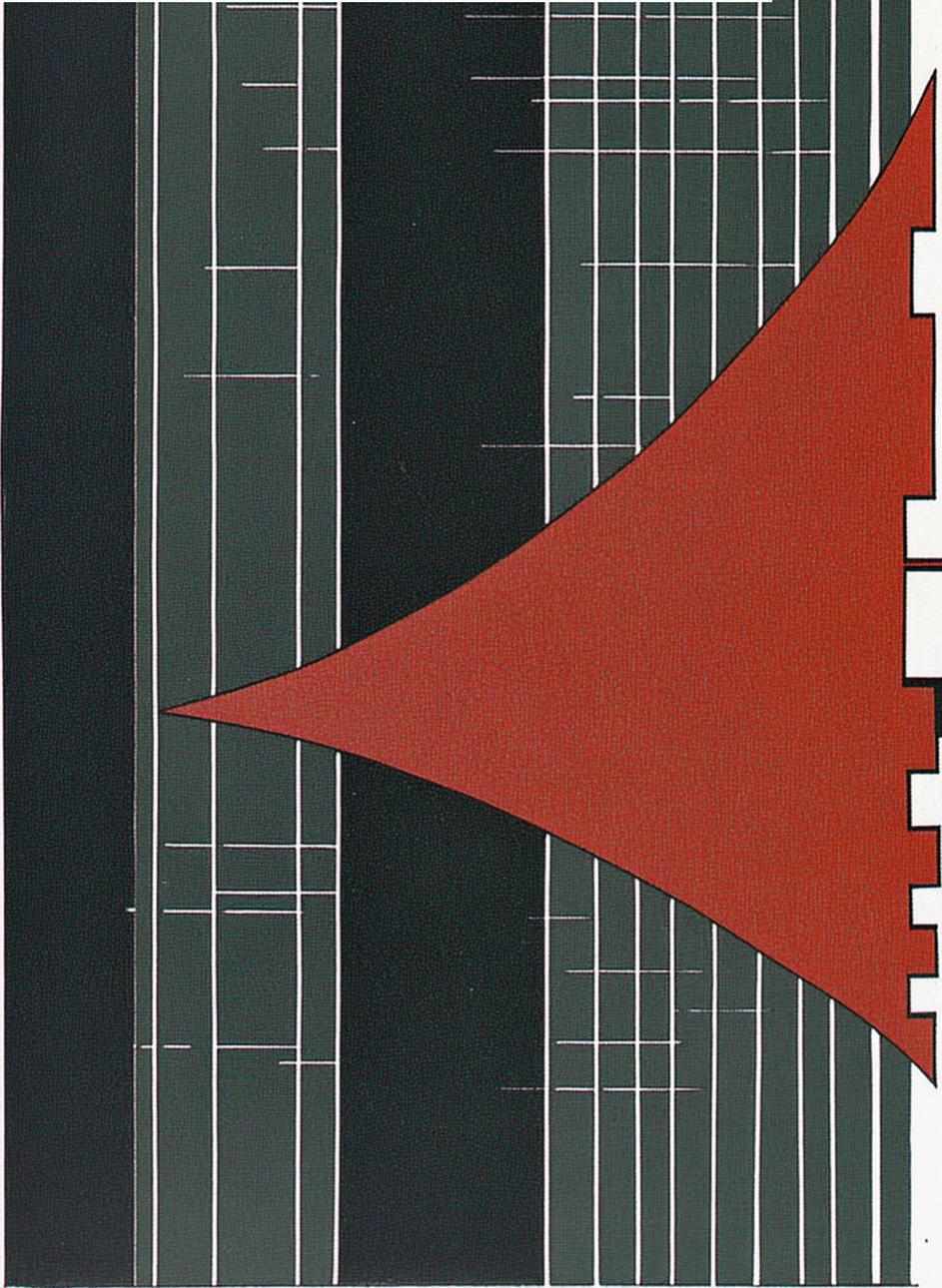


Joseph Joel Keith

Selected Poems



Joseph Joel Keith

July 6, 1901 [MacDonald, Pennsylvania] –

January 1, 1967 [Honolulu, Hawaii]

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As Brothers Are Remembered

(for Stephen Vincent Benet)

He will be remembered as lovers are remembered :
he wrote a great, free love song for a need,
for a love new-grown, for hearts that bleed.

He will be remembered as prophets are remembered :
he wrote a great, free warning for the blind.
Like a great, warm spring, he opened his mind.

He will be remembered as fighters are remembered :
he wrote a great, free anger for the foe ;
like a great, hot flame, he penned the blow.

He will be remembered as brothers are remembered :
he wrote a great, free message for his land ;
as the whole world's kin, he stretched his hand.

Of A Million Cries

Somehow, the flowers grow
in this deep, degraded place :
high in the sun they go
from graves of a fallen race.

Here is a garden, planned
as a mad child's: colors rise
out of the ruptured land,
from earth of a million cries.

What struggles above barbed deeds,
and climbs the high, barbed fence,
is all the bruised world needs
for blessed permanence.

Though I Sing, America

But, though I join the singing now, the great, high stirring song,
I will chant once more of darkness ; I will chant of wrong,
remembering the colorless faces of children, their hungry eyes ;
I can never- forget the stark and terrible cries
of dark and loyal children forced across the seas .

And, while I am singing your praises, America, of field and forest,
I can remember your songless children, children in arid places ;
and I can remember your own mad children hunting,
and lashing, and burning. And I can remember, America,
after the lawlessness, after the anger and tumult,
your bloody and lifeless sons on your evil trees.

Oh, America; like the great, full tree of knowledge,
spread farther. still. Let every branch of your vast growing
shelter the many children of all your loyal races.

Poem For Joyce Kilmer: 1944

I think of you again, O poet of a war,
not won, twice-battled, still aflame,
and clear above the tumult, high atop the earth,
I hear your noble name.

Oh, hot has been the tongue of man, and mad the heart,
and black has been the deed and mind.
I think of you who sang for all and you who fought
to give full sight unto the blind.

I think of you, good poet, singing, brave, and slain;
I think of you, good father, out
in battlefield and chaos; husband, friend and faith
immaculate, and still devout.

I think of you again, O poet of a war,
when marred cathedrals in debris
are whole and shining when the deep eyes have a sight
for viewing all that true eyes see.

Not Earth Alone

Pray long for children born in a world at war,
whose children's hours
are sung not high on blooming hills, but still
with death's red flowers.

Pray long for ones who never dare lift eyes
free to the sun.
Not earth alone spits fire, for heaven, too,
drops with a gun.

Pray long for ones who daily see men lift
on wide, strong wings
until the dark, who fear the stars and doom
the clear night brings.

And, Lord, let only the sweet and lark-like birds
go overhead.
Children have seen the circling, plunging ones too long,
and too long the dead.

Common Analysis

He thought: I have listened to long words uttered by learned men:
to wise, old gentlemen speaking of defensive strategies :
of barter, of friend and of foe:
of the deep, circuitous roadways of the deeper and learned mind :
of beginning of war and of end :
of why, of why, of why.

He thought : I will turn to my high hill,
I will turn to my high hill,
and cleanse my mind with the green and the quiet before I do battle.
Perhaps there's an answer iq. silence.
He saw old, dark Abe plowing,
old, dark Abe Lincoln Brown there tending his ten good acres,
and pausing to read the Good Book,
and sending his son to college,
and never working on Sunday.
He saw young Danny Weaver climbing the trail to Pine Wood,
young Danny Weaver growing out in the field and forest,
with a body as free as the May wind,
and a song as free as the lark.

He saw worn women going to their. old beloved Church,
and worn old fingers sewing something warm and new,
something warm for others.
He saw the oily river, and the locks of Monongahela,
and the great, black burdens going to light the home and the mill
of the Pennsylvania people:
the Armenians, the French, and the Dutch;
the Irish, the British, and the Finns;
the Germans, the Poles and the Greeks;
Italians; some speaking poorly
their English ; some not at all,
but their children singing loudly and clearly "America"
and giving their coins to the Red Cross,
and remembering refugees.
And, all alone on the hilltop, and since his family vanished,

all alone in the world,
he did not remember the fine words,
and the why, and the why, and the why.
And he uttered no word of his own,
but his heart answered every query, in silence, with eloquence.
Alone, he marched down the hilltop, with a million by his side!

In Anguish I Cry Out

I am the voice of anguish, and in anguish I cry out.

Long I have dwelt in shadows, in the black room
as the ominous boot struck the pavement of my mind,
as the dictatorial doorman ordered my own door shut,
but never my heart's door: this alone flung free:
though struck by many a wind of fury, though hit
with a savage thrust, this, my heart, flung free.

Long I have bled in the gutter because I was born
with a face, because I was taught the truth of man,
and spoke it, because I uttered the right word
of conscience, and muttered it, even, with the loose
and bloody mouth, made by the blow of the liar, might.

I am the voice of anguish, and in anguish I cry out.

Long I have dwelt in t'he rock-room hid in the height,
long I have lived there deep in the wild things' home ;
far, from my country's poorest nook, I have crept
through blessed black to strike an evil gloom
spread out across my land. Though dying, still,

with my last heart beat, I knew, smilingly knew,
that a million hearts, wherein the blood ran free,
were beating, beating : and I lived in these hearts.

I am the voice of anguish, and in anguish I cry out.

I cry not for a thing, I cry against it.
And I will keep my deep heart's weapon free
until I, too, with man's inalienable right
and human dignity, am free, am wholly free!

Child Killed In Traffic

There the child lay.
Death dared pluck
a flowering life out
with a truck,

man-made monster,
man as guide.
(And flowering playgrounds
wide, so wide !)

There the child lay.
Dots of red
on flowering garments
of the dead

grow like poppies
What was rose
and flowering meadow
never grows

on earthy pavements.
Run, child, run
on flowering hilltops
in God's high sun.

Song

Let me hear music of the willow
that the sad hour stirs,
like the low weeping of a lover
for the one who was hers.

Let me hear music of the maple
when the leaves blow away,
like the bright weeping for the lover
who had come not to stay.

Let me hear music of the branches
where the white shower clings,
like a bloom frozen, like a lover
who nevermore sings.

For Would Be Invaders

This is the land of the child, dark gentlemen:
it is the land where minds of children
are as free as the flowing waters:
it is the land where children go cleanly as brooks,
through the green places where a sweet wild beauty
awaits the picking fingers, awaits the budding heart:
here is a road where there is time for walking and dreaming:
here is a hill where there is time for climbing and singing:
here is a meadow where there is time for growing, growing—
where each might go his separate way ... But the chorus
of the voices of children is blended in singing of free land
as free as the green of the summer, as warm as the summer.
This is no land of the marching children, gentlemen:
it is the young land, youth that has come of age quickly:
it utters the purpose and wisdom of age, dark gentlemen,
but it is a land that cherishes always
the freedom of youth in its heart.

Born: July 1, 1942

Lift the child;
hold him, the high future, in the air.
He is the great gift;
he is the free man of 1962.
There must be no compromise
with his liberty;
no pact with the foe;
no infringement. His future
is growth and light; his betrayal
yesterday and the dark again:
the cave, the dub and the captive.

Beware!

Beware!

There's a foot on the stair.

Trust no thing in the dark:
it is subtle and still; it is stark.

Trust no door that will click:
it is naught but a foe; it's a trick.

Friends come warm as the sun;
who crawls in the dark isn't one.

Beware!

There's a foot on the stair.

Pity

When shadows fall, and linger far
across the hollow land that men
have claimed by conquest, pity ones,
now homeless, herded in the den;
oh, pity mothers without milk;
and pity fathers without will
to choose their labor; pity young
and songless children, old and still.
Oh, pity all in broken homes,
with fireless chimneys for their root,
but pity most, as shadows spread,
the child of darkness, child of brute.

Something Has Gone

Something has gone. Something the heart held deep
has withered, been spread, been blown ;
as ashes in a violent wind.

Slowly it crept, slowly it bore where the plots
of flowering love and flourishing faith were growing,
ever and ever and upward growing toward sun.

And always, wherever a thing grew weaker and darker,
there was more love for it, and tenderest pity.

Something has gone from the hearts of many a man;
something has gone, when, viewing the wasted valley
and the scorched green hill, the mouth speaks feebly, feebly;
the heart speaks nothing at all; yes, nothing at all.

Something has gone. And dead men walk the earth.

Children Of War

Children of Europe will go
out on the hill again.
Children remember a while.
Then their fear and pain

vanish, as blossoming fields
lure them to wood where the heart's
inescapable joy
goes as the creek that parts

wonder and wonder; and sweet
flowing of stream and mind
bids them to journey and seek
all that their faith can find.

Children of Europe will hide,
shielding themselves with night.
Children of Europe will seek
play when the world's alight.

and he stood erect
in the proud front row,
he followed the ways
where the wisest go.

And far as the clouds,
his hope rose high,
and his faith was warm
as the field and sky.

But his smile was gone
when his shoes wore thin,
for nobody smiled
or took him in.

His name lies deep

in honor and doubt
in the dark old trunk;
he'll not take it out.

He has risen, high
in the world. He calls,
"The tenth floor, sir!"
And no word falls.

Let Us Not Say The Skin Is Dark

Let us not say the skin is dark.
The hand is dark that flays
the helpless one who has no voice,
who has no right to cry aloud
in evil days.

Let us not say the skin is dark.
The heart is dark that feels
the love for his own child, but gives
no balm for colored, broken ones
he never heals.

Let us not say the skin is dark.
There is no thing as black
as mind that cuts its loss and sin,
as man who cuts ungodly shame
in his brother's back.

Inner Flight

The moon hung low
to light her way.
The blossoms breathed
what they could not say.

The stars crowned magic
on her hill.
Obediently,
the town lay still,

while, nestling there,
she felt a bird
rise in her breast
but sing no word,

for every sweet
and secret note
was hushed and held
deep in her throat.

And so she flung
her warm arms wide,
and held the night
and was his bride.

And slumber claimed
her scented room,
and the dreamer fled
with the dream and groom.

In This Green Place

It was in this green place,
under the maple where I lifted her face;
here that the lace,
white as the blossoms I brought,
trembled upon her heart that was warm as my thought;
here that our hands met,
and her cheeks were wet,
and we were no longer friends but dearer
than friends are, and nearer.

Of All Unloved Creatures

Eyes in a city speak volumes
a tongue can never say.
In these there's a burning, burning
all night, all day.

There is no peace in a city
when eyes melt into eyes
in a great lonely language
of no replies.

Eyes of all unloved creatures
haunt the city street.
Where is the heart's green meadow
where they can meet?

And Still They Heard

They stood there on the hilltop, waiting ·
for words the doubt hushed in the breast.
The tree swayed in the woodland. Slowly,
she looked eastward, he looked west.

The racing cloud moved high above them,
the last leaf fluttered farewell near
their faces, warm, as all departure
urged the doubtful hearts to hear

the warning wind, the leaf blown by it,
and see the cloud so lightly tossed;
and still they heard and saw and faltered,
and were lost.

Grandmother From Nebraska

I wonder if anyone remembers what I remember?
Her voice was hardly a voice, it was so low;
and everything about her, hke the covering of December,
was as light as moonlight touching snow.

And everything-step, touch and the way she would kiss and handle
a child or hold a hymnal or .stroke a fevered headwas
soft and as gentle as the high still candle
flickering good-byes to the dead.

I wonder if anyone remembers what I remember?
The way she carried a lamp, and turned it low,
and everything about her as she left us one December,
and the falling and falling of snow?

There Was Drama And Despair

There was something in the movement of her hand
that her word gave not away.
As it fluttered I could see and understand
what she had to say.

There was drama and despair, and in its fall,
there was death, like a grey bird shot.
In a single little gesture there was all
that the world forgot.

This Kind Brother

He always said, .. I think I'll take
the shortest way across the valley,
through Chestnut Ridge. There I can make
much better time." Then he would sally,

(ignore the home-road, one hour's walk)
into the wood's secluded places,
and loiter there and hum and talk
to lovely little furry faces.

He knew where all the best nuts grew.
The squirrels, tagging this kind brother,
saw pockets filled, knew what to do;
they thought this was the big tree's mother.

And on he went and deep he went
into the valley's bluest passes.
He lay mute while the dear larks spent
their tiny hearts in sky and grasses.

Then after cows went lazily
to slumber with the weary horses,
forgetful of their labor, he
pursued a dozen fragrant courses.

And while his wife prepared his bed,
and told his children their last fable,
contentedly he came and fed
on cold food left there on the table.

His Hand Went Up

He could not touch so soft a thing.
Not for a moment would he lock a wing.

His small white palm was the pigeons' table;
they would rather touch it than velvet or sable.

And when the food was gone, his hand
was more of friendship than command.

As wings went up, his hand went up,
up like a perch but more like a cup.

His hand rose there with nothing in it,
but it held the whole blue sky for a minute.

Woman Selling Eggs

One basket held the brown eggs, one held white.
Ma Weber was a clean and sturdy sight.
She went about her fresh and daily chore,
always welcomed at the town's back door.
She would chat but never tarry much,
being half-Yankee, and, plainly, half-Dutch.
If you had seen her basket, then saw nothing in it,
she would sit down and talk with you a minute.
If you were a judge, she'd talk of politics.
If you were a farmer, then she'd talk of chicks.
But if you were a mother, she'd talk to you of sons,
and pride would equal yours over the missing ones.
And when, at long last, holidays came round,
and one she loved came home with what he found
in books and stronger minds, and in himself,
she'd take her wrapped hat off the bedroom shelf,
and go to meet him. Walking on her route,
feeling his hand, she'd wish that you'd come out.
Hers was no chore now; she'd be slowly walking.
If you came by, she'd let him do the talking.
She would be almost mute, and proud and meek;
she would hear all that all the fine folk speak.
She would be proud, as proud as anyone
who ever loved her God and loved her son.
She'd never think of all the labor done,
for though she saw the neighbors' curtains stir,
she did not know he was so proud of her.

Invited Knockers

Her attic was not filled with old
dust-covered clothes and broken rockers.
It was a locked room. No one came
except invited knockers.

And all who came had childish hearts.
They held the remembered Teddy bear
and the small toy poodle, both still white
and silky as her hair.

And out of the tiny violin
they heard the touch of a small child bringing
a tender record of the years,
blending spontaneous singing.

And when she softly locked the door,
she went-the child she was before.

Smiling Lady

They looked at the lady,
for they saw her smile.
They looked at the lady
a long, long while.

They chatted of wisdom,
and they talked of woe.
Oh, when would they ever
begin to know

what she, the kind lady,
who did not speak,
revealed? Would they ever
cease to seek,

and find all her wisdom,
and smile through eyes
where all that began and
ended lies?

And the lady kept smiling
when they closed her door:
she knew what they knew and
not a thing more!

Western Night

The joshua trees salute the arrogant moon,
and coyotes split the cool night air with their cries,
and a scorpion waits for the love-death that comes very soon,
while over the lowland an evil tranquillity lies.

Here is a country where man has not flowered his way;
here is a haunt where the bandits of bad lands rule,
each killing each but each leaving others that slay;
here is the savage heart's food, his evil blood's fuel;
here is the thing that is strangely lovely and cruel.

