

(Poem 1) I Hear America Singing

I HEAR America singing, the varied carols I hear;
Those of mechanics--each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;
The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat--the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck;
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench--the hatter singing as he stands;
The wood-cutter's song--the ploughboy's, on his way in the morning,
or at the noon intermission, or at sundown;
The delicious singing of the mother--or of the young wife at work--or
of the girl sewing or washing--Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;
The day what belongs to the day--At night, the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs

– Walt Whitman

(Poem 2) Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

– Langston Hughes

(Poem 3) Asian American

Why are we here?

We are here because we are sons to fathers who
led their families through the jungles of Laos,

Escaping a genocide that I bet none of you here
knows about,

We are here because Little Boy and Fat Man were
dropped on the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima,

And out of 21,000 soldiers only 216 were taken as
prisoners at the Great Battle of Iwo Jima

We are here because our villages were completely
burned down to the ground,

And although we tried to stay strong

There was no way to convince the others that we
were not Viet Kongs

We are here because our great grandfather heard
about the Golden Mountains protected by the
white demons

But as they came over,

They were confronted by an era of great hysteria
in this land we call America

We are here because we were born in the muddy
refugee camps where card board papers partition
each living space

We are here simply because we are in search of a
better place

And who are we?

We are the doctors in your hospitals

We are the students getting A s in you classrooms

We are the bad drivers in the streets

We are the stereotypes that you want us to be,

But most importantly we're not just Asian
American

We're Hmong American, Chinese American,
Japanese American, Vietnamese American,

Korean American, Thai American, Mien American
and Laotian American,

And you can see us rolling in those vans

Or a nice car

But we know who we are

The question is "Do you know who you are? And
where you come from?"

– Tong Thao

(Poem 4) I'm Sitting In My History Class

I'm sitting in my history class,
The instructor commences rapping,
I'm in my U.S. History class,
And I'm on the verge of napping.

The Mayflower landed on Plymouth Rock.
Tell me more! Tell me more!
Thirteen colonies were settled.
I've heard it all before.

What did he say?
Dare I ask him to reiterate?¹
Oh why bother
It sounded like he said,
George Washington's my father.

I'm reluctant to believe it,
I suddenly raise my *mano*.²
If George Washington's my father,
Why isn't he Chicano?

– Richard Olivas

¹ reiterate: to repeat or restate

² *mano*: hand in Spanish

(Poem 5) Ellis Island

Beyond the red brick of Ellis Island
where the two Slovak children
who became my grandparents
waited the long days of quarantine,
after leaving the sickness,
the old Empires of Europe,
a Circle Line ship slips easily
on its way to the island
of the tall woman, green
as dreams of forests and meadows
waiting for those who'd worked
a thousand years
yet never owned their own.

Like millions of others,

I too come to this island,
nine decades the answerer
of dreams.

Yet only one part of my blood
loves that memory.
Another voice speaks
of native lands
within this nation.
Lands invaded
when the earth became owned.
Lands of those who followed
the changing Moon,
knowledge of the seasons
in their veins.

– Joseph Bruchac

(Poem 6) Bilingual in a Cardboard Box

Soy Mexicano
I'm an American

Puedo cantar canciones del corazón
I am mute

Puedo ver los colores de la puesta del sol
I am blind

Puedo escuchar las voces de los pajaritos cantando
I am deaf

Soy indígena bailando al cielo que llora
I'm forever seated in a chair with wheels

Todos me respetan
I'm labeled by pointing fingers

Tengo mucho dinero
I live in a cardboard box

Estoy riéndome con el mundo alegre
I am sad

Salgo con mis amigos
I am alone

Estoy soñando
and I don't want to wake up!

– Javier Piña

(Poem 7) Kitchenette Building

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary
plan,
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" mate, a giddy
sound, not strong
Like "rent", "feeding a wife", "satisfying a man".

But could a dream sent up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,

Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms,

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

– Gwendolyn Brooks

An American Dream

by Josh Gaines

The American dream rejects us.
The prospect of earned respect
Through hard work is suspect
At best.

Beneath the weight of economic neglect,
Like pyramid boulders
That slump our shoulders
That make us colder.
When they say Giza
Wasn't built by slaves,
That just means
In some way they were paid,
But that didn't make them free.

Society has never been
More controlled
Than by the power of the paycheck.

My mother had this idea
That was crazy
About making money
To free me
From a system
That would find me
Bind me
Charge me and fine me
Hold me
Control me
And hang me from a rope
Made by men for the hope
Of a dollar
With a picture
On the back
Of a pyramid
That watches
Their every move.

My mother had this idea
And I wanted to be a poet.
And one time
I got sneered at

'Cause I couldn't know
Of hard work
Or struggle,
But ask me.

I've been car-jacked
Commissioned
Shot at
Kidnapped
Beat up
Broke down
Broke
Homeless
Foodless
Fearful
But, cared for.
Someone cared enough
To give me my voice,
One voice among billions,
On a planet among trillions,
In a world where men's noise fills in
The gaps between wind and thunder
And I wonder,
I wonder if my 1% brothers
Could understand this dichotomy,
Could understand the solidarity of
Our fists in the air
In America's night,
Pumping for our chance
To stand equal with the elite,
Even if we come
From the streets,
Outside
Wall Street.