Texas, you're not going!

Texas

Reckon I am Bessie, you'd better clear out while you can. It'll blow over. They won't do nothin' to a beautiful girl like you, Bessie.

Bessie

I'm going to stay with you, Texas, I'm going to nurse you, I'm going to marry you.

Texas

No you ain't, Bessie, I ain't sore. Perhaps we'd not have made out so good. Don't wait no more, Bessie, let the boys take you up in the hills. So long.

Abe

(Slow)

He's right, Bessie, we've got to clear out. Goodbye, Tex.

Frank

So long, Tex, you got what was coming to us. I'll look out for her.

Pete

Hard luck, Tex. See you when you get out of the hospital. Come on, Bessie.

Bessie

(Angry)

I'm coming. —Goodbye, darling.

(Exeunt)

(DUTCHY goes over to Texas. Only other person on stage is a girl who sits motionless in the dark at the back till curtain)

Dutchy

I'll go get Doc McGoffin.

Texas

I'm all right, Dutchy.

(Exit DUTCHY, gallop of horse going off)

Texas

(To no one)

Just tell her Joe and Lefty died like this, on a barroom floor in old Las Vegas. I don't need anything better'en them. It's about the first time I ain't been homesick.

(Sings, loud and without nuance, no music)

Eyes like the morning star

Cheeks like the rose

etc.

Blow all ye little winds

Blow along along the Colorado trail.

(See "Songbag": Colorado Trail, also—
When the curtains of night are pinned back)

(When song is finished, silence. TEXAS
throws a kiss slowly. Then closes his eyes
and dies without effort)

(Music)

(Curtain)

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

No back drop. CHORUS and FIDDLER
dance or soup square dance:

Have you ever been to town Cousin Andy,
Cousin Andy have you ever been to town?

(Advance by couples and bow.)

Sure, I worked for a brewer,
Who pumped his beer from the sewer
Shet your mouth Cousin Andy, there's ladies present.

Is there money in town Cousin Andy,
Cousin Andy is there money in town?

(Ladies center and grind the corn.)

Sure, there's yellowbacks and gold
But I never caught a hold
You're a slippin Cousin Andy, hold it down.

Have you ever been a trapper Cousin Andy,
Cousin Andy have you ever been a trapper?

(Parley and swing back.)

Sure, the trees is mighty pretty,
You can't hug 'em more's the pity,
Why can't you Cousin Andy? The bark's too rough.

Is there money in the woods Cousin Andy
Cousin Andy is there money in the woods?

(Boys up and stamp it.)

There's enough to pay for liquor
So you feel a darn sight sicker.
That ain't much Cousin Andy. Well, that's all there is.

I want a pair of shoes Cousin Andy
Cousin Andy I want a new pair of shoes.

(Couples circle, dos - a - do.)

(Pronounce: dough.)

Chorus (Cont'd)

Sure, I'll buy a pair for you
In a year or maybe two.
That's a long wait. But honey, they'll be so purty.
I can't marry you if you got no money Cousin Andy
If you got no money I can't marry you.

(Split and promenade.)

Bible says to marry, honey,
Don't say nothin' about money.
Guess God forgot about money, —Guess He did.

(DANCERS exeunt.) (FIDDLER says:)

Fiddler

(Seated, strumming chords.)

After that shootin of Tex and Red Eye, the Sonntag gang had to take to the Sierra. We didn't hear nothing all summer long. Rheba, she shut up like a clam. It was a ugly summer. We knew Abe was sick, and maybe we doubted if anybody like us could win over the S.P. People are like that as a rule, when they don't eat right, they ain't got as much spirit as they ought to have. A hog acts that way too. Guess they don't want to dance no more tonight.

(Exit)

BLACKOUT

(N.B. These are not real calls; if desired
those can be found in "Cowboy dances.")

FRANK, ABE and PETE are sitting in the woods, far apart. There is sunset light above them; where they are the light is colder, greenish.

Frank

You're dead drunk. If either of you make another move for this bottle, I'll drill you full of lead.

(Pause.)

Pete

(Spoken fast over slow background music)

I'm going to tell you shysters one thing; Bessie's mine, see, she's mine. She's crazy about me. She's comin' here for me. Will we have fun. Geez, two months since I seen a woman. Can't you say nothin, you dumb, like the damn trees. Give me that bottle. We don't have to save it, Injun Jim said Bessie's goin' to be here before sunset. We'll be at old man Barker's tonight, with liquor and grub, by God and a cabin to sleep. What's that? Damn bough creakin'. Jeez, I hate the woods. Might be a deputy crouchin' behind any tree, takin' his aim real slow, grinnin' to himself. Bloodhunters kill us for the reward. Jesus, I hate 'em. If I could plug one, just so's nobody saw me. Fun, ha! It's Bessie's fault. She's the one that kilt Red Eye. And she's been up safe at Old Barker's with a bunk and three squares for two months, and I been starvin' in the damn woods like a dirty murderer. I'll take it out on her. Where's that bottle. I heard tell Barker's got a daughter, Miranda Barker, but hell, she's only fourteen, she don't know how to talk yet, they tell. Christ I bet Bessie ain't comin' at all. I bet she's met Black Bill, and she collectin' the reward money on us this minute, she an old man Barker, and they got us here in a trap. I tell you you oughtn't to trust her out of your sight, I don't trust no woman, or man either. How am I to know you two ain't fixed it up, you was talkin' to Injun Jim behind my back. Say I ain't goin' to stay here. Don't you make fun of me. I'm not scared of nothin'. But a man weren't meant to live this way, sneakin' around the woods like a dirty animal, with the whole government after him to kill him. A man's meant to live decent in a city with other folks and have the police to protect him.

Frank

Protect him from what? Protect him from the S.P. Did the police protect us in Johnson from bein' robbed of ten years of our work by the S.P. Railroad.

Pete

Oh hell.

Frank

Shut up then. What's it all about. Law. Money. Here we are scared out of our wits.

Pete

I'm going to go away.

Frank

(Laughs)

Might as well get drunk and stay drunk. And if I get any drunker, I'll shoot you both.

(Drinks, tosses bottle to Pete.)

Abe

What do kids like them understand
of the weakness of an old man
In the middle of what I'm doin'
the grit melts out of my bones,
start stumblin' in my tracks
they curse me and I curse back.

I don't want 'em to see it
so they see that I'm defeated,
all I want is they don't despise me
like I despise myself inside.
So at night I don't complain
with my wound burning up my brain
I hate them, I shake hating
because I can't creep away.

I'm afraid I'm going to die
all alone with nobody by.

Frank

Was it the 3 of us back in Johnson one night
No, it was 3 other men stood up and started a fight
Couldn't have been us, them 3 stood up in a honest grief
Us 3 broken down bums ain't got one honest belief.

Seems like I myself was once an upright man
Now it's a stranger who's me, who is this coward I am
I can't trust him, he's a sneak, he's mean and low
He's inside of me, and he knows filth I don't want to know.

Remember how we started
Remember what we still got to do
Brain don't you make no pictures
Till this S. P. war is through
That's Abe, that's my own brother
Remember, and don't show me nothing other.

Pete

(1)

I keep seein' 'em
in the crisscross of trees
like the flicker of a leaf
when there ain't no breeze
I keep hearin' 'em
a twig goes snap
they're sneakin' around
they've got us in a trap.

(2)

Don't make a fire
count of the smoke
wake in a sweat
if a treetoad croaks
shiverin' starved
in the murk of night
feel 'em creepin' up
just out of sight.

(3)

Feel 'em all around me
got to sit still
maybe they won't see
maybe they will
blood in my head
so I want to shout
yell like crazy
what's it all about?

Abe

You don't know what you'll do
when you're crazy afraid
Forget what you can
it's the way we're made.

Frank

Listen, Don't say you're broken
don't say you're busted
don't say you know
there's no one to be trusted.

Pete

What are we waiting for
What's it all about
Kill somebody
And let me out.

Abe

Howl, Pete, howl it out
no way to get out, no way to get out
howl like a coyote, caught in a trap
bit to the bone when them teeth went snap
howl like the rest, howl like a man,
listen to 'em howling since the world began.

Frank

Sure, we're yellow, yellow all through
it's what we're made of, it's all we drew
call him pal, call him friend
you know all the time he'll be yellow in the end
It's what I'm like, everybody's like that
You say you're a man but you know you're a rat.

Both

We love a fake, we love a lie
everybody hates you when you're going to die
when I see that scare coming into a face
I want to kick him so he'll damn well know his place
I want to kill him 'cause it might be me,
get drunk and laugh, laugh at what you see

Frank

You can see when you're drunk and laugh at what you see.

(FRANK has drawn, PETE draws)

Pete

Not me! Not me! You can't shoot me.

Abe

You're stinkin' drunk, put up those guns, both of you, or I'll blast 'em
off your wrists.

(Shot offstage. THEY throw themselves
on the ground facing toward it.)

Voices

(Offstage):
(From Act One)

The Sonntag gang didn't take it lying down
They robbed the S.P. and saved the town.

The Sonntag gang rode down the track
In S.P. coin they paid the S.P. back.

Pete

I can see 'em. It's old man Barker, and Bessie, and the kid's
Miranda Barker.

(He shoots into air)

(ALL get up, join song; enter OLD MAN BARKER,
BESSIE, MIRANDA.)

All

The Sonntag gang didn't take it lying down
They robbed the S. P. and saved the town

The Sonntag gang rode down the track
and in S. P. coin they paid the S. P. back

California's telling it far and wide
Of them brave boys and how they could ride

They waved the lantern they stopped the train
They robbed it in the night and were off again

The S. P. directors were down on their knees
But them three masked bandits they never will seize.

BLACKOUT

CURTAIN

(Curtain up on usual half back drop indicating
trapper's cabin in the hills, very rude. It is
a very bright night. FRANK and a YOUNG GIRL
are sitting on a kind of rough bench.)

Miranda

(Spoken)
(Fifteen)

You always watch nights, don't you Frank.

Frank

Sure Miranda, but Pete goes huntin' days, and Abe's too sick. But
little girls like you ought to be abed now.

Miranda

I think Bessie likes you better than she does Pete, Frank.

Frank

Shucks no, Miranda, the women always like Pete better.

Miranda

I like you better.

Frank

There's no accountin' for tastes, Miranda, is there now.

Miranda

You're always pokin' fun at me, Frank, I'm not such a little girl as you think. Why you leavin' us tomorrow?

Frank

'Cause Indian Jim says he heard Black Bill tell he was comin' here in a day or two. Wouldn't want to get you and your father into a jam.

Miranda

I'd like it. I can shoot as good as pa almost. He'd like it, too.

Frank

You little mountain wildcat, Miranda, want me to scratch you back of your pretty little ears, so's you'll feel good?

Miranda

(Low)

Couldn't I go along with you, too, like Bessie does? —Frank, I can't let you go way from me. It tears out my innerds like somebody stuck a hand in and grabs and —oh Frank.

Frank

Hush Miranda.

(Music)

Miranda

(Spoken)

I love you, Frank.

(Sings)

I don't know any more what it used to be
Before I saw you at table sitting across from me
All I can remember is I saw you look at me
And I couldn't breathe and I hurt so bad I couldn't see.

I couldn't see but just your looking eyes
And my ears was buzzing with a thumping noise
And I was scared the way everything went rushing around
Like I was all alone, like I was going to drown.

There wasn't nothing left except the light of your face,
There might have been no people, there might have been no place,
Like as if a dream were to be stronger than thought
And could walk into the sun and be stronger than aught.

Miranda (Cont'd)

Then someone says something and then you spoke
And I couldn't hardly answer up, but it sounded like a croak
So I just sat still and nobody knew
That since that happened all of everything is you.

Frank

Miranda, sweet, you couldn't guess how beautiful you are
It's like what a man dreams when he's looking at a star
So gentle, so sweet, so true, and so white,
And he dreams he's the evening that loves that starbright.

And now that the moon has covered over her sky
My star has come to me, trusting and shy,
Has come to my arms, so still in the moon-light
Where her eyes are so black and her young face is white.

So white and so soft and so true and so shy
I hold her like I was all of the evening sky
She is mine to love in my arms she is mine
And I want my Miranda, Miranda who's mine.

I have her and want her and want her some more
'Cause it's like I was more like myself than before
Miranda, I'm going to keep you to kiss
And never let you go further than this.

Oh my lovely Miranda, it's all a lie
I'll be leavin' you before that moon there leaves the sky,
Slide through the hills and then away
Riding all night, hiding the day.

Miranda

Frank, I know it, it's all a lie
You'll be leaving me before that moon leaves the sky
Ride through the hills and further away
Riding all night, hiding the day.

Frank

God damn those bastards of the S. P.
Beat us no, but they poison us, see
Like they stuck a finger into my heart
And stirred up the muck down there in the dark.

We'll never get clear of this S. P. war
Never be the ranchers we freely was before
No matter how right, when you fight too long
God, it's just the same as if you was wrong.

Frank (Cont'd)

I keep up a front, Abe does too
Don't care what's back of it, I'll see this through
And there's my brother Pete, he's breaking up fast
All I think of is how much longer can he last.

Miranda, look, my heart is mean and black
And that ain't nothing for you, but I'll be yearning to be back
Yearning for Miranda, so sweet and moonwhite,
So far from the hate in me, so safe here, and asleep.

Miranda

Frank, if we've only got one night
Don't think about nothin' else but me
Love me and hold me tight
Don't think of nothin' else but me.

I love your heart, what's black there too
I'm not afraid of the spite in you
I'm not afraid of the hate you feel
It's all of it you and only you is real.

Frank

Like next to this moonlight a shadow is dark
So it seems the spot where murderers lurk
And the moon moves oh so easy and the shadow, too
And fear becomes moonlight and moonlight is you.

Miranda, real in the moonlight
Miranda warm in my arms
All of me loves you lovely tonight
Each one of your honey charms.

Miranda

Frank, your mouth makes me dizzy with a strange delight
And your body's a heaven where I feel like in flight
And the terror you make me feel forcing up inside
Is bursting into sweetness like a fountain untied.

Frank

Miranda, the dream's taking hold of me
Like a waterspout takes hold of the sea.

Miranda

Oh Frank, it holds me, whirls me away
I'm happy and I want it to scare me this way.

Frank

It tears all through me, a sheet of fire—

Miranda

The flames leap out of me, I'm swept up entire—

Frank

Entire, like the lightning striking in a storm—

Miranda

Yes, open to love and open to harm.

Frank

Miranda, I'm losing myself with you
I'll hurt you dearest, it's got to be

Miranda

I love you, I love any hurt you do
And the hurt itself is more love for me.

Frank

Mine are the mountains, mine is the sky
All is Miranda's even if I die.

Miranda

Mine is the forest, mine is the sea
All of it for you, and you yourself are me.

Both

In the dark, in each other, narrow inside
Root of a dream that grows wider than wide
It's not our own words anymore we speak
It's a dream in us both where our own words break.

Like in a woodland hush
We heard a stream
Through pine and brush
We seen a gleam
In the forest high
We climbed upstream
We didn't know why
If it wasn't a dream

Both Frank and Miranda (Cont'd)

Here was a pool
Brown and deep
Clear and cool
Where the stream's asleep
Then the river's a gleam
With streamers and rays
Where a snag in the stream
Quivers and stays.

And the water's rushing
Down boulders and rocks
Spouting and gushing
Leaping in shocks
It forces the walls
Scaling the height
Here is the falls
A thunder of white

Roar and thunder
Thundering fall
Love is a wonder
Fiercer than all
Like heaven was gushing
With shooting spheres
Tonight we're rushing
Through millions of years.

No love is not swift
Look at our sky
The moon here will not shift
Until we die
Held in our heart
Silent and bright
Here, held, though we part
with the rushing night.

Whole and true
A place we found
And born anew
On our own ground.
Our hearts have spoken
Let them be still
And not be broken
by good and ill.

BLACKOUT

(Backdrop changes as usual.)

(Lights up on pantomime scene with music.
Time in all—1/2 minute.)

(Scene, full stage, represents third Sonntag train robbery. Backdrop a stalled train, blowing smoke. It is day. BESSIE covers passengers, PETE covers guards, while ABE and FRANK lug away a small safe. PETE watching them, gets near a guard. The latter jerks off Pete's mask. PETE jumps back, shoots him, also conductor. Two guards draw but are shot by PETE and BESSIE, after one has wounded Pete in hand. PETE and BESSIE off, BESSIE covering retreat. Excitement among passengers.)

(Curtain comes down and one shot is heard after it is down.)

(Curtain up, half stage. Scene is McTrevor's office, as Act II, Scene 1. MR. MCTREVOR dictating to secretary.)

McTrevor

Take this: Dear General, —You say that if we accept the 60,000 which those settlers in Johnson are now offering us, we will lose face. You say that the Sonntag gang will inevitably be caught, and all we have to do is wait. Well, you have less common sense than even my wife. In the first place, I have no intention of admitting a connexion between the money stolen from us and the money paid. Whoever heard of a thief being such a fool as to give away money. However you must hold off the sheriff until the gang has had time enough to turn over their loot to the settlers, before he nabs them. If he nabs them earlier, we will never see the money, the posse will steal it.

Let me tell you that this offer from the settlers is providential. The whole business, which I consider your idea in the first place, has made such a commotion that the first thing to do is to stop it. If we do not clear it up now, the State election will cost us twice as much. But worst of all, the story is spreading to Washington, thanks to those damned reformers, where it plays into the hands of Gould's Texas and Pacific, and his men on the Land Grants committee. With that vote coming up in two months, it will cost us more than Johnson is worth to get the legislation we want, and you know what is at stake.

McTrevor (Cont'd)

So I am clearing out from under and glád to get sixty grand for it. Anyway, I would rather lose my face than a favorable decision in Washington. As for the songs you say some bums are singing, I have no time for such ungrateful and vicious elements. And now don't mention this business again, but get after that Coal Company and don't waste my time. I am overworked as it is, because nobody does his proper share. I am not a strong man, and I have to attend to every detail. If you cannot be of more use, you might as well resign, and pay up the notes for nearly a million I gave you.

That's all.

(Exit SECRETARY.)

(McTREVOR sings)

(Mr. McTrevor's second aria:
(Act III, after love scene.)

There's one thing about me (haha) I'm bluff and I'm straight
Once a deal is closed I don't brood nor hate
I don't bear no grudge like these guys with a brain
I respect whoever beats me, and (haha) I'll take him on again.

Take these ranchers, I admire 'em, I'm a son of a gun
I tried to dispossess 'em, and they fought me and they won
They risked their necks and I'm paid in my own money
And am I sore at 'em, hell, I can laugh and think it's funny.

A lot of milksops go crabbin' about inalienable rights
But a man that's a man knows the real fun is a fight
Socking, socked, socking, that's (haha) when I feel swell
I'm big as the world and I'm steamed up as hell (haha).

Money's what I fight for, money, and I fight with it
And I'll tell you something else that ain't no secret
Money, win or lose, makes a man more a man
Sneer, you pikers, but deny it if you can.

Till you get the feel of money, you don't even exist
Look here, I can land a hundred million dollar fist,
Railroads, cities, I make 'em, see
When they dream of the nation, they dream of me.

What's man's greatest invention, money
What makes me young when I'm old, money
What upsets God's intention, money
What's the one fact we don't need to be told, (hahaha)

Love. Allright, love, you can love anybody
You know it yourself, they're all cute, they're all shoddy
Where does it get you, what's left the next day?
But money gets into your blood to stay. (It's yourself)

McTrevor (Cont'd)

These Sonntags, these fools, what did they do it for?
Hand out sixty grand. Jeezus, I get sore
Who do they think they are, to change the rules?
How dare they make heroes out of a pack of fools.

A man is meant to look out for himself, number one
That's all there is to it, that's how the world is run
These unselfish heroes are a poison to the young
I hate their guts, and I'll see them hung hung.

(Suddenly realizes he's let himself go)

Hahahahaha.

BLACKOUT

(Scene in the gorge. Campfire. Night.
ABE and FRANK. Partly spoken, partly sung)

Abe

When you start doin' a thing you feel right spry
And then you go on doin' it and you don't know why
You just go on
'Cause it's got to be done.

I never known six months to go so long
Seems like all our lives we been hiding away like savages
With none of them little soft things that make you feel it's good to be
a man
With nary a one of them to please you in your secret mind like.

Frank I guess you and I are agreed
I won't last so much longer.
Maybe I'm not losing so much duckin' out this way
Now Pete's been recognized and drilled those boys on top of that
At that last hold up
The S. P.'s got quite a case if they catch us.
Frank, I'm right sorry on account of little Miranda and you.

Frank

What's the use of bellyachin' an' the job ain't done yet
We still got to get our 63,000 down to Johnson
You know, Abe, I was scared as hell the company wouldn't accept the offer
You sure was right tellin' me just why they had to
From what your sister in Frisco wrote Rheba about it.
You're smart as a fox, Abe, I don't see why you ain't a rich man
yourself and made a million.

Abe

Who'd want to spend his life in such a stink
Thinkin' about other people's money, other people's money all the time
you can think
I like Rheba too much, I wouldn't want to carry that vomit in my mind
Around the house, where there's a nice woman.
Them rich men is so mean, they'll kill each other some day
After we're all dead.
—I guess I'll go over and get my pony to lie down
So I can rest my head on her, she likes it
She's a good girl.

(He doesn't move, though. THEY sit smoking.)

Well, we've done what we set out to.

Frank

Yes, I guess we've won.

(Music)

Abe

Goodnight.

Frank

Goodnight.

(Exeunt.)

MOMENT OF BLACKOUT

(PETE is standing by the fire. BESSIE
enters and hangs up a washed dress to dry.)

Bessie

Where's Frank and Abe?

Pete

Sleepin' with the ponies. Left us to watch.

Bessie

Well, I'm glad we're headin' back to Johnson tomorrow. It sure gets
on your nerves, this life of adventure out under God's heaven, if you
haven't been raised to it. Pete, what's eatin' you. You're shakin'
like a leaf.

Pete

Say, Bessie, there ain't never been any indictment out against you, not so far anyway.

Bessie

Sure, I was born lucky. But I'll stick with you boys, long as you want me. You sure done a swell job foxin' old McTrevor.

Pete

Bessie, you know I been recognized. You know I'm in for it.

Bessie

Hell Pete, plenty of worse men than you runnin' around free. Why don't you skip to Mexico. You could take a thousand dollars, and start a little ranch down there. You talk to Frank and Abe tomorrow.

Pete

A thousand.

Bessie

Say, you're done up, Pete, go to sleep, I don't mind watchin. I got my thoughts, and they ain't pretty enough to sleep with, at that.

Pete

I got mine too, Bessie.

Bessie

Sure.

Pete

Geez, it's a shinin' wonder how you keep so neat and pretty in this wild way of livin'. You make me ashamed speakin' to you, so lady-like you look, but I'm going to get fixed up, too, 'cause it's like I wanted to win you anew every time I see you. You're too good for the west, Bessie, it's in the East you'd be appreciated and shine among the great ladies of Fifth Avenue and Broadway. And I sure would have to fight a lot of millionaires over there, but for you Bessie it'd be the big thrill of my life. Have you heard about Saratoga.

Saratoga, Saratoga, where the dawn comes up
in champagne

Saratoga, Saratoga, where I wined and I dined
my Elaine

I showered her curls with diamonds and pearls
And I kissed her again and again.

Bessie

You sure have a nice voice, Pete.

Pete

Wouldn't you want to go to Saratoga with me?

Bessie

I would, like a shot.

Pete

Remember what you used to say to me all last year?

Bessie

Don't I remember.

Pete

Well listen. Frank and Abe are going back to Johnson, to be nabbed. I tried to persuade him, but he can't think of nothin, I guess, but that Miranda kid. I'm not going to be hung for her sake, nor no one else's. What about you, Bessie. So I says if they're cracked, both of 'em, we've a right you and I to the swag. It won't do them no good, swingin'. And it don't belong to them farmers, what never crooked a finger nor passed up a square meal for it. You and I risked our necks for it, and now we've got it, we've a right to it. So I says, tonight Bessie and me'll lift the cache, while them two crowbait are sleepin', and light out for the free and easy East, Johnson or no Johnson. 63,000 dollars. Bessie, we're rich as hell. We'll not swing.

Bessie

Wouldn't it be better to—while we're about it, so there wouldn't be any arguments.

Pete

Stick 'em in the throat? Geez, I guess you're right, Bessie, they'd sure tell the police on us.

Bessie

I wish there was a way we could collect the reward for it though; it's three thousand a piece now for each one of you.

Pete

We might split with some fellow we tipped off to where the bodies 'ld be.

Bessie

And we might kill a man and a woman, slash 'em so you couldn't recognize them, give 'em our clothes and say it was you and me.

Pete

Sure, and collect the reward on us too, and besides, they'd not even look for us after that. Geez, Bessie, you're smart as a button. I'd never be caught that way.

(BESSIE laughs raucously)

Hush. Bessie, you foolin'?

Bessie

The joke's on me, Pete. To think that's the runt I lost my little heart to. Doublecross his pals, and murder his own brother. What a cockroach. Lucky you haven't the nerve to do it by yourself, or I'd be scared of you. So long, Handsome, I'd rather sit with a spider. And that's what Tex had to die for.

(Exit.)

Pete

Bessie, I'll be hung, I'll be hung.

Bessie

(Offstage)

(Sings Tex's last song, "When the curtains of night, etc.")

Pete

You can't treat me like that.

(Draws gun, and sneaks after her.
A moment later a shot.)

(Enter ABE and FRANK)

Frank

(Whisper)

What was that? Pete! Bessie!

(Reenter PETE, gun drawn. Music.
He shouts.)

Pete

Put up your hands. I killed her.

Frank

Bessie?

Abe

Where?

Frank

Go and look, Abe.

Pete

Don't move. I'm going to kill you, and I'm going to take the money and light out.

Frank

(Singing:)

I'm not taking any orders from you
And I'm not scared of that gun
A coward that shoots a woman
Has nothing to say to a man.

(PETE shoots wild. FRANK shoots gun out
of Pete's hand.)

You're going to saddle your pony
Saddle it on the run
Clear out so I'll never see you
Long as I live in the sun.

Pete

I lost my mask at the holdup
I can be recognized
That's why you want to get rid of me
I'll go, but you'll be surprised.

If you two think you can throw me out
After what you've done to me
It's cowards and fools you are both of you,
I'm holding the aces, see.

It's you Frank, that forced me into it,
You made me a bandit and thief
Yes, you made a murderer out of me
You want me to come to grief.

But I'm sick of fighting law and order
Fighting the Bible and the police
I see it was wrong like it's always wrong
It's not the way to peace.

Pete (Cont'd)

You two led me astray, you're older than me
Well, I'm going straight to Black Bill
I'll confess, I'll tell 'em all I know
They'll forgive me, and it's you they'll kill.

Frank

Go ahead if that's how God made you
He made you my brother, too,
I'll finish the job I started
And take my reward when I'm through.

Pete

You always pretended to be so brave
And to show me how to act well
But now you're going to be hanged in this life
And hanged hereafter in hell.

I'm going to tell 'em your hide out
I'm going to make my peace
I ain't going to die for them farmers
I'm going to live safe with the police.

Frank

You've already done worse
Betray us if you care
Take dead Bessie's curse
And get out of here.

Abe

You're going to choke in your stink
It won't ever stop
It's of Bessie you'll think
Until you drop.

Pete

She made fun of me, that's why I kelled her
I ain't sorry for it, see
I'm going to be safe with law and order
And you ain't goin' to laugh at me.

Abe

You won't find no place
Where your feet stay still
You won't find no face
Don't tell you, Kill.

Frank

Get your damn pony
On the run
You're dead to me
Long as I live in the sun.

(Exit PETE.)

McTrevor, McTrevor, look what you done
You've murdered my brother, that was part of me
Meant to be handsome, made for show
Not meant for no good, but born with me, born a part of myself forever.

Abe

Frank, we got to make a grave
So Bessie can take her rest.

Frank

And then ride all night to Johnson
So the bloodhounds don't nab us with the chest.

CURTAIN

(SHERIFF BLACK BILL appears before
curtain and deposes, as in Act II:)

Sheriff

On September 26th Pete Sonntag turned up in Bakers Field alone and started right off on a tear. I received confidential instructions from Frisco not to grab him right off, and I guess there was good sense in that. He sure was the hero when he hit town, and everybody standing him drinks and so forth. But he didn't look good to me. Anyhow within a week he came to me and said he'd made up his mind. We came to terms. Against a promise of immunity for himself and half the reward money, he informed me Frank and Abe was hidin' out in the boarded up Sonntag shack, a mile East of Johnson. That was impudent of them.

I rounded up my deputies and at dawn of October 2nd I and fifty men had that shack surrounded. And damn bum shots those possemen were—but they was Frisco drunks the Railroad sent me, because the local boys didn't care to join up. The shootin' lasted all day.

We lost eight men, and two Johnson boys was killed in an attempt to rescue the bandits. They was Jesse Throckmorton and Nat Mills, whose son became governor of the State thirty years later. After their attempt the bandits hoisted a sign saying, "Do not rescue us."

Sheriff (Cont'd)

At sunset I permitted Rheba Merkmeyer carrying a white flag to enter the shack and a half hour truce was declared. Inside Rheba found Abe seriously wounded.

(Curtain up. Interior of Sonntag shack, like last scene of Act One, but it is sunset. Prop wall with boarded up window, sign as above, and white flag on bean pole stuck between boards.)

(ABE is on chair, his feet on a second, BOTH MEN have improvised bandages, RHEBA fixing Abe's.)

Rheba

Abe, Abe Merkmeyer
Lie right still
Or it won't stop bleedin'
It never will.
Rest yourself honey,
Rest just a mite
Let the breath flow easy
And the pain take flight.

Abe

Rheba, you're smartest woman I ever knew
And no man never was near as smart as you
But there ain't nothin' worthwhile in dyin' anyhow
For the glory of what's left I won't be lying down.
(Gets up.)

How was I to know how happy I'd be
The one last day I'll ever see
In an open fight, shootin' off the lid,
Fightin' like hell, and feelin' like a kid.

Frank and Abe, both:

We sure let 'em have it, Rheba, don't you fret,
Fifty started out, and they ain't got us yet,
Now they're forty, an' the fight's just begun
Give us four days more, and there won't be a one.

Rheba also:

Damn Black Bill and his bastard posse
Killin' their own kind for the S. P. boss
Fifty to two, comin' to wipe us off the earth
We sure let 'em know what a free man's worth
Fifty to two is what an honest man's worth.

Abe

Frank, I sure had to laugh when I saw you stand
Thirstin' for a drink with a cup raised in your hand
And a bullet from them bastards smashed it up
And left you holdin' just the handle of the cup
You was standin' like a fool too surprised to swear
With the water on the floor, and no cup nowhere.

Frank, it ain't just the fightin' that's been the fun,
It's feelin' you there behind me, cleanin' your gun
Somehow it's feelin' you bein' with me here
Like a brother whose responsibility is dear
Like all men was meant to be to each other in the first place
Though it don't make sense sayin' it, with a shot in my face.
(He has to lie down)

Frank

If there's more crazy things, Abe, for us to do
You and I'll stick together and sure see it through.

Abe

It's a funny thing how Rheba here loves me yet
It's hard on the women Frank, the notions men get.

Rheba

Abe sure is foolish
Nine times out of ten
But Rheba that loves him
Loves him for it then
For bein' foolish and different
And doin' what he wants
His wife is happy in him
'Cause it's what a man is like.
Hush Abe, hush. Oh Abe.

Abe

Two distincts, division none,
Shakespeare said it, and that's what we done
It ain't no insurance, but it sure was fun.
(Dies)

Rheba

(Whispers, music continues.)

Abe. —Frank. —So quick like that. —Oh Abe, I didn't tell you. . . .
when it gets dark they're comin' to rescue you, all of them from Johnson
and from all over the county. . . .

(Kneels.)

(FRANK is quietly cleaning his guns.
Suddenly SHE gets up, shakes the corpse.)

I won't let you, I won't let you
I'll beat you, Abe, beat you
Abe, you've done it, Abe,
Abe, I hate you, I hate you.
How did you do it
You were here, yes, you were here
Now there's nothing but a —Oh God,
I want to hate him
He's nowhere, Abe, he's nowhere.

(Silence.)

Frank

(Speaking)

Goodbye, Rheba. The half hour they said for the truce to last is over.
You stay here. I'm going to shoot my way clear.

Rheba

Here's Abe's gun. I'm going to fight with you. After dark, they'll all
be fighting.

Frank

No they ain't, Rheba. And you ain't goin' to shoot. You've got to stay in
Johnson and see the S.P. don't go back on the contract now the land's
paid for. Otherwise this war don't make sense. But I'm going to end the
shootin', so that part 'll be over with.

(Whistle blows off stage, shot is fired,
marking end of truce. FRANK jumps out
of shack, firing. Lots of firing. FRANK
staggers and falls. POSSE comes out,
ready to kill him. BLACK BILL shouts,
Don't shoot boys, take him alive, so
they'll hang him. POSSE shouts, He's
alive, we got him alive, three thousand
bucks, he'll get a trial.)

(RHEBA appears at door.)

Black Bill

(Shouts across stage)
Where's Abe? Watch out boys.

(Silence.)

Rheba

(Shouts)
Abe's dead.

Black Bill

(Shouts)
We want the corpse then.

Rheba

What country do you belong to
Are you Americans same as Abe
Take money to kill each other
What kind of a country can you make?
What kind of a country are you proud of
Where you don't care what's good or bad?
Are we all living here together?
You bloodhunters, where are you at?

CURTAIN

(Back drop of small citrus grove.)

Men's Chorus:

We have the land, the land is ours by title and law
Frank is a convict, Abe is dead like you saw.

Abe's death, Frank's life is the sale price they set,
When you transfer property you pay for what you get.

Them two paid it solitary for what we all got
Them and Bessie and Tex and the boys that got shot.

—Like the war is over now, but earnin a livin never stops
We've brought in water from the hills and moved into citrus crops.

So you fight the freight rate or it's frost or the blight
And trouble in the family, but there's something inside you you fight.

Like when they call you a bum and you let em and don't resent it
Like when you say yes sir, yes sir, yes boss, and you meant it.

Men's Chorus (Cont'd)

—Frank Sonntag, he's doing twenty years in the pen,
Doing time in the new State Penitentiary for Men.

When they took Frank Sonntag they took a part of us all
Took the pride out of us and locked it in that government jail.

Convict Frank Sonntag, he was the best we had,
Convict Frank Sonntag, he was the best we had.

BLACKOUT

(Fourteen years later. Curtain up on an
unattractive theatre dressing room.
PETE SONNTAG sits drinking in a frock coat.)

Voice

(Offstage)

This is deacon Sonntag's dressing room, sir. The rest of the show ain't
due till tonight, but he's in there now.

(Knock. PETE puts away bottle and glass)

Pete

Come in.

(Enter MR. McTREVOR)

McTrevor

Mr. Sonntag, I happened to be here in Fresno on business and heard you
were speaking here with the Great American Entertainment Co. I thought
I'd drop in and shake hands. My name is McTrevor.

Pete

This is indeed a privilege. After 14 years! After fourteen years! Once
my greatest enemy, now we shake hands as Christian friends. And what
an honor for a mere deacon, a confessed sinner, to be entertaining one
of the greatest constructive personalities in American history. Take a
drink?

McTrevor

I hear you speak quite well of me on the platform. Well that whole
Johnson business was really of no importance—just one of those things.

Pete

Do not say that Mr. McTrevor. For me it was my road to Tarsus. Take a drink.

McTrevor

Thanks. I see you use make up.

Pete

The lights, Mr. McTrevor, the stage lights, they falsify. I only use enough to correct them. And I get better results. It's no use being narrow. After all, I am on my Father's business, not my own.

McTrevor

And done very well at it. I hear you own most of the Great Northern Hotel in Chicago.

Pete

(Warily)

Ah, my labors have been blest.

McTrevor

Of course. The information is strictly confidential.

Pete

I bought against a rise in equities in the section, but the hotel itself turns out to be extremely profitable.

McTrevor

Sure. Sure. That kind of hotel is apt to be. It happens a friend of mine is seriously interested in that corner lot. Why don't you come and see me at my office, when you're up in Frisco.

Pete

That's a date. I hope you'll go up in front and see the show. That Lucy Love girl who sings is an eyeful and a good sport too.

McTrevor

Sorry Deacon, not tonight. But I'll take a look up in Frisco. It's my theatre there, and I can charge it to the management.

Pete

Hahaha!

Voice

(Off stage)
You can't. . .

Other Voices

Lock him up with the rest.

McTrevor

What's that?

(Enter a crowd of MASKED MEN.)

One

Well, Pete Sonntag. Clear out, old fellow.

McTrevor

Certainly, certainly.

(Exit second door)

Pete

Who are you. What do you want.

Man

You know who we are. We seen in the paper you was to speak here. Confess all about the Sonntag gang robberies. An evangelist. Turns sinners to repentance. And you make a pile of money doin' it. Well, you're getting out. You're takin' the 5-43 East, and you're never again in your life going to set foot in California. 'Cause if you do you'll get it. In the middle of your act, right in the bright stage light, where you're a target for a baby. Now you know. Boys, take him to the station.

Pete

But Frank I thought they'd given you. . . .

Frank

(The man)
Fourteen years. Fourteen years was up today.

Another man

So we figure to run you out of town makes it a double celebration.

Pete

You can't do that, the law. . .

Frank

Shut up. You're out West here. It's the train or a necktie party, take your choice. Go on, boys, I'll wait here.

Pete

But it's costing me \$10,000. Help, Mr. McTrevor, Mr. McTrevor.

Boston Ben, then Others

Is the old skunk here, too. Let's tar and feather McTrevor.

McTrevor

(Comes out)

(To Pete)

I'll get you for ratting on me, you yellow bastard.

(To others)

Leave me out of this. I'm going.

Frank

Hustle Pete off before you miss the train. I'll take care of McTrevor till you come back. Somebody lock the door, and shoot whoever tries to come in.

(Exeunt)

McTrevor

How much do you want to let me go?

Frank

Didn't you hear me say it? I'm keepin' you till they all come back. Then we'll see what you get.

McTrevor

You can pull this sort of thing when it's your brother, but not—

Frank

(He speaks low and quietly all through this scene)

Don't you dare speak of my brother. You made him your kind. And I'd like to strangle you for it right now.

McTrevor

Help. Help.

Frank

Scream your head off. If anybody comes, I'll shoot you dead, and they won't get me alive, neither.

McTrevor

What are you going to do.

Frank

What's your hurry? Just sit and wait a spell. 14 years today. It's a long time.

Fourteen years is a long time to wait
Too much time to sit still and hate
Too much time to sit in one place and think
The other places, the other people, can't help but shrink.
Now I'm back the old wishes begin again to be real
But when I look at you it's just a ghost I feel
If I had had you this way fourteen years ago
You'd have got what you deserve, what you still deserve now.
It's just an old man I see sittin' here
A puffed up old man who's afraid of fear
Afraid of Abe, Rheba, of Tex, Bessie, and Pete
Ghosts of the living between him and his meat.

McTrevor

Hurry up and get it over
I'm not a farmer to sit here and jaw
Don't forget it, I'm McTrevor
And I'm losing my temper right now.
Want me to whine like a mongrel bitch
Confess I'm a killer and a crook?
You know the poor, they're as vicious as the rich;
Pity 'em, yes, in a two dollar book.

Frank

You're a fool old man, your strength is gone
It's time you were dead and put under a stone.
I been thinkin' so long one way or another
I come to know you like you was a brother.
I know the fear under the peel of your eyes
The fear of despair it don't disguise
Despair how phantoms come and go
You taken to money like a snowbird to snow.

Frank (Cont'd)

Money hogs your mind by day and by night
Shuts out the easy weather and the shiftless light
And likewise how a hand is found and lost
So you can mind people to be figures of ghosts.

The money in your mind makes you see like stone
It's all dead every where, what you can count you can own,
Own time by the clock, count people by the head
Figure it in money, you can count it, if it's dead.

McTrevor

Will you let me state my case to the audience?

Frank

Go ahead.

McTrevor

My point is that Mr. Sonntag hasn't the moral right to shoot me. He hasn't because in this opera I have not been presented as a real character. I have been no more than a stock villain, a diabolus ex machina. To kill me has no dramatic value.

I don't say I am pleased with so unreal a part. I had expected the subject of the opera to be the conflict between Mr. Sonntag and myself, or in a larger sense between agrarian charm (represented by the settlers) and capitalist power (represented by the S. P.). But as the opera progressed I found I was mistaken. The real subject of it turns out to be the conflict among the settlers themselves, the conflict inside their characters, as they come to terms with a massive, impersonal utility of national scope. The drama is not how to get rid of me, but how to go on living with me around; the drama is not revenge on the rich, but how to get used to being poor. Unattractive as I am, shooting me might offer a relief, a sentimental diversion. But I insist that it is beside the point, it is not cogent, it is not dramatically justifiable. I didn't ask to be a wooden character; but if it will save my neck, I am glad to remain one.

Frankly, I should have preferred to show you the conflicts I myself have lived through in my own real life. I believe that my own real life can be justified quite as well as Mr. Sonntag's. In defense of my real life, I might remind you of a fact you all know, living as you do sixty years later than all of us here on stage. In your time the distribution of earning power has immensely widened; the bitterness of the episode here presented has become historical, it is not actual. But I will not take credit for that. I will instead take credit for my function in society, and stepping back into character, that is what I shall now try to do.

McTrevor (Cont'd)

(Now to Frank)

The man who can make money
Give the devil his due
There's not much about him that's funny
He's a better man than you

Money is the blood of the nation
It nourishes and renews
It pumps from ocean to ocean
It thins in a million hues

Storing the flame of the smelters
Storing the fire on the plain
Storing the fever that shelters
A will in the mess of the brain

Hoarding these gifts from ruin
Beyond the gasp of breath
Hope and horror pursuing
Money stands up against death

Past the collapse of the starving
Past the suicide's yell
Money keeps clean its carving
Keeps its innocent smell

Millions of curses its thunder
A roar of envy and greed
Like a flood advances the wonder
Money—majestic in speed
I face it, the flood that devours
Deluge, tempest, I turn to a use
Men like me risk the life that is ours
But the nation gains, win or lose

Power of money, it crushes
You and your feeble kind
Power of a people, it gushes
Blood in the great man's mind

Hero, he toughens his nature
He forces the nation's flower
Progress, progress, the future
Is organization of power.

Frank

If you didn't get so red in the face
You'd have made a more convincing case.
Every time I started to get sore at that song
I had to smile how you could twist your tongue.

McTrevor

There's not a word of it you can deny
Nobody can who's got any sense.

Frank

You can crow all right at my expense
You'll stop soon enough when it's you who's going to die.
You tried to swipe our land we fought and got it back
You go on livin' in a palace we go on livin' in a shack.

(Spoken)

Sure, heroes is nice to think about. Trouble is when you think about one of them heroes, you forget the sixty million other people that have got to live along side of him.

(Song)

Ain't you ever noticed with a girl or along with a pal
How there's a big country inside them you never get to know
Like at night in the hills you hear two kids that call
Far off, far off from each other, and never no more.

Or like at another time above the canyons you stand
And the sun is bright on that country like on promised land
And maybe behind you where your cold shadow is thrown
Are other canyons in moonshine, the unknown you yourself own.

Land so large you never travel out of yours into his
View so far a lightning flash can cross the abyss
Miles on miles in that basin how small a town appears
Look, how small an act, action, done among the desert of years.

All this is our country. Pride is this country inside
Pride the view as over our own, view beyond over others as wide
Open boundary we are born with, like the undefended breath
That makes us here the same as brothers, and equally separate in death.

When you look at night at a stranger beside you in sleep
His breathing body lays there right under a common sky
Wide open to the dark is the common greatness bodies keep
We all live, live great and defenseless as you and I.

Well, pal, after saying that
I look at you settin' there rich and fat
With a gentleman's grouch and a gentleman's drool
A gentleman's smell, and

(Slaps his thigh)—mean as a fool

And I got to laugh 'cause I can see
We're both of us Americans, and the joke's on me.
Created free and equal, equal to what?
To you, pal, settin' in a sourstomach squat
To you so mulish, and so stuck up
So mean by nature you'd kick a peeing pup

Frank (Cont'd)

To you God set above me, above and apart,
A hero, superman, don't make me ff. .

(Raspberry)

Some shouts orders and some obey
But there's a lot more than shoutin' in the length of a day
Some got money and some ain't
But it comes off in bed like a old woman's paint
Some is successful, but so few, so few
The population scouts around for something else to screw.

McTrevor

I fail to see the humor of the situation
The rights of property are the rights of creation.

Frank

Pick your own big words about the poor and the rich
I just think you in particular are a son of a b-

(He is interrupted by CHORUS)

Chorus

(Including MIRANDA, two women, but not Rheba)

(First off stage then entering)

Take care brother, we're not the kind that you can boss
'Cause this time we're having our way

Don't like your moustache, it's agoing to be your loss
'Cause this time we're having our way.

Frank

(During)

Miranda!

(Interrupts)

Listen, this man here is son of a bitch McTrevor.

Voices

Tar and feather him, shoot him, string him up.

A Man

Hell, I'm going to strangle him with my own bare hands.
(Slowly)

McTrevor

(Sing)

Don't, don't kill me

McTrevor (Cont'd)

I'm an old man and I want to live
Please lady
(Clasping Miranda's knees)
don't let them kill me
Call me whatever you want, but don't kill me.
(He repeats several times)
—money, is it?

Frank

(Spoken)
Shut up. I'm going to pronounce sentence.
(McTREVOR howls. CHORUS laughs cheerfully.)

Frank

(Speaking)
Pop, justice is relative. You've had more than your share all your life,
and this is one more time you get it. Come here and I'll slap your face.
(This is done)
I just ain't sore enough to hang you the way justice demands. I'm free
and I got my friends here and I ain't goin' to stir up an old stink for
the sake of morality, when I'm feelin' so good. What about it, Miranda?

Miranda

Let him go. I hope he marries a woman who spends all his money for
him.

McTrevor

Thank you, thank you.
(Exit)

Frank

(Sung)
There's something in a woman that loves the rich
Honest, dishonest, she don't care which.

Miranda

Frank, it's no use talkin' too big
Till you've had something good to eat
It makes you too mad, it sounds too sad
So let's get back to Johnson where we fixed a big treat.

(EVERYBODY steps forward, a curtain shuts
out the scene, RHEBA joins them)

Chorus (Women)

This is our land
This is our sky
It belongs to us
Till the day we die.

Standin here and there
In the summer sun
It's not like thinkin
What you or I done.
Lookin out across the fence
If the corn would grow
It's a feeling all over
Without thinkin it's so.

It belongs to us together
Cause we made it that way
And it's something no stranger
Can come and take away.

(MEN):

Here is the way we take
Here is the place we live
This is the day we like
We know the country here
Yip! and people, the friends we have.

A country we like to have
A way we take to go
Call it good, call it brave
Take it easy—you got to give
Yip! and people, the friends we have.

Call it wrong, call it right
You get to work and you get to fight
We know the day we like
And the money we make to live
Yip! and people, the friends we have.

It looks fine, it looks good
Here is the place to be
And the way we like to go
Feeling easy, feeling free
Yip! and people, the friends we have.

(ALL):

Sure we're different, and none of us the same
Some got better looks, some got a English name
Some hold their liquor, some hold their wife
Take your turn, and have the time of your life.

Chorus (All) (Cont'd)

No use thinkin you're better than the rest
You don't believe it when you get undressed
Come down off the grandstand and join the old parade,
We're American anyhow, hell, of who are you afraid.

Some like to do the shoutin, let em go ahead
Keep your shirt on, they'll stop when they're dead
God how they rile you, it's a fact they do you dirt
Cheat and boast of it, that's the big shot kind of squirt
Looks like the best way to keep money in its place
Is graft a couple of angels on the human race
It's plain unreasonable how the rich folks act
We're American anyhow, and that's a fact.

Everybody knows how everybody lives
The trouble it takes, and the glory it gives
Wash the spinach, tidy up the home
Catch a freight, and roam, Romeo, roam.
We all start young, later on we're old
And most of the time, boy we do as we're told
If we work in the sun or we work in the rain
We're American anyhow, from California to Maine.

When you seen the moon on the roofs of the rolling freights
You get a feeling it's our own, the whole United States
It's one wide country and there's lots of us in it
Like we say free and equal, like we keep trying to begin it,
A feeling we're sure of, and a secret we keep
No use gabbin up and down and makin it cheap.
So what? So it's plain as the nose on your face
We're American anyhow, say, all over the place.

(Enter also McTREVOR, BLACK BILL, PETE,
etc. and join in.)

My country tis of thee
Sweet land of liberty
Of thee I sing

(A man shouts into the musical rest, fast:
Long may our land be bright with freedom's
holy light!)

Long may our land be bright
With Freedom's holy light
Protect us by thy might
Great God, our king.

END.

ABOUT THE PIECE:

The historical nucleus of the story is in the illegal, unjustifiable and viciously brutal eviction of the settlers of the Tulare Basin in California by the Southern Pacific in the eighties, which led to the Battle of Mussel Slough. And also in the later, possibly related holdups on the same road, which led to the pursuit and heroic exploits of John Sontag and Chris Evans. The facts can be found conveniently in "The Big Four" (for Mussel Slough), and "Bandits and the Southern Pacific" (for the Evans-Sontag episode.) --There seems also to be a memory of Jesse James and of the later life of one of the Younger brothers coloring the legend. Compared to history, the legend is more logical and also less brutal. The only real names the legend has retained are: Son(n)tag, the S. P., and California. A photograph of Evans exists, as well as one of the shack where he was killed.

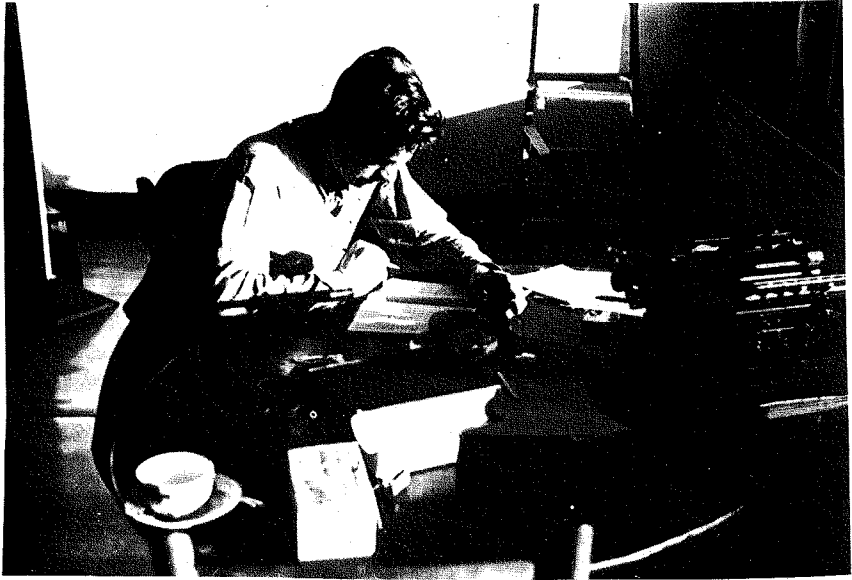
In this libretto for a play opera I try to use as many familiar forms of singing as I can. That is why there are examples of a child's improvised song, a humorous local ballad, a leftist song, a war spirit march, a hymn, a blues song, a square dance song, a sentimental love song, and a barroom waltz. The other forms grow out of these into the unfamiliar. A few scattered stanzas of real songs are meant both to heighten this immediately familiar feeling, as well as further widen the range from the personal to the impersonal. On the other hand even literary verse is used. The intention is not to write in a folk style, but to write in no style at all, as broadly and as sincerely and as obviously as anyone would. I do not think the music should imitate folk music.

One model has been the libretto for the "Magic Flute". Another, the verse from "Birmingham Jail":

If you don't love me
Love who you please
Throw your arms around me
Give my heart ease.

A third, the sentence quoted in the "New Yorker":

"If a man wanted some noise, he would open his trap and howl".



Esau and the Angel

It is said that Esau too wrestled with an angel. He appeared standing in the form of an effeminate boy with red hair, and Esau who had been married twentythree years by that time, was charmed. "Clasp me," said the angel; "your hair is real, and I love the feel of it on my back." "I am afraid to hurt your delicate skin, boy" said Esau, clasping him tighter. "Oooo," whispered the angel, "isn't Jacob an old fraud. After all, whose money was it?" "My brother is brighter than me," whispered Esau. "He's ten years younger and he's terribly handsome, but I love you for your dumbness." "The love of angels passeth human understanding," whispered Esau, turning his head a little so he would not kiss the angel; he managed to avoid the ambrosial lips, but when his own touched the divine cheek, he thought he would lose consciousness. The angel laughed, "Let me go a little; I like your goat smell, but it suffocates me; I had a hard day." Esau let go, and the boy stepped back. "I'm sure you did," Esau said, looking away. He felt a fierce pain, and realized in a sudden memory of his youth, that he had been kicked in the groin. Through the darkness over his eyes he heard however the angel's lovely laughter. "When once you've got an angel in your arms," he heard the heavenly voice remark, "it's foolish to let him go; it wounds my vanity." Esau saw him smiling a little rather tenderly and his eyes shining; he grabbed the boy in both arms, threw him and got a scissors hold on his legs. "Bastard," the voice hissed in his ear, and the teeth bit his cheek. He couldn't tell if it was sweat or blood between their faces, but he squeezed the boy tighter and laughed. He had no intention of hurting him and he knew he couldn't be, the way he held him. The boy was still. Listening for the boy's breath, Esau felt a twinge of remorse, knowing his wives often accused him of being rough when he didn't mean it. But he held tight. So frail the boy was; though he was wiry. He envied his brother who had wrestled with this same boy and had boasted of his victory. But then he felt almost his whole self being flooded and swept away by a miraculous wave of music. "God told me," the angel was saying, "that he loves you. You have mastered the wrath he put into your blood at birth as a temptation. He loves you more than Jacob. And we angels are his messengers and love whom he loves." Tears came to Esau's eyes. He felt the angel's lips light and flowerlike touching his. He opened his a little, inhaling the powerful sweetness, pressing greedily, advancing his thick tongue through the soft passage. An overwhelming burst of pain made him tighten like a vise on the boy; his shut mouth was filled with a hot sweetish wave, his own blood. The

angel spat. "Just the tip of your tongue," he said laughing, "You sure are dumber than Jacob. But you're sweet. Let go me, your blood is all over everything, what a mess." Esau didn't let go his hold, "I wouldn't have done it," said the light boyish voice again, "if I'd known it would have made such a mess. You have such thick rich blood. I'll staunch it." Esau felt a little peck of lips on his cheek, and sure enough the blood stopped flowing, though the pain didn't abate. But the angel's kindness was like a balm inside his heart. "I do think you're interesting," the boy in his arms continued, though now his voice sounded farther off. Esau opened his eyes and drew back his head a little to see that adorable face again; it was smiling, pure of any defilement of his blood, with a heavenly malice. "I've had enough of this," the boy said, "and so have you." "But you said you loved me," Esau said, although without his tongue-tip it came out like "Bu oo ai oo yovb be." "Haven't you any sense of humor at all?" the boy said just a little sharply. Esau felt all the miseries he had ever known beating like inside his eyes, but he refused to cry again. "Well, if you insist," the boy said again. And he brought his head forward to kiss him, and kissed Esau with closed lips on the mouth, and drew his head away again. He smiled his heavenly smile again. Esau began to smile too. "Of course, I'm just fooling you," the boy whispered charmingly. Like a fountain the tears gushed from Esau's small eyes. He relaxed his hold. The angel was out of his hold at once, laughing. "How silly men are," he laughed, "Jacob at least was like a woman, he kept me giggling till I was tired and then he had me; not that it did him much good, but anyway he could put it in writing and his boast will continue to sound hollowly through the foolish ages. Praise be to God who created us all." And he was gone. It had only taken twenty minutes, and so it was still the middle of the night. So Esau praised God too, but without words.

And it is said that the angel returning to heaven made the following report:

I came before Esau in the same shape in which his brother had conquered an angel, and a moment later he had realized that the particular shape I appeared in might be used to trap me, in a way my own lack of human experience might not have prepared me for; he made no attempt to touch me in my inaccessible angelic nature. Esau on the contrary, ignoring the human limitations of the occasion greeted me at once in my own angelic language. The more I debased myself to his condition, the thicker I folded the disguise between us, the more he ignored his right, he delighted in my angelic presence and in the irretrievable and imperishable sensation of recognition. He took God's message not according to its express terms as pointless except for the challenge to wrestle, but so to speak overleaping its mysterious and even appalling impositions, he took it as a divine salutation. While Jacob's clear acceptance of the limitedness of his possibilities of action showed his humility, Esau's confused presumption

of an unlimitedness in his possible adoration showed his love. Extravagantly he spent his poor human resources and soon had nothing left but mortal doubt. Jacob has used doubt against me as a murderous weapon, the way men do among themselves. Esau however offered me this last treasure as a present. I was not empowered to accept it, nor to give him a third opportunity to seize me. I should have like to. His is an impractical understanding and an unkingly one, unlike his brother's; but one delicious among men.

And as he rose upward and looked about him, the angel sang:

The fields of heaven open wide
Here place can find no time to hide
And time can find no place
To darken and disgrace
But shows a shining face.

Esau and Jacob reconciled
Rebecca young, young Isaac mild
Here may they intertwine
Their difference of design
As fervidly as mine

For man and woman's fitfulness
The spite inborn and the distress
Their motions the most base
Become them in this space
As beauties of their race

Like my own wings on which I soar
I jubilate and I adore
So passion and its stings
Here turn into great wings
With iridescent rings

Here free they sail and somersault
Who now on earth in fury halt
Here swoop the ones who rave
And cooped in horror crave
Extinction of a grave

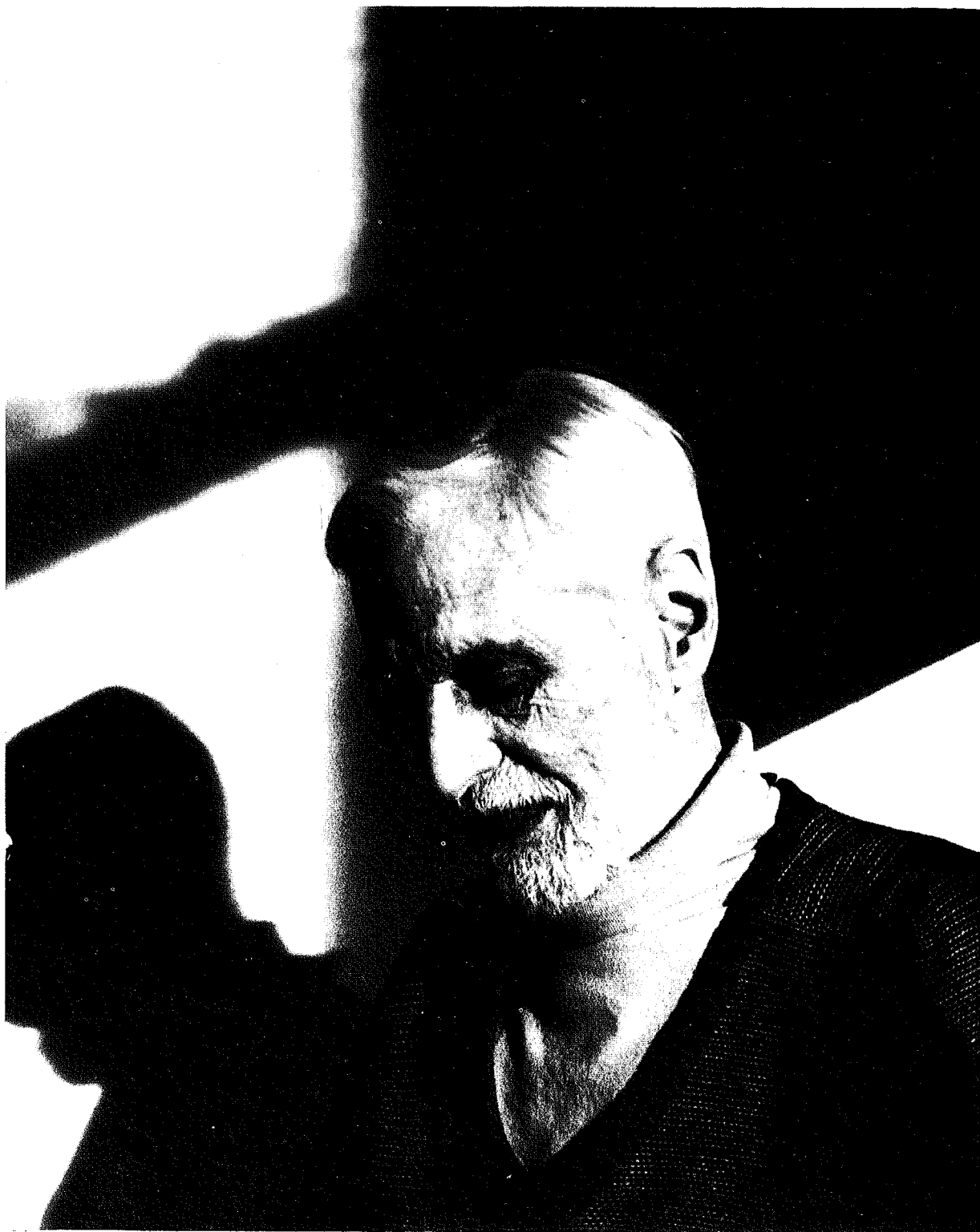
How lovely in their paroxysm
Earth's people, radiant with chrism
Whose wounds must measure all

Foreverness's wall,
Blood creatures, soft and small

And now I turn my gaze away
Into the noon of my own day
Gulf everywhere and vast
I fall through it at last
And rise in it as fast

Absorbed I cease to comprehend
For all is means and all is end
My breast the burning sky
Angelically I
By myriads multiply

Our song a universal shout
Love's word within us and without
An incandescent will
So I my fate fulfill
Which like a tender silence deepens still.



AN INTERVIEW

with

Edwin Denby

by

Mark Hillringhouse

In his apartment-loft in Chelsea, April 21, 1982.

MH: You were born in China in 1903.

Denby: Yes.

MH: How long did you live there?

Denby: I don't remember at first. I remember going back when I was about four. My parents and grandparents had been there travelling.

MH: They were missionaries?

Denby: No, they were in the Diplomatic Corps, and my father went into business there.

But the time that I remember was the second time at age four, that was in Shanghai, and I remember it because I remember the house, and pagoda, that marvelous thing with the great big tower in the back yard was overturned outside the wall of our garden, and it was so amazing to see it lying there on the ground.

I remember that I went to kindergarten in China and there was a pony and a two wheeled little wicker cart which took me and my two older brothers to school. And the great thing about it was that when you got to school you

could throw the reins back into the cart and the pony would go home.

MH: Do you speak Chinese?

Denby: No. I once thought I knew the word for milk, but when I said it nobody who knew Chinese knew what I was saying. (laughing)

But my father did. Later on I always thought that I had some sort of affinity for it because Waley made such a deep impression on me as a writer and a poet.

MH: Which writer?

Denby: Arthur Waley, the one who translated Chinese poetry.

You don't know anything about him? He's a marvelous poet really and a marvelous man and his prose is so good.

MH: So he started you in poetry; you read him early on?

Denby: No, well yes. I was about 16 in college when someone gave me or I found this book called One Hundred & Sixty Chinese Poems and I read them. And because I thought I had an affinity for Chinese I went right into them and had no trouble with them at all. Much later I discovered that they were really very good poems, very well translated.

MH: Where did you go to college?

Denby: Harvard.

MH: What years?

Denby: It must have been in 1920. It didn't interest me and I didn't graduate.

MH: You quit?

Denby: I didn't like it. At the time I was in my Junior Year and I was drinking a lot. I must have been 19 and I thought it was boring.

I had two very good friends and it was exciting in a sense because it was Prohibition time. But I got very impatient with school and decided I would rather leave than take my Senior Year.

I was lucky because a History professor's mother had an old fashioned estate in New Hampshire. Though I didn't know her or have a course with him. There were several professors who were very nice to me because I had gotten the highest scores on the college entrance exams. I had no idea why but I did. And that didn't mean anything to anybody I knew, but when I got to Harvard several professors knew it and they wondered who this creature really was, and they couldn't find out because I had no character, nothing. And I didn't seem to know anything so they thought, "Maybe there's something to him." I was doing Latin and Greek and the Latin professor said to his old friend the History professor who lived on the same Cambridge street, "Maybe your mother could give him a job in the country. It might do him some good." This was because I had said that I wanted to be a farmhand.

MH: From Harvard to becoming a farmer!

Denby: I wanted to get away, and of course I had never been on a farm

and had no idea what a farmhand was.

MH: They didn't get many farmhands with Harvard educations in those days.

Denby: It so happened that she needed somebody.

MH: But did you start writing at that age? Did you write poetry? Did you meet poets at Harvard?

Denby: Yes, I think I must have.

I didn't write anything while I was on the farm because I was completely idiotic. I was quite astonished. I woke up! I had been there for five months and I thought, "I've had enough of this." So I left and got a job in a hotel as a busboy. I needed \$5 to take the train from northern New Hampshire to southern Vermont, to a place where a painter at the time named Rockwell Kent lived. I don't know if anybody knows him anymore, but he had written a book on Alaska with his son. There was something mysterious about it in my dazed state that attracted me there because I wanted to meet him. So I earned the money. All I know was that they were very glad to get rid of me at that hotel. Then as soon as I left the hotel I started walking past Mount Washington from the north side and I began to feel wonderful.

I got to this place called Manchester in Southern Vermont—I lose my memory once in a while but somehow these things come back to me—and in Manchester I met a very nice woman poet. She was a very old fashioned type woman poet and coincidentally a friend of the woman who ran the hotel where I had just quit. So I thought, I'd like to give a reading of Shakespeare's sonnets. In fact I had given poetry readings in college to my friends of all the classics because those were the ones I liked. I didn't know contemporary poetry or anything. I wasn't even curious about it!

So the woman said, "Oh, I think that's very interesting, and I don't think we could afford to miss anything like that." So I went to the local library and got a copy of the sonnets, came back, and asked how many should I read? I wanted to read them all, but they suggested twenty. At any rate I read them and must have read them terribly. But that gave me enough money to get to the next place because I was going home to my family for the summer in northern Michigan.

MH: You love sonnets more than any other form of poetry, you write mostly sonnets.

Denby: I love the form because it is so clear to me, and I love the way the shape is so determined. I love the way it begins as a quatrain and builds up gradually by adding to itself in the next quatrain, and then how it comes to its emotional peak, its climax, and then subsides. And that it does still more the third, and then I love the way the conclusion quiets everything down again, or flies off if that's the temptation.

Whether or not to make the conclusion fly off and whether or not I found out about not making it fly off I don't know. I think those first sonnets couldn't have been any good at all. Because nobody ever saw them

and I haven't kept them. But it was years later that I thought about it.

The form itself was such a handy challenge—no? It's like making a small table or chair. You know what it is if it's needed, but then it's up to you to do it.

MH: And you're comfortable writing in that space?

Denby: Yes, and of course I'm talking about afterwards when I started writing personal sonnets.

MH: Your early sonnets are more lyrical.

Denby: Yes. Well I don't know what that means. I say yes because I don't know. I have an image of them in my mind, but much later I knew so much more about the possibilities imaginatively as well as technically.

MH: Were you inspired by the sonnets of Milton, Shakespeare and Spenser?

Denby: They're marvelous. I had written a sonnet that echoed Shakespeare's passionate plea, and a professor who was a poet—Oh dear I forget his name. Anyway he took me to dinner and said, "Well you know, Shakespeare is not passionate." And I said, "What do you mean!" Well he had read them the way a grownup reads them and I had read them the way an adolescent reads them, and they mean quite different things.

They seemed to me to be passionate, but of course I had no idea what passion was in the literary sense. Whereas ten years later I would have known what the professor had meant and wouldn't have been so indignant at the remark.

Other people in my class when I was at Harvard were much more active in poetry than I was and I sort of stayed away from them.

I knew one man who was a friend of Professor Palmer's, the one who did the Homer translations. So he invited me to go to a reading at Professor Palmer's and Professor Palmer was an old man at that time who had led a very full life and he read very melodiously. I remember how interesting the sound was and he told my friend that I was no good.

MH: That was nice of him.

Denby: So afterward when my friend came and said to me, "You know he said to me you're no good!" I was offended. It wouldn't mean anything to a grownup. He seemed so wonderful to me. I wasn't ready to realize that there were many worlds.

But I haven't thought of that up until now.

MH: You must have come to New York after that. After Harvard?

Denby: Yes. There's a lapse in my memory somewhere.

I came to New York and lived in the Village with my best friend from college who's still a very good friend, and I still see him. He became a doctor later, but he wanted to marry his girl friend and his family didn't want him to. There was a difference in social status and

this astonished me because I was so stupid and couldn't understand those things yet. But he had a very nice father. The mother was very peculiar, a midwesterner, who in those days were stricter about social rank. He did marry her and came to New York.

We took an apartment together near where Sheridan Square is now and I think the rent was only \$20. It was two rooms in a rowhouse.

MH: What year was that?

Denby: 1919. Because that was my Senior Year when I came to New York.

I said to my parents that I couldn't study anymore and I would rather just study alone.

MH: And you've lived here ever since?

Denby: No. Then I went abroad.

But I lived here and worked for a while at the telephone company installing phones. I did that because they were hiring people and this friend of mine wanted to go and apply for the job and he said, "Why don't you come along and just apply with me." That gave me a little nerve to do it. So I got the job and he didn't. He was color blind. You needed to tell these wires apart. But I had to take the job because there was no money coming in so I took it for a while. Fortunately I had a wonderful foreman who realized that I wasn't dumb and who realized that I lacked something as far as practical intelligence goes.

MH: Mechanical ability.

Denby: Yes. He was an amazing man to know that I was perfectly willing but just couldn't do that kind of work. He would come by at a quarter to five near the end of the day to see what I had done. I'd show him proudly and he'd say, "Well that should go here and that should go there." And in five minutes he'd have my whole day's work done.

(both laughing)

Luckily after about a month some money came in and we all gave up our jobs.

MH: When did your interest, your fascination with dance start?

Denby: That came abroad. First it was poetry. I came to New York to write poetry instead of staying in college. So my parents who were going to take a long trip said, "Alright, here's the money." A hundred dollars a month was more than enough to live on so they gave me seven months worth and of course it got spent. So that's why we had to take the jobs. Then we thought we'd start a school but that never got beyond the talking stage. Anyway this friend of mine had meanwhile decided that he wanted to study medicine and discovered that he could study it in Vienna. The money it would take to study it here was enough for him and his wife to live over there. So he decided to take his degree in Vienna even though he didn't know German, he learned German. And I had lived in Vienna with my parents when I was a child and so that seemed perfectly natural to me.

MH: Had you lived all over the world with your parents in the Diplomatic Corps?

Denby: Well it was just Vienna and China actually. But I went to school there and spoke German and read German.

MH: At the gymnasium level?

Denby: It was the first year of gymnasium and volkschule before that. That was in 1914 when the First World War started. But at any rate my parents came back to America after the war had been going on for about a year and a half.

I told my parents that I wanted to go to Winchester in England. I don't know why, but I heard it was a very good school. Then Hotchkiss was thought the most difficult academically.

MH: Where is it?

Denby: In Connecticut. I was sent there instead and didn't like it at all but went through.

MH: And that got you into Harvard.

Denby: That got me into Harvard, yes. It normally feeds into Yale. But I didn't want to go where those other fellows went whom I didn't get along with anyway.

Harvard was a bit more interesting and it was extraordinary to be so free.

MH: How did you get started as a dance critic?

Denby: Oh that's another long story. I'm sorry, these things are very complicated.

As soon as I could get enough money I decided to go to Vienna instead of hanging around New York. I hadn't any work and remembered Vienna with pleasure from my childhood. My friend and his wife were there so I went and took a room and started writing an epic in four books.

MH: Ah!

Denby: In blank verse.

MH: Does it exist anywhere?

Denby: No. It was silly. It was very autobiographical.

En route to Vienna I changed trains in Switzerland, a girl came in with a very heavy suitcase and was trying to put it up on the rack. So being American I picked it up and I was surprised other people didn't. Later on I realized that only Americans did that. Europeans realize that she would have been perfectly able to do it herself or she wouldn't have been travelling all by herself, and it would be sort of pushy to help her unless she asked for it.

We went over in the train to Vienna together and she showed me

the catalogue of the dancing school she was going to. In it it said in German, "The student will have the experience of time and space." So I said what nonsense is that (laughing), everybody knows what time and space are!

I remember where it was because it was in an imperial summer castle I had seen as a child. I remembered the fake medieval castle which I mistook as real and the swans in the lake frightened me. I must have been six or seven.

So after I got to Vienna my friend there said to me, "Well why don't you go there, you were always interested in dancing. Go and see what it is." So I went.

I met the girl there to whom I had promised I would go to see what it was all about. I watched a class and liked what they were doing very much. The strange thing was that it was being run by an American woman. Diaghilev took his dancers there in the early twenties. I realized it had been very famous just before the war.

It was a Dalcroze type of school. Dalcroze was this Swiss who had invented this system to help conductors conduct in two different measures at the same time. In order to play Stravinsky for example. Of course nowadays conductors can do it without the least struggle. It was a giant leap at the time.

There were very few boys of course and they were doing modern dance which was based on gymnastics. Those were the first years of German modern dance which was where it started anyway. This school had a modern dance choreographer and the students came from all over the world.

MH: I guess Martha Graham brought it over to this country.

Denby: Well yes, Martha, I don't know where she studied. I never read her biography so I don't know. And I used to know her and like her very much and I thought she was a marvelous dancer.

I went three years through that school and that's how I first learned something.

Meanwhile I was really interested in psychoanalysis.

MH: Freud?

Denby: Yes. Of course Freud was the great idol in America. So we all read Freud and discussed it endlessly.

An American I knew, an old friend, came by and said, "Why don't you go and see Freud, you're depressed, you always wanted to see him. And he's in this town, and all you have to do is go ring his doorbell!" So I rang the doorbell and the maid came to the door and I said, "I'd like to see Herr Professor." I learned that that was the proper way of saying it. She said, "Well, I'm very sorry but Herr Professor isn't well. He can't see anybody." And I said, "Oh!" And this woman looking at me then said, "I'll tell you, you can go to see a friend of his, Doctor Feder, who's a very good friend, and he'll let you know when Herr Professor is better and will perhaps arrange a meeting." But I said,

"I don't want to see Doctor Feder I want to see Doctor Freud." And she said, "Yes, but this way you could."

Years later I said to myself who was that maid who was so extraordinarily perceptive. She saw immediately that I was not quite right in my head. At that time I was neurotic, and she thought of this way of helping a total stranger who was standing on the doorstep asking for something impossible. I didn't even know that Freud was sick, and had been sick for a year as I found out later. So I thought maybe it wasn't a maid, maybe it was his daughter. Of course I never found out.

Much later I did get to see him. That was after two years of analysis with Dr. Feder who was likewise famous and respected Freud and recognized his genius with the pleasure Europeans have. It really means something to them. That's the one pleasure there is in life, in your profession, where you can know and appreciate what a person's value is. I didn't find it for a long time here.

MH: Did this do anything to your poetry? You must have had a lot of anxiety, or did you, maybe you didn't, about poetry and dance.

Denby: No, I think I just goofed off I suppose. I have no idea, no memories of that.

I was disappointed that I couldn't write my epic. I had three books of it and found writing it very dull and thought it would be more fun to commit suicide, but I never had the nerve to do that (laughs).

MH: Thank God! But did you become a dancer for a while?

Denby: No. They thought I was too awkward but that's allright. They also thought I was bright. Finally I found an agent. I had graduated from the school. A man said to me I could get a job in German provincial theatre. At the time they always had dance groups.

I don't know if you know anything about European theatre, but it's all run by the state, opera, plays, and dance. It was always taken care of by the local King or Duke or whatever, and as the governments changed most of it was taken over by the state. There were some private theatres too, but all that was very different from competitive Broadway. The director was appointed and if he wasn't good they'd change him. So some of those theatres were well run.

MH: If it's not commercial, supported by the state, does that change the nature of the performance?

Denby: Yes. It does because you appeal to the real standard of art and not the standard of what the newspaper editors can understand in a review, or what the public can take in.

New York theatre understands a star but has a hard time understanding the playwright.

But I did get a job in the theatre as a dancer in Germany. Again I was very lucky because the reason I'd gone there—it's a complicated story. I went to give an audition and arrived in this town in mid-winter,

a town that had an advanced theatre because it had a progressive director. I was told by an agent in Vienna that I should apply for an audition there. So I went and said, "Here I am." And they said, "We'll give you an audition Sunday morning." They also asked me to go to their theatre that very night to see what it was like. So I went. I was very happy and said this was the place for me.

What happened was that the lady who gave me the audition, the choreographer, was the wife of the man who had done the scenery. Well I got to know them of course because they hired me and I got to see that they must have thought, "There's something we can do with this creature, he's not just an average person coming by, he doesn't seem like a dancer to begin with."

MH: So your career in dance was very short?

Denby: No, but having been brought up modern and not ballet, I didn't know that a dancer is a special type of being. It was more like Judson Church than modern dance in those days.

MH: You're being a poet primarily, or would you consider that?

Denby: Yes, but I didn't say no; I didn't think that I was. I thought I had been trained as a modern dancer.

MH: Were you still thinking of poetry all during this period when you were involved with dance?

Denby: I don't think so. I was writing plays; I was writing plays in German.

MH: Were they ever published?

Denby: No. But they always wanted to produce them. They liked them when they read them. Then they hired me for the next year. Of course this was winter and they hired you for the next season.

MH: What year was this or how old were you?

Denby: I was about 23 and I guess it was about 1926, something like that. I was there for a year, then we went to Berlin because this choreographer was brilliant. She did things that no other choreographer was doing. But from a theatre point of view, not from a movement point of view.

MH: When you started writing dance criticism did you ever imagine that you would become so good at it that Clive Barnes would call you the foremost dance critic alive?

Denby: That's a lot of time after I came back to New York; after the Nazi thing made it impossible to stay in Berlin.

Hitler came into power so I went to Majorca, a place where poor Americans would go because I didn't know what to do.

So then I returned to New York and meanwhile met Virgil Thomson in transit sometime in Paris. I saw him again when I returned here. We were friends. He was in his 30th year, and it was he who suggested my writing for the Herald Tribune because their two dance critics had joined

the Army. That was about a year before the war in 1938.

He suggested that I go and see this editor who was in charge of a thing called Modern Music. They had a very brilliant editor named Lederman who's still alive and she's still writing too.

So Virgil had come back from Paris and knew all about music. But he was very lively and always finding people for the magazine and wrote for it. But all the young musicians wrote for it and he thought that I could write about dance for them because the only performances many of those young composers would have would be dance performances. The music critics wouldn't go. So he thought that I would know what they were doing and could write about it from the dance as well as the music side. And the idea would be, he said to me—I remember, "It doesn't really matter what you say because they're not interested in dance, they're only interested in seeing that their music has been reviewed."

Well that was how I started writing.

And then when Virgil saw that I had done that for a few years and he needed a writer for the Herald Tribune because as music editor he was in charge of dance, he suggested me. They had a very brilliant head editor in those days at the Tribune, marvelous man.

MH: What was his name?

Denby: I wish I knew (laughing). At any rate he looked me over and could tell by instinct all the things I have been telling you, because he was that kind of man. He supported Virgil who was constantly in hot water.

I remember Virgil's first Philharmonic review of their opening concert for the new season before I was on the paper. At the end of it he said, "It shows once again that the New York Philharmonic has no relation to New York's intellectual life." Of course all the people who supported the Philharmonic, which was a sacred institution were furious, especially the rich people who called the paper to complain bitterly to the editor.

Virgil of course was quite amused because he was quite able to defend himself. The owners of the paper were very grand people socially and intellectually to know that it was much more fun this way than to have one of those acquiescent reviews that say, "Oh well, they did their best." And so on.

But I remember I used to get up in the morning to go get coffee and a fried egg and the Herald Tribune on the corner to read Virgil Thomson. It was such a pleasure to read first thing in the morning, one of his lively and wonderfully aggressive reviews.

That was how I started writing for them. Too bad it doesn't exist anymore.

Then a young man in a publishing house said to me, "Why don't you make a collection of your reviews." I had been doing it for a couple of years, and his editor said O.K. that would be ideal when he glanced over the collection and so they published them.

Somehow that got to England where Clive Barnes was a dance critic.

MH: He thinks you're the best.

Denby: Well, he said that once. He's a very nice man. (laughing) It's been quoted since. I've never contradicted it.

MH: You went on to write books on dance. Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets and Looking at the Dance.

Denby: Those were some longer articles. Some were written for Modern Music.

MH: What happened to your poetry during all this time? You were still writing poetry.

Denby: Yes I was.

MH: Were you able to get your poems published?

Denby: No. I didn't even try as far as I know. But I don't think anybody would've liked them.

Of course gradually I grew up and found out what poetry was about and it became much more interesting and serious to me.

MH: What happened at the Tribune?

Denby: After a few years the Tribune folded. But there were people who preferred my reviews to others, and the reason they did was that I was modelling myself after Virgil Thomson. But Virgil was the person who taught me what it is that is worth writing about and how you go about doing it—not by telling me but by his example.

Afterwards the editor of Modern Music who was very pleased that I was writing for a newspaper used to call me up. About every week or two I'd want to resign because it was such hard work, and I was so dissatisfied with it. But she very nicely explained why that was good and how good that was or if it was not quite so good. And that way she kept me going for the first six months when I thought I could never learn the job.

Then I got the hang of it.

At that time the Metropolitan Opera was on 39th Street, a beautiful house that they should never have torn down, and the Tribune was on 41st Street, so I'd just walk across and grab a cup of coffee. And then later on at the end of the day when I was getting a little worn and stupified, Elaine DeKooning who had become a very good friend used to go with me.

I could turn to her and say, "Did you see anything? I didn't. What did you see tonight?" And she'd say, "Well, I saw these green stockings so and so was wearing in the second piece that were quite interesting."

(laughing) And I thought, "Oh yes!" And then it all came back to me.

It was one of those blackout businesses that you can't help if you're trying very hard to remember something. If you didn't have this machine you wouldn't remember all of what I'm saying.

But it was so modest what she was saying. Anybody else would have said, "Why I thought the second piece was much the best because of this and that." You know, and it wouldn't have stimulated me at all. It would have been her review and I could have imitated it, but it would have been limp because it has to occur to you at the moment. She understood that so well. Afterwards at the newspaper they loved her dearly, she was very beautiful too, besides being so sweet natured and amusing and Irish.

So I asked whether she could take over my job for several weeks during the summer when I was going somewhere and they were delighted. And she understood Bill de Kooning very well too.

MH: You knew Willem de Kooning before you knew Elaine?

Denby: Yes. I knew his previous girl friend who was this incredibly beautiful Jewish girl whose name was Juliet, a very delicate Bronx girl.

MH: What year was this? What year did you meet de Kooning?

Denby: I met him in '36; it was the first year I was living in this apartment.

MH: After you came back from Europe?

Denby: Yes. He was living one floor down in the next building.

MH: So you knew him for quite a long time before you ever knew people like O'Hara.

Denby: Yes. In fact that was one of the reasons that the poets spoke to me because I was a friend of Bill's.

MH: What was it like; how did you meet O'Hara? Were you introduced?

Denby: I can't remember at all; it's as though I'd always known him.

And of course that's the kind of person he was if he was interested in you at all. He never asked any questions like somebody trying to find out who you were. He just took it all in. And I thought he was a wonderful poet. But I thought he was even a more wonderful man.

At first he was a swell person to have around, then I got to know his poetry better and I thought he was amazing.

MH: Did he know you as a poet?

Denby: Yes, but you see I was always writing in this old fashioned way and he was writing in a lively new way.

MH: But you were much older too.

Denby: Yes I was older. But he said somewhere, maybe it was in Poetry Magazine, something very nice about me, one of his great big compliments. He wrote an opinion of my poetry being very good and I was very pleased. But he was so generous to everybody. Of course it didn't make me less happy that he was generous to other people. I realized that that was his nature.

MH: Koch? Ashbery?

Denby: Yes, yes, yes, but they didn't have the same warmth and outgoingness.

MH: But you saw each other frequently?

Denby: Yes, but Frank much more than the others. I didn't really make very good friends with the poets. But with Frank it was impossible not to be friends if you knew him at all. He was always interested in dance too.

MH: You were also very friendly with a lot of the artists. Obviously de Kooning introduced you to them.

Denby: There too I really didn't belong to their milieu.

It wasn't that I knew a lot of them and knew them for many years, but it was that they knew I was a friend of Bill's and that I knew they were friends with Bill. I was busy with other things, and I didn't understand what they were doing until many years later.

MH: At the time you didn't realize how important that group would become.

Denby: No.

MH: Were you aware of a change, a growing excitement, an enthusiasm, because you were dealing with a younger crowd of artists? Ashbery, O'Hara and Koch must have seemed like very young men to you who were very excited and very enthusiastic about art.

Denby: Oh yes. They admired Bill of course very much, especially Frank. He must have written about Bill. Bill liked Frank very much too.

MH: Did you spend time at the Cedar Tavern or San Remo Cafe?

Denby: No. I went to the Cedar once or twice and I remember Bill de Kooning and Franz Kline standing next to each other at the bar drinking. I was sitting at a table. And it was adorable to see them because they were about the same size and they were like two teenagers having an absolutely marvelous time together. They were of course famous painters by that time in their own world.

But the way they made jokes to each other and the intimacy between them, it's still one of my happiest memories.

MH: What was New York like in the 50's?

Denby: Well New York was always heavenly to me.

MH: You love it here?

Denby: Yes. This was a very quiet part of town then.

MH: This same apartment?

Denby: Yes. Rudy Burckhardt's darkroom was here but he was living across the street with his first wife and Jacob was a baby then.

MH: You must love New York because you write a lot about New York. Your poems, except for Mediterranean Cities, have a New York subject matter.

Denby: I suppose so.

MH: Was the city better then?

Denby: It's really ruined compared to what it used to be.

MH: You still like New York?

Denby: Yes, very much. Of course being old and sick makes it a lot different since I don't have the nerve or the energy I used to have. It's a nuisance. But as far as I can be aware of it I think it's still a marvelous city.

It's changed a lot because of those painters really, who started the New York intellectual life. Before that it was merely literary.

MH: A whole new dimension was added.

Denby: New York is always self-consciously theatre oriented. But they added another dimension to the theatre life, and so did the dancers, and of course so did the painters and the art dealers who were all so different from the previous generation, the pre 1930 New York art scene—totally different.

MH: Do you know Saint Mark's?

Denby: The first time I went to Saint Mark's Church was for the funeral of a friend of mine, an old man, who belonged to one of New York's first families, and whose church it had been for generations. I didn't realize that until I went in to the funeral and felt the people around to realize the presence.

I thought it was an incredibly beautiful building and I had never been in it before. I was very much interested that it was one of the few things left over that was beautiful from the Eighteenth Century. It was very interesting that it wasn't famous.

MH: It has a ghost.

Denby: Oh really! I didn't know.

MH: Peter Stuyvesant's ghost.

Denby: Oh his ghost (laughing)! His ghost would be rather noisy don't you think? That's funny, I've never heard that.

Well before the Saint Mark's Poetry Project there was the Judson, the artists of the Judson, who are now being revived in modern dance. Let's see, I think that was the Reverend Carmines.

MH: Did you give readings?

Denby: No.

MH: You don't give readings?

Denby: No, terrible.

MH: Did you in the 50's?

Denby: I read once on the machine at Saint Mark's because they asked me to come down and read some poems, Denbyesque poems.

I never wrote enough to make it feel that I belonged to their group. I mean I like them as friends and I admired them as poets, and some of them I didn't understand and some of them I did, but literature as a profession was never a part of my life. I knew that there was that profession but I never worked at it.

MH: Who is your favorite New York poet, or do you like them all? James Schuyler? Frank O'Hara?

Denby: Oh Frank really is the one that I enjoy reading and rereading the most. Schuyler is very brilliant and wonderfully very alive and flexible. I think he's a first rate poet.

MH: Did you meet him along with O'Hara and the others?

Denby: Yes.

MH: James Schuyler doesn't imitate anybody.

Denby: No, neither does Ashbery or Koch. Those three old friends of mine don't imitate themselves the way you'd expect other people to.

MH: Well Ashbery keeps changing; every book is different.

Denby: He certainly does (laughing). You have to learn how to read it all over again.

MH: Frank O'Hara changed.

Denby: Yes.

MH: And Schuyler.

Denby: Yes, it's true, you have to learn how to read their poetry all over, as if you were starting fresh. And that's marvelous. Ashbery after inventing so many things can go on and invent even more. He's not nearly appreciated enough.

MH: Ted Berrigan told me he thinks he's our greatest poet right now.

Denby: He certainly is. There's no doubt about it, is there?

MH: But there are such strong regional preferences.

Denby: Who do they say is the best?

MH: Allen Ginsberg is probably the most famous.

Denby: Oh yes, but he's scarcely a poet at all. He's a member of society.

No, I mean he's a man alive at this time. That's wonderful. (laughs)

MH: He's so magnanimous.

Denby: Yes and he'll be of the greatest use to people who'll be trying to find out what it was like generations from now. But we who see what's happening don't realize that. Don't you think?

He's a very magnanimous man and I admire that very much, but I like poetry to be poetry, and that is just my individual preference.

MH: Do you see Virgil Thomson anymore?

Denby: I saw him last Christmas and he had a hard time hearing but he watched closely and is very understanding. They gave him a very beautiful concert at Alice Tully Hall. He's known all the poets from the past too.

MH: Do you still see the artist friends that you have?

Denby: They all went off in other directions. The poets are still here for the most part.

Ron Padgett is lecturing tomorrow on Reverdy. I promised to go and hear it.

Anne Waldman is also very interesting and very informative. She knows them all having begun the Poetry Project which has done so much. It's amazing to me.

MH: What do you think of this younger generation—Berrigan and Ron Padgett and Waldman?

Denby: I think they're marvelously crafted and talented but I don't always understand them.

Padgett is so witty that I get a lift just reading him. Besides I'm impressed by him as a person.

MH: I'm impressed by Berrigan as a person; he's very kind and generous and not pretentious. I love his poetry.

Denby: Yes that's true. And none of them are pretentious are they? It's astonishing.

MH: Well they're all serious poets and it's very hard being a poet in this culture.

Denby: Yes, and it's hard to earn a living.

I was thinking more than if you were a European poet because a university would help you out in a way that they don't here.

I went to a reading at Columbia, Ashbery's, and I was amazed he read so badly. I was relieved when I thought about all that work he has to do to earn a living, but oh my!

MH: He has two jobs.

Denby: And he was a brilliant art critic for a while.

MH: Still is. He writes for Newsweek.

Denby: He still writes for them? I used to get it every week but I heard he'd given it up. Well I'll have to go to the library and look them up because I liked reading them very much. What a pleasure. He writes extraordinarily well about it.

MH: Kenneth Koch has a new book of poems coming out.

Denby: I remember him as going off in all directions at once from sheer wit. It was George Washington Crossing The Delaware with those wonderful sets by Alex Katz.

MH: There were sets designed by Red Grooms for The Red Robins.

Denby: Those were extraordinarily brilliant. But it's hard to do those plays. They'll be done better someday; they'll be much funnier when people know them better; when people know how to do them.

They're difficult to do because you have to do them so unintentionally. The dialogue has to be done so unintentionally and that's something that New York professional actors don't like.

MH: Did you know Barbara Guest?

Denby: I knew her but I didn't know her very well.

Of the younger poets Anne Waldman is the only one that I know really well.

MH: When did you meet her?

Denby: I think through the Poetry Project. I used to go to the readings there a lot.

MH: What can you say about the future of poetry?

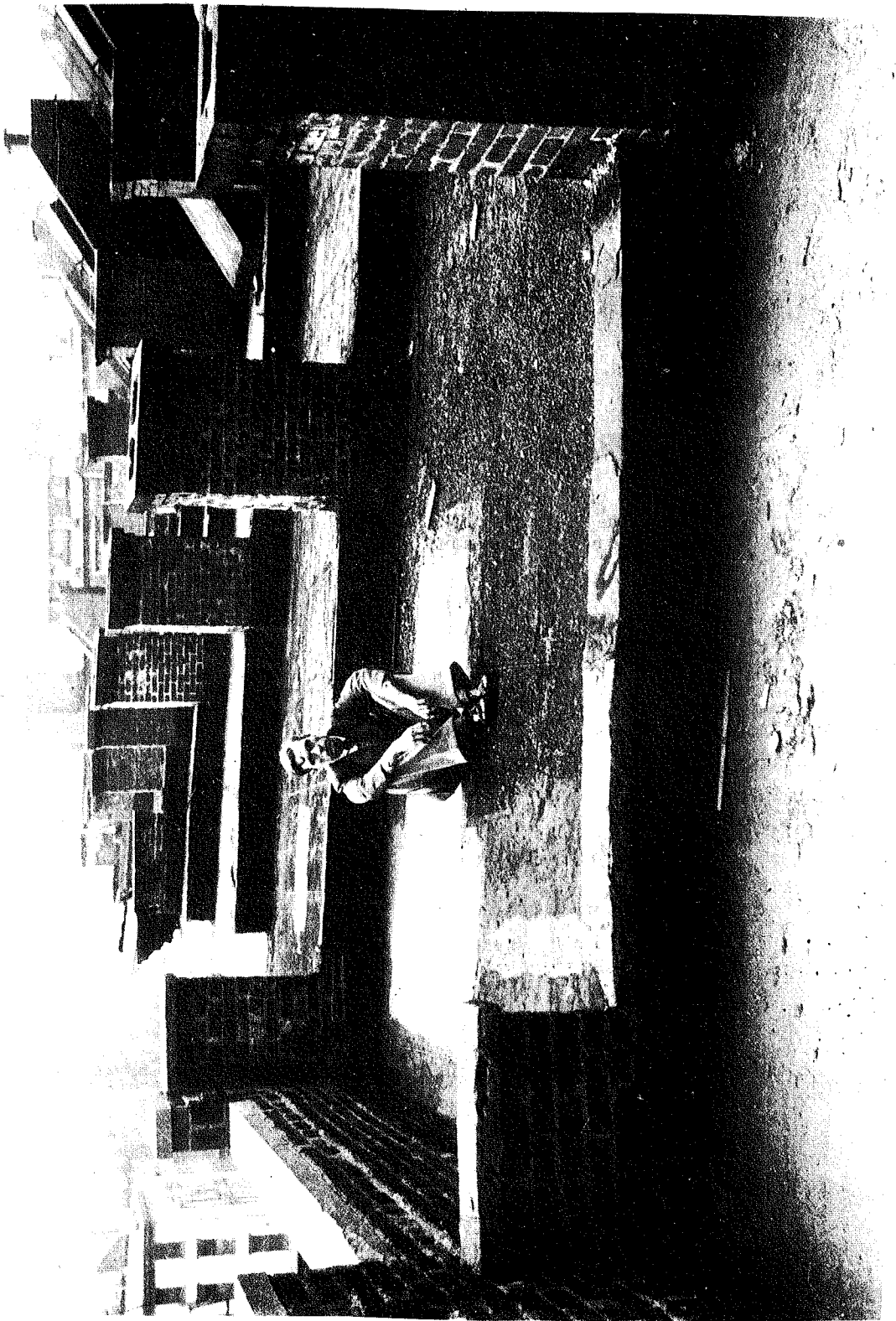
Denby: Well, I think that Ashbery's importance as a poet will only be realized in twenty years.

MH: Between the three of you, O'Hara, Schuyler and yourself, you seem to write about New York the most. Ashbery and Koch are not that open about it. Ted Berrigan is, but he's a younger man. Most of your sonnets are based on New York and the action of people in the streets. I was wondering why?

Denby: Well, I learned a lot, maybe all that I know about New York from Rudy Burckhardt's photographs and movies. Because I got very interested in them, the way that you can study them and know what the texture of light and air is all about. I wanted that in my poetry. Nobody really understood the films of Rudy Burckhardt because he was trying to capture that, to make you feel as if you might be able to touch the air and the light.

MH: Are you still writing poetry?

Denby: Yes.



Parts of "The Sonntag Gang" were first printed in The Collected Poems of Edwin Denby, published by Full Court Press, 1975.

Mag City 15 will appear in the fall and will include the second half of The Economy by Bob Rosenthal, the first half of which appeared in Mag City 13.

