

SMOKE & STEEL

By Nancy Galbraith

Adapted from the poem "Smoke & Steel" by Carl Sandburg (1922)

Overture

PART I

Smoke of the Fields

SMOKE of the fields in spring is one,
Smoke of the leaves in autumn another.
Smoke of a steel-mill roof or a battleship funnel,
They go up in a line with a smokestack,
They twist... in the slow twist... of the wind.

If the North Wind Comes

If the north wind comes they run to the south.
If the west wind comes they run to the east.

By this sign
all smokes
know each other.

Smoke of the fields in spring and leaves in autumn,
Smoke of the finished steel, chilled and blue,
By the oath of work they swear: "I know you."

Hunted and Hissed

Hunted and hissed from the center
Deep down long ago when God made us over,
Deep down are the cinders that we came from—
You and I and our heads of smoke.

If the North Wind Comes - Reprise

Some of the Smokes

Some of the smokes God dropped on the job
Cross on the sky and count our years
And sing in the secrets of our numbers;
Sing their dawns and sing their evenings,
Sing an old log-fire song:
You may put the damper up,
You may put the damper down,
The smoke goes up the chimney the same.

Smoke of a city sunset skyline,
Smoke of a country dusk horizon—
They cross on the sky and count our years.

PART II

A Bar of Steel

A bar of steel—it is only
Smoke at the heart of it, smoke and the blood of a man.
A runner of fire ran in, ran out, ran somewhere else,
And left—smoke and the blood of a man
And the finished steel, chilled and blue.

So Fire Runs In

So fire runs in, and fire runs out, runs somewhere else again,
And the bar of steel is a gun, a wheel, a nail, and a shovel,
A rudder under the sea, a steering-gear in the sky;
And always dark in the heart and through it,
Smoke and the blood of a man.
Pittsburg, Youngstown, and Gary—they make their steel with men.

Smoke and blood is the mix of steel.

The birdmen drone
in the blue; it is steel
a motor sings and zooms.

In the Blood of Men

In the blood of men and the ink of chimneys
The smoke nights write their oaths:
Smoke into steel and blood into steel;
Homestead, Braddock, Birmingham, they make their steel with men.
Smoke and blood is the mix of steel.

The birdmen drone
in the blue; it is steel
a motor sings and zooms.

Steel Barb Wire

Steel barb-wire around The Works.
Steel guns in the holsters of the guards.
Steel ore-boats bring the loads clawed from the earth,
 lifted and lugged by arms of steel, sung
 on its way by clanking clam-shells.
The runners now, the handlers now; they dig
 and clutch and haul; they are steel making steel.
Fire, dust, and air fight in the furnaces; the pour is timed:
Liners on the sea, skyscrapers on the land; diving steel
 Into the sea, climbing to the sky.

PART III

Luck Moons Come and Go

Luck moons come and go:
Five men swim in a pot of red steel.
Their bones are kneaded into the bread of steel:
Their bones are knocked into coils and anvils
And the sucking plungers of sea-fighting turbines.
Look for them in the woven frame of a wireless station. *(Repeat)*

So Ghosts Hide in Steel

So ghosts hide in steel like heavy-armed men in mirrors.
Peepers, skulkers—they shadow-dance in laughing tombs.
They're always there, they never answer.

One of Them Said

One of them said: "I like my job, the company is
 good to me. America is a wonderful country."
One said, "Jesus, my bones ache; the company is a liar;
 this is a free country, like hell."

The Ovens Light a Red Dome

The ovens light a red dome.
Spools of fire wind and wind.
Quadrangles of crimson sputter.
The lashes of dying maroon let down.
Fire and wind wash out the slag.
Forever the slag gets washed in fire and wind.
The anthem learned by steel is this:
 Do this or go hungry.
Look for our rust on a plow.
Listen to us in a threshing-engine razz.
Look at our job in the running wagon wheat.

Fire and Wind

Fire and wind wash at the slag.
Oh, the sleeping slag from the mountains, the slag

will go down many roads.
Men will stab and shoot with it, and make butter and
tunnel rivers, and steer airplanes across
North America, Europe, Asia, and around the world. *(Repeat)*

Hacked From a Hard Rock Country

Hacked from a hard rock country, broken
in mills, the rusty dust waits
Till the clean hard weave of its atoms cripples and
blunts the drills chewing a hole in it.
The steel of its plinths and flanges is reckoned, O God,
In one-millionth of an inch. *(Repeat)*

If the North Wind Comes - Reprise

PART IV

Once When I Saw the Curves of Fire

Once when I saw the curves of fire, rough scarf women dancing,
Dancing out of the flues and smoke-stacks—flying hair
of fire, flying feet upside down;
Buckets and baskets of fire exploding,
fire running wild out of the steady, fastened ovens;
I saw then the fires flash one by one: good-by: then smoke, smoke;
And in the screens the great sisters of night and cool
stars, sitting women arranging their hair,
Waiting in the sky, waiting and murmuring:
"Since you know all
and I know nothing,
tell me what I dreamed last night."

Smoke of the Fields - Reprise

Pearl Cobwebs in the Windy Rain

Pearl cobwebs in the windy rain,
in only a flicker of wind,
are caught and lost and never known again.

A pool of moonshine comes and waits,
but never waits long: the wind picks up
loose gold like this and is gone.

A bar of steel sleeps and looks slant-eyed
on the pearl cobwebs, the pools of moonshine;
sleeps slant-eyed a million years,
sleeps with a coat of rust, a vest of moths,
a shirt of gathering sod and loam.

The wind never bothers... a bar of steel.
The wind picks only... pearl cobwebs... pools
of moonshine.