

“A Dance That Is Danced Standing Still”: Poetic Motion in the Work of Woody Guthrie¹

Jamie Fenton

Today you're a better songbird than you was yesterday, 'cause you know a little bit more, you seen a little bit more, and all you got to do is just park yourself under a shade tree, or maybe at a desk, if you still got a desk, and haul off and write down some way you think this old world could be fixed so's it would be twice as level and half as steep, and take the knocks out of it, and grind the valves, and tighten the rods, and take up the bearings, and put a boot in the casing, and make the whole trip a little bit smoother, and a little bit more like a trip instead of a trap (Woody Guthrie, "Introduction," *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*)²

Woody Guthrie writes the troubled world of 1940s America as an engine which needs fixing. This “old world” is going somewhere, towards a new, more global world, and it is the job of the writer, who is “you,” everyone, to get things in shape for the journey. In a mixed metaphor of total movement, the engine is also the road on which it runs, which needs to be “twice as level and half as steep,” a tautology which performs its own sort of flattening on the sentence. Only after all the work of grinding, tightening and taking-up will the world be made “a little bit more like a trip instead of a trap.” This last phrase does some more fixing-up work, showing us how “trap” can be repurposed, smoothed into “trip.” “[A] little bit more like a trip instead of a trap” also trips, tumbling lightly over the assonance of “little [...] bit [...] trip [...] trap.” And it is only at the full stop, the punctuation which traps the sentence, that we realize the length of the trip from where and when we set off: “Today.” We become better songbirds over the course of the long sentence.

Guthrie is very concerned in passages like this one with getting somewhere. Progress must be made. But the getting somewhere involves an initial stopping: “all you got to do is park yourself under a shade tree, or maybe at a desk.” In order to fix up the road and engine of your writing, you yourself must be parked. Moving and writing seem to be two different things, even if, as we have seen, writing moves. Creating the engine of writing requires a contrasting technology: the desk. If, that is, “you still got a desk.” Many of the songs in the book Guthrie is introducing are about people who have been pushed from their homes, who have nowhere to sleep at night, let alone a desk to write at. The “still” of “still got” takes on its other meaning: in order to have a desk, you must be still, settled, homed. Movement is a dubious desire, slipping between progress and displacement, journey and drifting.

This dissonance carries over into the slippery final phrase: “trip” comes first, and becomes a trap. Guthrie almost certainly found the sound of “trap” in “trip,” rather than vice versa. A trip, *the* trip, from the Dust Bowl to California is the ultimate trap, as Guthrie writes in “Dust Bowl Refugee”:

I'm a dust bowl refugee,
 Just a dust bowl refugee,
 From that dust bowl to the peach bowl,
 Now that peach fuzz is killin' me.³

The repetition of “Bowl” creates a sense of inevitability. California replicates only the worst part of home: the lack of work and pay. A peach bowl is merely a bowl for peaches; it doesn't necessarily contain any. The trip, the “From [...] to” which slips into so many of Guthrie's songs, traps the migrants, who in the startling fourth line seem to be choking on peach fuzz, where they used to choke on its half-rhyme, “dust.”

These two passages show Guthrie caught in the middle of an essential American paradox: the desire for travel on the open road is matched only by the desire to settle down on personal, preferably private, land. The paradox is briefly taken up in reference to Guthrie by Martin Butler, who argues in his essay on hoboism that Guthrie's narratives of mobility are “characterized by a certain ambivalence.”⁴ Butler refers to Tim Cresswell, who theorized the contradiction in his reading of *On the Road*:

[...] all the frantic transition and movement is actually a search for something permanent and transcendent [...] While we have seen a dissatisfaction with small town orthodoxy and big city ugliness and the network of family, home and work, one part of the American Dream, we have also seen the affirmation of America as a land of wanderers, outlaws and hobos — a view equally “American,” rooted in the frontier image and the literary tradition of Walt Whitman, Mark Twain and Jack London. The clash of ideologies is a clash of American ideals which seem unresolvable.⁵

Cresswell is writing about Kerouac, who rode the asymptote of travel for travel's sake. There may be “a search for something permanent,” but it is not as pressingly politicized as it was for the subjects of Guthrie's Dust Bowl songs. It is also worth noting that Cresswell was by no means the first person to present the simultaneous desire for travel and home as unresolvable. In an essay on the automobile in his 1939 collection *The Living Tradition*, Simeon Strunsky refers to the “interplay between [...] the mania for distance and movement on the

one hand and the pull of the old home town on the other.”⁶ Strunsky is more optimistic than Cresswell. He refers not to a paradox, or a “clash,” but an “interplay.” Productive, playful work can emerge from the tension.

This article examines the ways in which this tension powers Guthrie's writing. There are two strands to this examination, which are traced over three parts. The first strand is methodological. Very little of the existing work on Guthrie gives even slight rein to the idea that his writing is worth reading closely. Mark Allan Jackson's *Prophet Singer* claims in its introduction to be rectifying this dearth of precise critical attention, but goes on to treat Guthrie's songs as unformed reportage.⁷ We learn a lot about what Guthrie was talking about, but very little about how he said it. I will confront Guthrie's mobility to assess how his verse and prose move. The paradox of home and travel is played out again in elements of form, especially rhyme, which acts as both a route between words and a rooting in sound.

In a bid to give Guthrie's poetic work the credit it deserves, I will be treating his lyrics primarily, though not exclusively, as written texts. While the performance and melody of Guthrie's songs are of course worthy of study in their own right, there is significant evidence that songs for Guthrie were first and foremost written, specifically typed, objects. The archive at the Woody Guthrie Center is brimming with folders of carefully typewritten lyrics for songs which were never recorded, and perhaps never even performed. Guthrie took great pleasure in assembling songbooks for friends, complete with hand-painted covers. The typescripts in these books are immaculate, but never come with so much as a note on key. Joe Klein compresses this love of the page over the stave into a neat turn of phrase: “He wrote his songs at the typewriter; it was the instrument he played best.”⁸ If the forward motion of the sung text keeps it one step ahead of scrutiny, the typed text stands still long enough to invite close reading.

The fact that such an approach to Guthrie is so rare is inextricable from the second strand of the article: a literary-biographical reassessment of Guthrie's working practices. The image of Guthrie which has survived to the present day is that of a freewheeling troubadour, a man of the open road, who composed to the beat of his own feet and never settled. Such a figure does seem to resist any kind of standard literary scrutiny. As early as 1953, folklorist John Greenway was dissuading his readers from wasting energy searching Guthrie's lyrics for examples of literary achievement, placing him instead in a group of practitioners whose work would never be classed “with productions of conscious art.”⁹ Protest songs like Guthrie's are “spontaneous outbursts,” but — unlike the Wordsworthian verse this gestures towards — are

composed without “careful artistry.”¹⁰ That Guthrie’s work responds well to at least a certain type of close reading, which I develop in this article, suggests that Greenway was wrong to place Guthrie in this group of interesting but minor singers. I believe that we should have a different, more sustained (and sustainable) version of Guthrie in mind: a Guthrie for whom writing was hard work, a crafting rather than a cruising.

Bryan Garman develops a symptomatically overplayed characterisation of Guthrie in *A Race of Singers* (2000), a book-length study of the democratic hero after Walt Whitman. Although generally reluctant to engage with actual poems, Garman presents Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” as a prophecy of Guthrie’s complex political stance: “‘Afoot and light hearted,’ Guthrie celebrated the freedom of the American highway, where, in Whitman’s words, he was ‘loos’d of limits and imaginary lines’ that would otherwise prevent him from becoming his ‘own master total and absolute.’”¹¹

Guthrie did indeed read Whitman, and he did scrutinize his own place in this poetic tradition, but it is worth putting the brakes on this image of the freewheeler and avoiding the trap of viewing Guthrie’s life as one long trip. If we consider the real circumstance of Guthrie browsing *Leaves of Grass*, we can note that he probably would have read “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” in the same sitting as “Song of the Open Road”; the two poems are always paired. Alongside the Guthrie of open roads and limitless wandering is a lesser known Guthrie of continuity and domesticity, a Guthrie who lived for a decade with his wife and children in a cramped Brooklyn apartment. Guthrie had his second period of creative success in Brooklyn, after the initial fertile period in Los Angeles which produced the material for *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940). They were years of close writing, and their products deserve a renewed scrutiny.

The three parts of this article investigate three different sorts of movement and their relation to Guthrie’s output: walking, motoring, and movement’s opposite — stasis. In the first part, I give space to the idea that Guthrie was first and foremost a wanderer, and investigate how this wandering shaped and paced his form; how walking interacted with talking. The second part harnesses automotive travel to question the tendency of Guthrie’s verse to easiness, or coasting. The final part slows down, and makes a case study of Guthrie’s output from Brooklyn in the late 1940s, specifically his recently rediscovered novel, *House of Earth*.

In his introduction to *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, Guthrie makes one of his frequent sweeping declarations: “I ain’t a writer [...] I’m just a little one cylinder guitar picker.”¹² It is worth seeing where that one cylinder takes us.

1. *Hard Traveling*

Rambling — Walking — Talking — Travelin' — Dancing

Yes, we ramble and we roam
And the highway is our home,
It's a never-ending highway
For the dust bowl refugee.

Yes, we wander and we work
In your fields and in your fruit,
Like the whirlwinds on the desert,
That's the dust bowl refugees.

I'm a dust bowl refugee,
I'm a dust bowl refugee,
And I wonder will I always
Be a dust bowl refugee.

In "Dust Bowl Refugee," walking has become a constant state. The rhyme of "roam / home" settles the two words together in an ironic refutation of the unsettled life on the highway. In performance, the second syllable of "never" is sung on a whole note, as if the word "never-ending" is never going to end. The journey is elongated and homelessness is re-emphasized: a home is not never-ending but the end to journeys. A rhyme, writes Christopher Ricks, is "a form of again [...] and a form of an ending."¹³ So, too, is a road: one person's starting point is someone else's destination. This constant rambling becomes strangely productive at the end of the song, when Guthrie makes it clear that to be homeless is also to be questioning of that homelessness. He puns on "wander" and "wonder." Both words come on the dwelled note, so that their meaning only emerges in the line's second half. The two terms are adrift in the space of the pause, meaning two things at once, slipping further into each other: "Yes we wander || and we work," "And I wonder || will I always."

Unsettled by these unsettled words, we take a small share of the querying which makes up the song's final verse. To wander, to be rootless, is to wonder why this is, and when it will end.

This sort of quibble gives an argument for an ontology between Guthrie's hard traveling among the downtrodden and his remarkable song-writing skills. The actual experience of trudging the highways and wandering through the migrant camps is assumed to be what made Guthrie's written wonderings so successful. In this vein, Jackson forms his chapters in *Prophet Singer* around the things Guthrie *documented*, not merely the things he wrote about. Guthrie's

work is that of a documentary artist, bringing his readers close to a real-world subject.¹⁴ We can scrutinize *Dust Bowl Ballads* in the light of this assumption. Guthrie was indeed close to his subject — he witnessed dust storms and grinding poverty in the south west — but he was not, it should be remembered, an actual part of the migratory work force. He moved to California to live with a wealthy aunt, and ended up working at a radio station, not in a peach orchard.

How far, then, did Guthrie's foot-travel among the subjects of his songs effect the form, the basic stuff, of these songs? Can song even be a documentary form? We can track Guthrie's relation to these questions through his frequent rhyming of "walk" and "talk." Walking, experience, has something to do with talking, the turning of that experience into words. The relationship seems casual, a mere chime, but Guthrie often put significant weight on such sonic coincidences, trusting them to do work for him. For example, he frequently rhymed "busted" and "disgusted" to gesture rapidly towards the state of the working poor, trusting this auditory hook to say what he otherwise didn't have time to say. "Walk" and "talk," as a pair, travel particularly far through Guthrie's output, and raise the question of how his movement found its way into the movement of his verse.

The rhyme between "walk" and "talk" has bolted the pair into cliché.¹⁵ You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk? Further elided, we can demand of someone to "walk the talk." The glib sound bite has deep roots in the division between word and deed: the flippant offspring of a biblical dichotomy.¹⁶ It is remarkable among clichéd chimes, though, in its ability to mean more than and differently to its idiom. The words have legs, which carry them beyond the simple correspondence of speaking vs doing, mouth vs the putting of money in it.

A cliché is something said by everyone, but Guthrie often employs this particular cliché to talk about his desire to talk about what no one wants to say. It has a cameo in one of his typically confounding method statements:

My best songs will be the ones that never rhyme;
They will be my songs about the bare limbs and the blossoms;
And I'll always walk and talk and ask myself,
How can the limb that is bare set itself up to judge
The trunks and the limbs, twigs, and sprigs that are in blossom?

(Guthrie, "My Best Songs," 1-6)¹⁷

In *The Force of Poetry*, Ricks claims that for a cliché to be permitted entry into a poem it has to be aware of its clichéness, and somehow

redeem it by doing something in, or for, the poem.¹⁸ Full marks for the first: “walk and talk” is part of a line explicitly addressing self-awareness. After dropping in the cliché, Guthrie immediately remembers to “ask” himself. The line break lets us read the asking back onto the walk and talk. Why ever did he say something so worn out? The line has “set itself up” to be judged by harboring a guilty cliché.

“Walk” and “talk” excuse themselves, however, by not quite rhyming with “ask.” Guthrie’s travel among and conversation with workers sets him up to ask why the bare limbs — the prudish, ivory-towered oppressors — wield so much power over the blossoms, the vibrant, earth-bound folk. These two groups will never align: they will “never rhyme.” Guthrie’s walking and talking together make up an asking, an interrogation of why this division exists. The half-rhyme of “talk” and “ask” is a way of asking something about the complete rhyme of “walk and talk.” If walking and talking rolls so easily off the tongue, is it any more than a path of least resistance? Where do we go next? What action can we take? The answer for Guthrie is to do more talking. This talking will be outwards, though, not conversation among a group. In his essay “People I Owe,” Guthrie figures this move from in to out with another half-rhyme: “And the only way that I can pay back all of you good walkers and talkers is to work, and let my work help you to get work.”¹⁹

The “good walkers and talkers” are the other half of Guthrie’s own walking and talking — neither activity is complete if done alone, just as a word cannot be a rhyme word until rhymed with. In this instance, Guthrie moves from walk and talk to “work,” another half-rhyme which does more work than the chiming from which it stems. The “work” of this essay is the same as the “ask” of “My Best Songs.” They are both a next step, a refusal to settle for the cliché. Song writing takes the walk and the talk and turns it into an amplified, shared conversation.

In both these examples, half-rhyme is used to revive and employ the cliché. But clichés will always continue to operate on, or rather as, their own worn-out terms, keeping their trueness in circulation. Documentary artists of the Depression put a paradoxical amount of weight on walking as a precursor for any literary, journalistic, or photographic talking. William Stott claims, with a certain amount of scorn, that “reliability of insight was conferred [...] by prolonged wandering about.”²⁰ This wandering, to borrow Guthrie’s pun from “Dust Bowl Refugee,” attempted to distance itself from any explicit wondering. Documentary photography, for example, prided itself on an apparent absence of judgement. The photographers did the wandering, the viewers did the wondering, tasked with putting together a life and a history from a photograph of an empty shack or broken-down car. The unfortunate consequence of

this vacuumed presentation was that wonder took on some of its mystical as well as its intellectual sense. Important political context was omitted, and the viewer is left with the deeply unfamiliar. Philip Rahv, whose term “the cult of experience” Stott borrows, lamented in 1940 that while it was all well and good to make politics and social values implicit in an experientially-grounded art work, “nowadays it is values that we can least afford to take on faith.”²¹ The walk is necessary, but the talk is essential.

Essential, but shunned. The way out of the Depression was not literary musing, but hard, physical work. Even the artistic projects funded by Roosevelt’s New Deal were centered on a promotion of labor. Stott performs a brilliant series of readings of government-sponsored murals in which reading and writing appear to be entirely backgrounded.²² In the corner of Emanuel Jacobson’s *Early Schoolroom*, he notes, “sits a stoop-shouldered drudge reading a book [...] his arms hanging limply between his knees, his heavy head bows almost to the page.” Stott notices that reading is not a mere alternative to the vigorous movement of the other figures in the mural, but its opposite and death. The boy’s knees go limp, and his head, the site of thought, is stilled by the reading material. Even Guthrie, whom Greenway termed a “logophile” and whom Edward Comentale diagnoses with “graphomania,”²³ is careful to buy into this premise of action over word in “People I Owe”:

My work in these days is mainly writing. I write songs, ballads, stories with tunes, tales with no melody, wild lines with free beats and freer rhythms. These rhythms alone are as pretty as the paint on your tractor, the oil on your wheel, but I have painted your tractor, hoed lots of hard rows of weeds out of your cotton and out of your corn.²⁴

Guthrie assures the folk that his walk is as good as his talk, indeed that the two are intertwined. He can only write wild lines because he’s hoed hard rows. The lines and rows form a tight weave. It is telling, though, that the physical activity is adapted from some word-stuff. The simile “pretty as the paint on your tractor” is the impetus for the work done in the second half of the sentence, the actual painting of the tractor. Cart runs before horse, words do the work of creating work. Sound patterns run across the second half of the sentence, adding an aural work to the metaphorical effort which made a bridge between rhythm and labor. “[H]oed lots of hard rows of weeds” is a sounded task. “[H]oed” and “hard” alliterate and in doing so put pressure on their hard consonant, which returns in “weeds,” the first letter of which picks up from “rows”; “rows” chimes with “hoed”; “of” is repeated. The phrase is made up of rows and parallels,

and the parallels start to impress rhythms on the sentence: “hoed lots of hard rows of weeds,” “out of your cotton and out of your corn.”

This goes some way to reconciling Guthrie's wordiness with the emphasis, both cultural and personal, on experience. There is an aural experience to be had in reading about labor. While this usefully argues with the trend of sublimating form in social documentary, and while Guthrie's prose rhythm is more than “merely ornamental,” it would be glib to go too far in the other direction and claim that Guthrie transcribes labor into sound patterns.²⁵ The role of prosody in documentary is more troubled, because rhythm and rhyme are a special sort of lie, or a different sort of true, one which skips over logic in favor of the illogical logic of sound patterning.²⁶ They create relationships between words which aren't really there.

The essential distance between walk and rhymed talk allows Guthrie to go further than he otherwise might have felt comfortable going. He frequently claims a first-person persona to describe second-hand experiences. “Back in nineteen twenty seven / I had a little farm, and I called that heaven,” he writes in “Talking Dust Bowl Blues.” He didn't, of course, but the song was nevertheless successful, bringing Guthrie and his wife “more groceries than a dried up farm in Okla. would.”²⁷ By contrast, the other great work of Dust Bowl fiction involved an erasure of its author from a situation in which he had actually been present. In his introductory note to *Dust Bowl Ballads*, Guthrie hints at this mystical figure: “There was a feller that knew us Oakies, and he knew what it was like in Oklahoma [...] because early in the deal, he threw a pack on his back and traipsed around amongst us, and lived with us, and talked to us, and et with us [...] — that man was John Steinbeck.”²⁸

We can be reasonably sure that Steinbeck would have shunned this myth-making, but Guthrie's description is nevertheless accurate. John Steinbeck was accompanying the Farm Security Administration in early 1938 when a violent flood hit a migrant settlement in Visalia. He helped distribute supplies, and the episode became the ending to *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). But there is no Farm Security Administration in the closing chapters of the novel — no middle-class author bringing blankets through the rain. Steinbeck wrote himself and his companions out of the text in a bid to double down on the fictionalization. In a letter to Elizabeth Otis about the floods, Steinbeck wrote that simple reports would not be enough, would not stir to action: there needed to be an anger.²⁹ Robert DeMott (over-)summarizes the letter as a declaration that “objective reporting would only falsify the moment,” as indeed it did.³⁰ As the *Visalia Times-Delta* reported on 5 February: “The Health and Welfare Authority of the San Joaquin Valley believes reports of disease and starvation are exaggerated. While they recognized the problem of housing and caring for thousands of migrant families they did believe

widespread reports of starvation and contagious disease to be exaggerated."³¹

This may be true, but it, too, is a falsification of sorts. That the reports of starvation might have been exaggerated does not change the fact that people *were* starving, and that exaggeration is almost inevitable in reporting such a charged issue. Critics saw through Steinbeck's selfish ruse of fictionalization. Outraged California resident Frank Taylor decried *The Grapes of Wrath* in *Forum and Century*: "Though it is fiction, many accept it as fact. [...] It is difficult to rebut fiction, which requires no proof, with facts, which do require proof."³² Steinbeck was caught in a Catch-22 situation. If he had linked his story more closely to fact, it would indeed have been easier to rebut; as fiction, it is fictional. This was the trouble with "trying to write history as it is happening."³³

Guthrie escaped this dialogue over the metaphysics of truth. He was speaking to the people who already knew, where Steinbeck spoke to the people who needed telling. The question of experience is also limited in biographical scope. Jeff Morgan notes that "while Guthrie certainly did write from first-hand experience, most of his topical songs while in California were written from newspapers."³⁴ Once Guthrie moved to New York in 1940, away from the active sites of humanitarian crisis, newspapers became almost his only source of stories. The image of Guthrie composing while walking, the beat of his feet stealing into the lines, is untenable. Ideas may have come on the road, but they were written at a typewriter.

This is not to say that sound patterns never find their way from newspaper to poem. Such a slippage is responsible for what became an archetypal, school-house example of "poetry," Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Hallam Tennyson recalled that his father composed this poem "in a few minutes, after reading the description in the *Times* in which occurred the phrase 'some one had blundered,' and this was the origin of the meter of the poem."³⁵ Although Guthrie was probably unaware of this metrical slippage, he was certainly aware of the poem. Indeed, in 1938, he rewrote it into a ballad. Guthrie had been exposed to the poem via the 1936 film, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, which ends up at the Battle of Balaclava via the Indian Rebellion of 1857. At the end of one draft, Guthrie laments that he is going to have to change the story: "I'll have to write a new set of words to this song because I don't want to sing about how the English robbed and killed the people of India, not in a favourable way at least." It is hard to see how Guthrie could have further depoliticized his version:

You've heard of the light brigade
 And of the charge they made
 This ride the captain said was a deathly blunder

[...]

A brave young soldier lad
 Who loved a sweet young maid
 Rode with that light brigade thru fire and thunder
 A letter he did forge
 He told the troops to charge
 They charged to win the war, that brave six hunderd.
 (Guthrie, "Light Brigade")³⁶

Guthrie balladizes the story by writing in the courtship of a "sweet young maid" as the impetus for the charge, in a loose mirror of the film's plot. There is no mention of India, and this calls attention to the sheer lack of contextual information provided by the original poem, a vagueness responsible for its declined reputation. All that remains of Tennyson is the rhyming earworm of the "blunder," which gives "hunderd" and "thunder." Tennyson's "blunder" becomes the "handsome dashing lad's magnificent blunder": an entirely different usage which doesn't sound all that bad, but the same recurring rhyme. In the second draft, Guthrie makes his criticism of the British actions in India part of the song:

For every lad that fell
 A maiden
 Lived to tell
 A love dream
 Shot to hell
 Yes, blowed to thunder.

I wonder
 What the hell
 These britishers any how
 Was down here murdering India's people ³⁷

Guthrie writes himself back out of the story with a reversing a-b-b-a rhyme pattern, in an echo of Tennyson's distinctive form, if not a direct nod to it: "Shot to hell / Yes, blowed to thunder. // I wonder / What the hell." The rhyme starts asking questions as Guthrie takes a step back from the song's subject. This is just one example of how rhymes for Guthrie were mobile, moving from poem into film into poem into ballad into commentary. They are part of a poetic to and fro, not necessarily the transcription of a real experience.

Instead of searching for such transcriptions, idealising a connection between Guthrie's experience and his poetry, we should instead be looking at Guthrie's forms as themselves a shared experience. One of Guthrie's most well-known songs, "Hard Travelin'," sets off from the idea of a common, prior knowledge:

I've been havin' some hard travelin', I thought you knowed
 I've been havin' some hard travelin', way down the road
 I've been havin' some hard travelin', hard ramblin', hard gamblin'
 I've been hittin' some hard travelin', Lord.

"I thought you knowed" refers to the common experience of the group the song addresses. It is a song for insiders, those who have also done hard traveling, been pushed onto the road by the people to whom this song is not addressed, those who don't know. But the phrase also talks to the song's engagement with form as a shared experience. It seems common sense to say that when we hear or read a rhyme word in verse, we expect its partner. We begin to guess what it will be, to demand its arrival. As Ricks writes, mixing memory and desire, we are "hoping" for it.³⁸ It is worth querying this assumption. A word is not a rhyme word while it is not rhymed with. But it *is*, once chimed with. Of course, poems induct us into a rhyme scheme; they have a plan which they make us privy to, and they teach us to expect rhymes in certain places. This can always be derailed, though. In John Berryman's famous declaration, modern poetry began with the surprising, unrhyming third line of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."³⁹ Is this right? The first two lines, "Let us go then, you and I, / When the evening is spread out against the sky," do indeed make "a nice rhyme." Then come the next two lines:

Like a patient etherised on a table;
 Who would suggest a rhyme if he were able.

Not quite. But Berryman surely misspoke. Modern poetry began in the *fourth* line, the point at which the poem diverts from the rhyme scheme it had set up in the first couplet. As Berryman admits, this couplet places us in a tradition of "dim romantic verse" in which we expect another couplet, and we don't know we're not going to get one until Eliot leads us off in a different direction in the fourth line: "Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets." Half-deserted, that is, of rhyme: Eliot continues to let half-rhymes linger in the shadows of his poem, even after the throng of couplets promised by the first two lines slinks off.

Rhyme, then, is a shared experience, both in the small world of the poem, and the large world of poetic tradition. It involves knowing what has happened, and having a common idea of what will happen. To wander from street back to highway, Guthrie's "Hard Travelin'" makes an easy journey of this guesswork. The song is about traveling, so presumably the word "road" came to Guthrie first, and he was able to pair it with the regional quirk of "knowed." Although the song travels "way down the road," the colloquial "knowed" keeps it squarely at home, indicative of a singer who grew

up in a certain region, and was surrounded by other people who said “knowed” instead of “knew.” These are the people whom the song addresses, the people to whom “knowed” does not sound overworked as a rhyme word. Guessing the chime for “knowed” is a straightforward game. We could have a confident stab in the second line after “way down,” and we could have made a wilder guess as soon we heard the first line’s “travelin’” and then “knowed.” You can’t travel on a toad, although a traveler can be slowed, and, if it all goes wrong, towed. Expectations are upset in the concluding half-rhyme of “Lord.” In a southern accent the rhyme might work, but in Guthrie’s arguably more midwestern accent, which makes “knowed” so convincing, it sits askance. The end of the verse takes us in a different direction, towards the larger journey of a spiritual or gospel song. Suddenly the “you” of the first line is God, as well as Guthrie’s audience. And in this way the unseated rhyme sits well. Spirituals are complaints to God as much as they are songs of praise. Guthrie only “thought” the Big Boss knew; there is a gulf, a distance, a jarring.

“Hard Travelin’” inducts us into its sound world. The “knowed” / “road” / “Lord” rhyme carries on throughout, all the way down the road, becoming a way of life for the period of the song. We only reach an actual road in the final verse:

I’ve been walkin’ that Lincoln highway, I thought you knowed,
 I’ve been hittin’ that 66, way down the road
 Heavy load and a worried mind, lookin’ for a woman that’s hard to find,
 I’ve been hittin’ some hard travelin’, Lord.

The road is contracted, from Route 66, to the colloquial “Lincoln highway” and gestural “that 66.” There is of course only one 66, but to Guthrie’s audience it is notorious, *that* 66, a road that more than any other is collectively known.

Guthrie describes a moment of collective rhyming in his autobiographical novel, *Bound for Glory* (1943). The scene takes place at a camp in a peach orchard. Guthrie has met a girl and is promising to teach her the guitar, but they are interrupted:

“You two quit’cher flirtin’ an sing us a song. Happ’n ta know the’ Talkin’ Blues?”

“I’ll teach ya after th’ dishes an’ stuff’s all put away.” I was just catching part of what the person talking was saying, “Huh, th’ Talkin’ Blues? I know a few verses.

[...]

If you wanta get to heaven,
 Let me tell you what to do,
 Just grease your feet in a mutton stew,
 Just slide out of the devil’s hand

And ooze over into the Promised Land!
Take it easy. An' go greasy.⁴⁰

After Guthrie has sung for a while, “several other folks added verses they’d picked up somewhere.” The song’s plot doesn’t make any sense. It is not pulled from a shared experience like “Hard Travelin’” or “Talking Dust Bowl Blues,” but shared via a common knowledge of the form: two rhymed couplets followed by a few lines of unrhymed speech. The song is bracketed by induction: Guthrie’s promise and delivery of guitar lessons. Talking blues, by contrast, does not need lessons, or rather provides them within its structure. You cannot learn the guitar by watching someone play, but you could offer up a new talking blues verse after hearing a few sung.

Almost inevitably, Guthrie rhymes the “talking” of “Talking Blues” with “walking.” In an introduction to “Talking Dust Bowl Blues” for the pamphlet *Ten Songs*, Guthrie writes: “Me a walking. Me a talking. I know this is me doing this. [...] I know you’re liking it and it’s tickling me smack smooth to death.”⁴¹ The walking-talking chime is usually figurative, as we have seen, but in this context it is quite factual: the “Talking Blues” are also the “Walking Blues.” Guthrie’s recorded performances of talking blues songs run at 110-125 beats per minute. This fits neatly into the recommended tempo for square dance accompaniment — recommended because it allows dancers easily to take one step per beat. In other words, Guthrie talks at walking pace. The relationship between talking blues and square dance goes further than tempo. Square dance calls are delivered in the same form as talking blues: a mixture of semi-sung and spoken lines. Guthrie neatly fits a dance call into a talking blues verse he typed on a scrapbook page about dances:

I want four pretty gals and four young men
In the middle of the floor to all join hands
All form a circle and circle to the right
Gonna swing my sugar till the day gets light
Circle on. Keep right on. Caint go wrong.⁴²

The dense instructions come as rhymes, making them a kind of puzzle, and once the puzzle has been solved they open up to the perfect rhyme of: “Circle on. Keep right on.” The documentary history of talking blues is lamentably sparse, and it is unclear whether it began as a form of dance calling or whether square dance calling took its form from talking blues, or whether the two developed independently. They collide in Guthrie’s work, though, and present another relationship between form and movement. A song played at walking pace isn’t a transcription of any particular instance of

walking; it is part of a shared rhythmic culture, a walk which talks to everyone at once.

2. *Easy Riding*

Speeding — Driving — Skating — Coasting

The formulation of walking as a sort of fluency or impetus to creativity is pleasingly romantic, but politically short-sighted, and should not be overplayed. Guthrie was writing in a fiercely modern America, where the prevalence of the automobile meant that the act of walking was implicitly the act of not-driving.⁴³ Walking is hard traveling, not easy riding. In a telling moment in *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie reverses the pairing of walk and talk. Guthrie and his vagrant companions have been sharply moved along by a police officer:

“And don’t ever let a smiling cop fool yuh,” a voice in back of me told us. “That wasn’t no real smile. Tell by his face an’ his eyes.”

“Okay, I learnt somethin’ new,” I said, “But where are we gonna sleep at?”

“We gotta good warm bed, don’t you worry. Main thing is just to walk, an’ don’t talk.” (p. 233)

Walk, and don’t talk. Keep moving, and don’t ask questions. The concerted effort among law enforcement to keep these displaced people moving stems from a belief that a static, housed group would have time to talk, and talking would lead to organization, as Steinbeck set out in a 1938 letter: “Do you know that they’re afraid of? They think that if these people are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities, they will organize.”⁴⁴ Walking, they are silent.

In the poem/photo book *Land of the Free* (1938), Archibald MacLeish makes a motif of the essential opposition between foot travel and fluency, turning it into a flattened mantra:

We’ve got the road to go by where it takes us

We’ve got the narrow acre of the road
To go by when the land’s gone

We can stand there

Keep our damn mouths shut and we can stand there



Figure 1. Russell Lee, "Old Lumberman in Minnesota," *Land of the Free*, facing p.74

We can stand still with our mouths shut

We can stand still with our mouths shut

Men don't talk much standing by the roadside.⁴⁵

The line "Men don't talk much standing by the roadside" returns several times in the next few pages. If the men say anything, they say that they are silent.

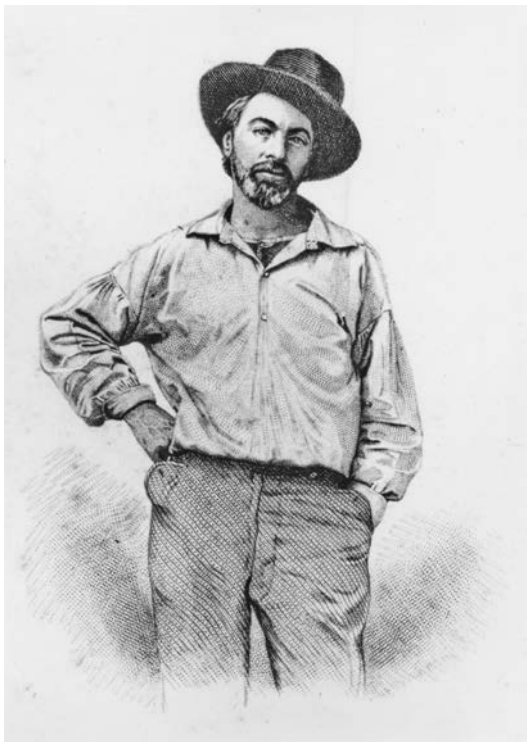


Figure 2. Frontispiece, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)

The lines above face a photograph of a lumberman by Russell Lee, who takes the famous frontispiece image of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and methodically reverses everything which makes that print a symbol of openness and magnanimous poetic speech. Lee takes his photo from a high angle, diminishing the lumberman's stature. His legs are excluded from the frame, leaving him immobile. Where Whitman stares out at the viewer with a mixture of curiosity and challenge, the lumberman looks down and off to one side, his eyes shaded by the brim of his hat, which sits low on his forehead in contrast to Whitman's jaunty angle. Lee's picture closes what the frontispiece throws open, just as MacLeish closes up his verse. He writes with the same accumulative, parallel phrasing as Whitman, but rarely lets his sense spill over lines: the poem is tight-lipped and taciturn. The earlier picture introduces a yawping new poetic voice. The later is the breaking of the promises which that voice made. Whitman's loafing has been rewritten into tramping and criminalized as vagrancy. *Land of the Free* is a story of the people who are left behind, left standing at the side of the road as a modern America drives past.

But while elegizing this leaving behind, MacLeish is also complicit in it. His poetics are distinctly modern, terse, and sharp-edged, part of a shift in poetic form which can be traced, in one school of thought, to the industrialization and mechanization of America. Cecelia Tichi maps this transition in *Shifting Gears*, a manifesto for technological determinism in poetics. Her conclusions are bold but also speak to common sense:

The machine-age imaginations of Hemingway, Dos Passos, and others responded directly to the new value of speed which permeated American culture. Hemingway's syntax of the straight line, for example, represented the shortest distance between two points. Compressing space, it also collapsed time and so enacted industrial-age speed.⁴⁶

Successful modernist writers were swept along by technological change; it provided a new sort of poetic fluency. Claiming that mechanized form is the vernacular of modernization, though, implicitly marks out a subset of authors who did not modernize, who were left behind. Where does Guthrie fit into this scheme? He is not generally attributed with many modernist sensibilities, and at times he seems to be truculently anti-technology, deliberately playing up his accent on words like "engine" and "electricity," which in the manuscript for "Talking Columbia" he renders as "Eeleckatrissity."⁴⁷ John Greenway cuts to the chase and describes him as "quaint."⁴⁸ He is a strange figure who came to New York from the rural midwest, so, to all intents and purposes, from the past. This section is an attempt to

contest this: part of the move to modernize Guthrie, or rather to show that he was never all that antiquated.⁴⁹ His forms are intimately related to speed, and his relationship with technology was one of wonder and wry comment, not of blind resistance. The car, in particular, is a key symbol for Guthrie, most fluent and talkative at its points of break down. Speed and technology, though, also bring to light questions of easiness, of verse as automatic, coasting and unconscious.

In a 1941 letter to his band mates in the Almanac Singers, Guthrie set out a scheme for the modernization of folk music: “what we’ve got to do is to bring American Folk Songs up to date. This dont mean to complicate our music at all, but simply to industrialize, and mechanize the words.”⁵⁰ This immediately rebuts writers like Jackson, who claims that complaining about mechanization was “a familiar Guthrie mode.”⁵¹ Guthrie’s letter is referring in part to the need for literal tech-talk in songs, the need to “throw in more wheels, triggers, springs, bearings, motors, engines, boilers, and factories.”⁵² But alongside these mechanical words is the desire for a mechanization *of* words: a move towards the compression which Tichi describes in *Shifting Gears*. We don’t have to delve deeply into Guthrie’s catalog to find an example of this compression:

This land is your land, this land is my land,
From California, to the New York island.
From the redwood forest, to the gulf stream waters,
This land is made for you and me.

(Guthrie, “This Land Is Your Land”)

The rhyme of “my land” / “island” makes up both a root and a route. “[M]y land” forces a regional accent onto “island,” localizing a line which simultaneously travels a vast distance: California at one end, New York at the other, the pronunciation of “island” stemming from somewhere in the middle. The rhyme also turns island into “I land,” a rhyme of sense with “my land.” Although these lines feel timeless, they are also incredibly modern. The idea that all the land from California to New York could be comprehensible as yours and mine relies on the technology which allowed people to travel that distance in a comprehensible passage of time: the train, the car and, lately, the airplane. Strunsky goes into great detail in mapping the travel times of modern America: “Today the train time from New York to San Francisco or to Los Angeles is something over eighty hours. From Portland, Maine, to Miami would be about forty-two hours.”⁵³ He compares this with “the covered wagon of 1843 which took five months to travel the two thousand miles from Missouri to Oregon, and with the stagecoach, which required a day and a half to go from New York to Philadelphia.” The train from California to New York

takes eighty hours; Guthrie gets there in a line, the journey made smooth and vanishing by a smart rhyme.

Having absorbed a poetics of speed, Guthrie begins to play with it:

Been to Pocatella, Idaho;
Chicago an' Buffalo;
Down past th' gulf of Mexico,
West to Californio;
I'm always on th' go, folks,
I'm always on th' go.

From Monroe, Lousyannio,
To Birmin'ham, Alabammero,
To Phoenix, Arizeenio;
An' good ole Hot Springs, Arkansaw;
I'm always on th' go, hey, hey;
I'm always on th' go.

(Guthrie, "Always on the Go")⁵⁴

Butler provides a deft reading of these lines, noting that the repeated "o" ending which Guthrie adds to the place names makes the lines circle around the salient, driving word of the song, "go."⁵⁵ He misses some of the irony, though: for all of Guthrie's going, every destination sounds the same. The disparate towns are levelled by the repeated sound, made part of a shared neighbourhood: O Town, USA. When you can travel anywhere in a few hours, everywhere is local, and so susceptible to this folksy vowel-bending. The first bending is a gag: Guthrie riffs on the plenitude of actual locations which end in "o," then surprises his audience with "Californio." The logic of the rhyme tussles with the nonsense of the word. "Arizeenio" is moved particularly far from home. Arizona already contains the necessary "o" sound, but in the wrong place, so Guthrie simply shifts it and swaps in an "ee." This climax of vowel bending is then superbly deflated by the unchanged, wonderfully mundane, "Hot Springs, Arkansaw." "Arkansaw" already contains a shift in implied sound, from its correct "-sas" to pronounced "-saw": it doesn't need another. The prosaic "Arkansaw" becomes a different sort of surprise.

Rhyme's capacity to surprise has always been best exercised in performed and recorded verse. On the page, we can see a rhyme coming; in performance and on recording it hides around an aural corner. In a quirk of techno-rhyming, this corner became entirely real in modern America, with the appearance of Burma Shave advertisements in 1927. The shaving company set up groups of

billboards on highways which formed jingles when read in succession by passing motorists:

Shaving brushes
 You'll soon see 'em
 Way down East
 In some
 Museum
*Burma Shave*⁵⁶

Suddenly, a printed rhyme is as surprising as a performed rhyme, hidden way down the road. The line break moves from a sliver of white space on the page to a driven, experienced distance. Burma Shave signs were ubiquitous, and thus represent a significant example of rhymes as guessable. The driver-reader knows that the second sign sets up a couplet, and has the space of road until the fifth sign to narrow down the possibilities. Hence the parallel distance which sign-writers built into their rhymes, as above: the game has to be tricky to be enjoyable. "Shaving Brushes" rhymes a verb and a participle, "see 'em," with a noun, "Museum" — there is a grammatical distance between the rhyme words. There is also a distance in register: the colloquial contraction "see 'em" finds its rhyme in the latinate "Museum." Burma Shave created a national fluency in rhyme which arose simultaneously with the fluency in travel owed to the automobile.

The Burma Shave phenomenon, a perfect overlap of technology and poetry, is brilliantly unique, but was part of a wider conversation about poetic ease. Burma Shave grew up in a culture of casual poetry. Mike Chasar makes the advertisements a key case study in his book, *Everyday Reading*. He writes that Burma Shave poems invited a very casual, open sort of reading, based on "the driving encounter, a dynamic that encouraged driver-readers to cruise the text, to read backward as well as forward, and to co-create the poem."⁵⁷ The game of guessing the rhyme is one where the rules can be broken: readers can come up with alternative endings, set out on their own poetic path even as they follow Burma Shave's initial rhyme direction. Chasar skips over the other side of the driving encounter, however — the momentum of the car. The one thing a driver cannot do while reading a Burma Shave sign is stop: no one wants to cause a massive road accident for the sake of light verse.⁵⁸ Like verse in performance, then, the rhyme will come — there is no pausing. To "cruise the text" implies a measure of control which the driver, in practice, does not have. The car is the ideal of independence — hence Chasar's emphasis on co-creation — but it is also, by no coincidence, an ideal of speed, and should not be thought of as a free floating object in pathless space.⁵⁹ Roads are not rails, but they are

tracks. This is a different sort of easiness, the unthinking easiness of being at least slightly out of control. Burma Shave poems thus tap into an element of modern technology which Tichi mostly glosses over: a poetics of speed is also a poetics of ease. In focussing on avant garde writers like William Carlos Williams and John Dos Passos, Tichi sublimates the fact that modern technology was designed to reduce work as well as to change it. For all her discussion of efficiency, she pays little heed to the idea that the most efficient poetry might be the easiest, not the modernist verse which gets mileage out of words via studied allusion and dense texturing.

Guthrie's forms are an example of this everyday poetic technology. Talking blues, in particular, became a sort of machine over Guthrie's career, although at first glance it feels anything but mechanical. The rhymed couplets give way to the freeform, unrhymed tail lines, which vary in length from a few words to entire paragraphs, as in Guthrie's "Talking Juke Box":

I got a waxy voice and a mechanical brain
 I got eyes that see pretty plain
 I know I've never found my real voice yet,
 But the history of the people I didn't forget
 I mean your personal history. I know all about you.
 Know every step that you ever took, ever book you ever
 read. Every hand you ever held. Every kiss you ever did
 steal. Ever job you ever had. Every single solitary little
 penny that who cheated who out of. Would you believe
 that
 one of these days and nights you'll put a nickel in me and
 hear all of this about yourself?⁶⁰

This is a particularly unique outing of the form — Guthrie ventriloquizes the juke box, turning the song's title into a pun. It seems that talking blues can go off in any direction, then, but viewed across the body of Guthrie's work, it resembles something much more machine-like. Talking blues was Guthrie's go-to form for exploring new subjects: he put the nickel of an idea into the form's slot, and a song emerged with seemingly minimal effort, based on the quantity and varying quality of the examples which survive. Alongside successes like "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and "Talking Columbia" are disastrous failures like "Kangaroo Talking Blues" and "Talkin' Prostitute." The successful songs were the ones subjected to redrafting, the automatic tempered with a careful crafting.

This crafting becomes insistent on an insistent uncrafted document. In March of 1948, Guthrie typed a talking blues verse onto the corner of a piece of a scrap paper. It begins:

Way down South on a northern lake
 Took my gal to teach me how to skate
 (Guthrie, "Talking Ice Skating Blues")⁶¹

The romantic scene turns to tragedy in line 4, though: while kissing on the lake, "where the ice was thin," the ice melts, "and we both fell in." The verse exists somewhere between finished and unfinished.⁶² On the one hand, it is typed, dated, initialed and ruled off. On the other hand, it is a single verse, detached from following verses which would make it a song. Guthrie had a tendency to mark a finished piece by typing "-30-" at the end of the page, a piece of journalistic code he had picked up while writing newspaper articles in California. This is interesting in itself, implying that Guthrie thought of every typed song as a sort of transmission, marked for immediate release, even if it just ended up languishing in a drawer, never to be performed. The moment of finishing, of letting stand, is also a moment of renewed motion, of sending off. But this piece of song goes un-thirtied, and remains in a state of flux.

On the other side of the paper, Guthrie has scribbled two short stories in pencil, both of which involve a kind of finishing. The first reads: "I married a dancer and got to be quite a poet setting around waiting for her." The second: "I had to join eleven separate unions to chop and make this chair you see here." Both poet and carpenter complete a product after a long period of crafting. Guthrie's quip at the plethora of unions is affectionate rather than frustrated. He spent much of the 1940s writing songs for and about unions — they provided him with the raw materials and the market for his work. The first story is a typical example of Guthrie's vacillating self-fashioning: at one point he is a poet, at the next he is merely "a little one cylinder guitar picker." "Talking Ice Skating Blues," discrete and un-song-like, sits on the page as a test case for Guthrie's claim. If the stasis created by waiting for his wife has made him quite a poet, this should surely be quite a poem. It is indeed successful. The "Way down south" opening is obedient to the tradition of a folk singer leading us by the hand into their story, which in this case is about skating lessons: we are inducted to an induction. Guthrie's precise rhythm and unforced rhymes drive us smoothly along towards the plot twist in line 4: we are taken on an easy ride to a sudden plunge. As so often in Guthrie's talking blues, the move to the tail lines marks a shift in register, in this case from anecdote to a sort of folksy analysis. The couple get a "cleanin'" in the lake, a sort of quasi-baptism to absolve them of the sin of kissing. Guthrie concludes with a rueful tall tale of an image: the lovers freeze up, "stiffer than the Statue of Liberty." "[S]tiffer" moves the lines back towards the

bawdy, sets up an expectation which is burst by the ridiculous, outsized Statue of Liberty. All this work happens in lines which skate, feel entirely casual, but which are, nevertheless, working.

If Guthrie's forms on the large scale are crafted rather than automatic, then, there is still something automatic and frictionless about his small scale play with sound. Greenway (who, it is worth remembering, believed it a waste of time to close read the work of folksingers) wrote this of Guthrie's tendency to let sounds slip and go off on their own:

He is a logophile, but his hypnosis with words does not manifest itself, as it does with others who have this affliction, in polysyllables. Guthrie rarely strays far from the Anglo-Saxon word hoard, but the curious associations which he finds between simple terms lead him into fantastic flights of imagery. Metrical restrictions fetter these flights in his songs, but in his prose they are completely unrestrained.⁶³

“[H]ypnosis with” is grammatically ambiguous. Is Guthrie hypnotized by words, or does he hypnotize others with them? The latter is evident: sing the first line of “This Land” and someone will offer up the second. Even detached from melody, phrases like “This Machine Kills Fascists” have inveigled their way into the cultural subconscious. But Guthrie is also hypnotized *by* words, by their melodic, compulsively returning to, or led towards, rhyming pairs like walk/talk, busted/disgusted. This love of sound pattern, of “curious associations,” appears in all circumstances, casual and momentous:

Did you ever see a hangman tie a slipknot?
Did you ever see a hangman tie a slipknot?
Yes, I seen it many a time, and he winds, and he winds
And after thirteen times, he ties a slipknot.

Tell me, will that slipknot slip? No! It will not!
Tell me, will that slipknot slip? No! It will not!
(Guthrie, “Slipknot”)⁶⁴

While the slipknot will not slip, Guthrie's words certainly do. The density of the assonance and alliteration in lines 3 and 4 creates a tongue twister: a different, much less significant sort of winding and tying, but one which forces itself on anyone encountering the verse. In the second stanza, Guthrie unties “slipknot” in order to release and question its capacity to “slip,” and in doing so he finds “not” in “knot.” The rhyme is bravura, and textures the verse with an awful inevitability, but the sound pattern is so dense that it begins to

overwhelm the sense. For a white singer to approach lynching was always going to be difficult, and Guthrie's lines feel too easy, too slippery, too much like nonsense.

Or, perhaps, they are on the verge of collapse. Guthrie had a complicated relationship with race. While not actively racist, he was at least complicit in the culture of oppression which this song documents for much of his youth. He had an apparent epiphany when an African American listener wrote into his Los Angeles radio show to complain about his casual use of racist slang.⁶⁵ "Slipknot" is a song in which words come easily but have a lot at stake. The third verse's "Did you ever lose your father on a slipknot?" feels genuine, but "lose" starts to sound uncomfortably like "loose," especially after the next verse's "calaboose" and "noose." Under scrutiny, the song begins to unravel. It is a case, perhaps, of the technology of poetry working easily until it breaks down. The clockwork wound too tight will snap. The car traveling at fluent speed is always seconds away from disaster.

Instead of slipping, sliding, or skating, then, I believe we should take Guthrie's hint about mechanization, and investigate his verse as *coasting*, as technology at the edge of control. In doing so, we can begin to reconcile his work's apparent ease with the political realities it encounters. In *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie hitches a lift on his way to California:

A mile or two of up-grade, and the tank was empty. The driver threw the clutch in, shifted her into neutral, and kept wheeling. The speed read, thirty, twenty, fifteen — and then fell down to five, three, four, three, four, five, seven, ten, fifteen, twenty-five, and we all yelled and hollered as loud and as long as our guts could pump air. Hooopeee! Made 'er! Over the Goddam hump! Yippeee! It's all down hill from here to Alamogordo. To hell with the oil companies! For the next half an hour we won't be needing you, John D.! We laughed and told all kinds of good jokes going down the piny-covered mountain [...] And it was a free ride for us. Twenty miles of coasting. (p.196)

Coasting is by definition a detached form of motion, but it is not detached from the wider politics of travel. To travel without running the engine, to obey a fundamental law of physics, is somehow a political victory. It is a strike back against John D. Rockefeller, Standard Oil, and by extension the group of large companies directly responsible for the mass migration to California which Guthrie finds himself a part of. Strunsky's essay on automobiles declared the car a democratic invention, "because it is so impartial in distributing its gift of mobility."⁶⁶ But America in the 1930s was a country where the

necessity of spending large amounts of money on a car to find work meant that a migrant couldn't necessarily afford the gas to get to that work.⁶⁷ To be freewheeling is to restore the democracy of the automobile and reclaim the fluency of travel from the corporations. As soon as the car is detached from its reliance on fuel, a space opens up which the passengers fill with noise and "all kinds of good jokes." Freewheeling, then, is the ideal form of motion for the self-styled peoples' troubadour: it is free in all senses of the word.

Out of the control of the oil companies, however, a coasting car is also merely out of control. The forward motion of a functioning engine goes hand in hand with the capacity to reign that motion in. At the mercy of gravity, accidents happen:

Way up yonder on a mountain road,
 I had a hot motor and a heavy load,
 I's a-goin' pretty fast, there wasn't even stoppin,
 A-bouncin' up and down, like popcorn poppin' —
 Had a breakdown, sort of a nervous bustdown of some
 kind,
 There was a feller there, a mechanic feller,
 Said it was en-gine trouble.

Way up yonder on a mountain curve,
 It's way up yonder in the piney wood,
 An' I give that rollin' Ford a shove,
 An' I's a-gonna coast as far as I could —
 Commenced coastin',
 Pickin' up speed,
 Was a hairpin turn,
 I didn't make it.

Man alive, I'm a-tellin' you,
 The fiddles and the guitars really flew.
 That Ford took off like a flying squirrel
 An' it flew halfway around the world --
 Scattered wives and childrens
 All over the side of that mountain.
 (Guthrie, "Talking Dust Bowl Blues")⁶⁸

This is a weirdly cartoonish description of what sounds like a significant road traffic accident. Nick Hayes picks up on this cartoonishness in his graphic novel, *Woody Guthrie and the Dust Bowl Ballads* (2014).⁶⁹ Hayes tells the story of Guthrie composing "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and pairs the lyrics with larger than life caricatures:

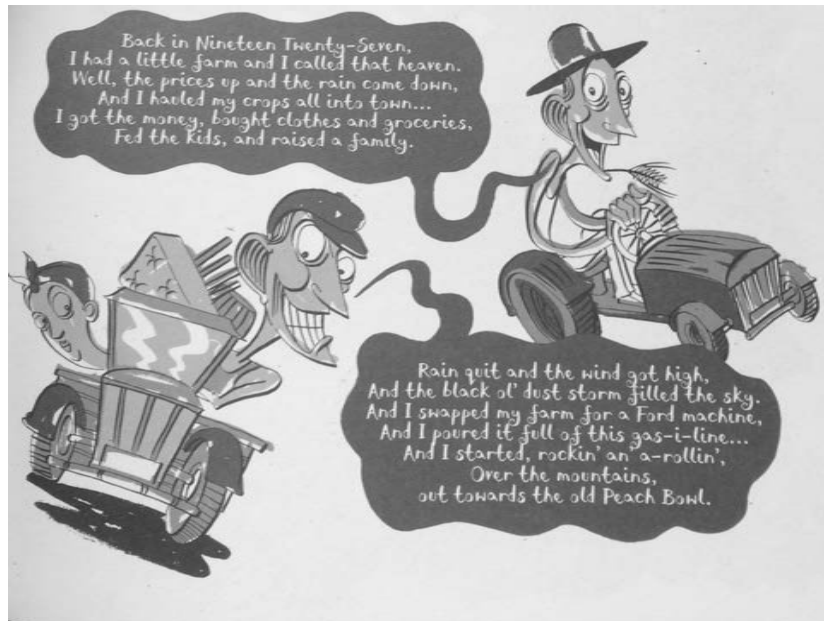


Figure 5. Nick Hayes, *Woody Guthrie and the Dust Bowl Ballads*, Chapter 8

The caricatures contrast with the book's vernacular: a hard-edged, elegiac style, in which gaunt figures often linger at the sides of the panel:

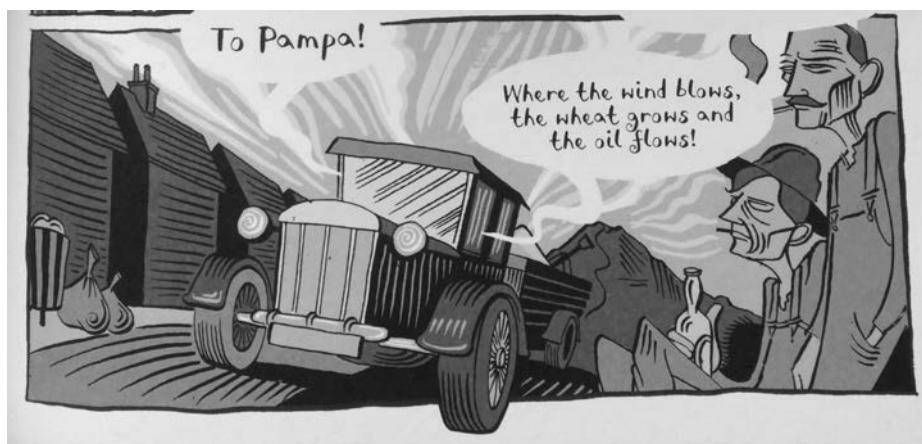


Figure 6. Nick Hayes, *Woody Guthrie and the Dust Bowl Ballads*, Chapter 2

But while “Talking Dust Bowl Blues” is cartoonish, Guthrie is also doing some very precise work with form. In the first stanza, the car’s breakdown comes at the same time as the breakdown in form, from rhymed to unrhymed, almost as if the “wasn’t even stoppin’” / “popcorn poppin’” rhyme is too much for the stanza-vehicle to bear. The next stanza switches into an alternating, a-b-a-b rhyme scheme,

building momentum into its sounds over the first two lines of formulaic scene setting — “Way up yonder on a mountain curve / It was a way up yonder in the piney wood,” and finally getting the car moving again when “curve” finds a rhyme in “shove.” The repeated “way up yonder” is a sort of cranking, an automatic motion prior to departure. In the tail lines, Guthrie takes the rising acceleration which gave the earlier prose passage such tension (“five, three, four, three, four, five, seven”) and refits it into the talking blues form. A continuous sentence of eyes glued to the accelerator becomes a vertiginous series of snapshots of approaching danger, like panels in a comic strip: “Commenced coastin’, / Pickin’ up speed, / Was a hairpin turn, / I didn’t make it.” The car takes off, in a wonderful flight of fancy, but we are brought to the ground again in the next stanza:

Got to California so dadgum broke,
So dadgum hungry I thought I’d choke.

The broken-down car makes it to California, only for its driver to break down in turn. Choking from hunger is an unsettled image, suggesting a glut of vacuity, and indeed in other versions of the song Guthrie opted for the more sensical, and better rhyming, “croak.”⁷⁰ “Choke,” though, recalls the choke on a car, the part of a carburettor which controlled the mixture of air and fuel going into the engine. A malfunctioning choke on a car might let in too much air, too much of nothing, and the car would break down. This rhyme seems colloquial, rattled off, but is under significant pressure.

The fantastical flying car and Hayes’s cartoonish rendition of the incident recall Grant Wood’s 1935 painting, *Death on the Ridge Road*:



Figure 7. Grant Wood, *Death on the Ridge Road*, oil on masonite, 1935

The red truck seems, again, like something lifted from a cartoon. Outrageously bright in contrast to the menacing hearse-like cars over the hill, its wheels are tilted absurdly as it skips over the ridge. Is it out of control, or just oblivious? The inevitable crash won't be any less violent, but at this moment of maximum potential energy, the truck is hypnotically cheerful. Everything about the painting is doomish and on edge — the storm clouds, the hidden vehicles, the telephone poles ready for crucifixion — but the truck retains its childish innocence: a toy transposed into a tragedy.

A coasting, playful Guthrie song can be always be searched for the parts which aren't working as easily as they seem to, the rhymes which are wound too tight and precipitate a breakdown. This is evident even in the apparently flippant "Talking Ice Skating Blues." Guthrie takes us "way down south on a northern lake." South and northern slip neatly into the rhythm, but are geographically confused. The ice is bound to be thin if we're further south than we first thought. In the second line Guthrie is taking his gal, but she is doing the teaching, taking him through the skating lesson. There is a push and pull of influence which unsettles the lines before the plunge.

Guthrie's work is not mere easy riding, then, but neither is it hard traveling. It is a sort of coasting. Edward Comentale describes Guthrie's headlong forms as a "disavowal of power." The joyful coasting in *Bound for Glory* is exactly that: a moment of disavowal, a thrusting aside of power in favour of something risky which nevertheless generates a "surreptitious protest."⁷¹ We should think of much of Guthrie's work in this way: as the car at the crest of the hill, the couple kissing on the ice; thrilled with potential energy; a long way to fall.

3. *Standing Still*

Living — Driving — Staying

Late in 1943, Guthrie moved into an apartment on Brooklyn's Mermaid Avenue, a stone's throw from Coney Island Beach. With him came Marjorie Mazia, the dancer who kept him waiting, and their daughter, Cathy, born just that year. Aside from seven months comprising his second and third merchant marine voyages in 1944, plus another seven-month stint in the army in 1945, Guthrie lived in this cramped house for the rest of the decade, eventually leaving it in December 1950, when his family moved into the Beach Haven apartment complex owned by Donald Trump's father, Fred C. Trump. The move to Mermaid Avenue has conventionally been viewed as marking the end of Guthrie's greatest creative period. *Dust Bowl*

Ballads had been recorded in 1940, and *Bound for Glory* had been released early in 1943. It is true that Guthrie's output during his Mermaid Avenue years included a slew of topical protest songs, many of them unremarkable; but it was also here that he produced some of his most memorable children's songs. Joe Klein writes evocatively of Guthrie's home life in this period, describing the apartment as "a luminous island of creativity," but admits that it produced "no really memorable songs" outside of the children's songs.⁷² In 1947, Klein writes, Guthrie began work "on another novel, called *House of Earth*," about a farming family in the Texas panhandle.⁷³ Klein sings the novel's praises, quoting Alan Lomax's opinion of the first chapter: "It was, quite simply, the best material I'd ever seen written about that section of the country." Unfortunately, that chapter "was all that he'd ever see of *House of Earth*." After attempting a second chapter, Klein continues, "Woody gave up on it."

But he didn't. He finished the novel, and sent the manuscript to Hollywood, in the hope of getting a deal for an adaptation. The deal never came through and the completed manuscript languished in Los Angeles until it was moved to Tulsa as part of a bid to collect Guthrie's materials. It was unearthed in Tulsa by Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp, who were doing research for an article on Bob Dylan. Brinkley and Depp edited the manuscript, and published it in 2013 as part of the Guthrie centennial. It received a mixed response. The editors make a powerful case for the novel in their introduction, claiming it reinforces Guthrie's place "among the immortal figures of American letters."⁷⁴ But Michael Faber dismissed it in the *Guardian* as "a historical curio," claiming it suffered from overly light-handed editing and an excess of "verbiage."⁷⁵ Reviews in journals are both few and unfulfilled. The Guthrie community, it seems, doesn't really know what to do with it. If it was poor, it could be swept under the rug like the sprawling, semi-fictional *Seeds of Man*; if it was a masterpiece, it could be heralded. As it is, the novel is merely held as good, and balances uneasily at the top of the tottering pile of Guthrieana.

By considering the circumstances of production, however, *House of Earth* becomes a useful and beautiful piece in the puzzle of Guthrie's creative method. It implies, counter to the popular narrative, that Guthrie's best work came from periods of stillness and sustained work, not from restless wandering. The material for his other great creative success, *Dust Bowl Ballads*, was assembled during a similar period of stasis: his two year stint on Los Angeles radio. In a brilliant article on this stage in Guthrie's career, Thomas Conner emphasizes the role that sustained conversation between Guthrie and his listeners played in creating his radio persona: the persona that would find full expression in *Dust Bowl Ballads*.⁷⁶ Guthrie spoke to his listeners over the airwaves, and his listeners

replied, volubly, by mail: there was an address they could write to, a place where they could be sure Guthrie would receive their half of the conversation.

House of Earth emerged from a similar sustained stillness. It was a stillness surrounded by — and emphasized by — movement. Guthrie's apartment, Klein notes, was something of an open house, a steady axis to a whirl of friends, neighbors, children and artists. At the center of the merry-go-round was a small desk tucked into the corner of the room, and a typewriter. Guthrie wrote a short essay in 1947 describing the meticulous maintenance he performed on this typewriter, a "new modern easy runner Royal table model."⁷⁷ *House of Earth* was not written under the intensive routine which had produced a book like *The Grapes of Wrath*: there is no record of Guthrie having a strict writing schedule.⁷⁸ But the attention Guthrie gave to his typewriter implies it was in constant, regular use: "I just now cleaned my typekeys [...] I used my toothbrush soaked in lighter juice. I scrubbed from A to Z, then from Z back to A, then through all of the numbers from 1 to 9." Greenway recalls a similarly industrious scene on his visit to Guthrie's home in 1946: "I found him, a little weather-worn man with incredibly bushy, wiry hair, sitting before a typewriter in a hollowed-out space in the middle of a tiny room filled with guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, mandolins, tambourines, children's toys, record albums, books, pictures, and scattered manuscripts."⁷⁹

Guthrie sits among a whirlwind of objects: they seem the weather which wore him. Each object is primed with motion. Guitars are made to be strummed, toys played with, records spun, and even the more academic manuscripts are "scattered": they contain a recent history of swift movement. Guthrie is burrowed into the midst of this storm and Greenway had to find him, to unearth him. This was the place, the desk and the typewriter, where Guthrie wrote *House of Earth*, his novel about the desire for a home and the endless movement of wind and dust which made that impossible.

House of Earth is a story of things which seep and creep into the home. Tike and Ella May Hamlin live on a rented farm in the Texas panhandle. They inhabit a tiny wooden shack, entirely pervious to the plains dust, to termites, and rot. In the opening pages, Tike brings his wife a government pamphlet, which she receives like a gospel:

"Why. A little book. Let's see. Farmer's Bulletin Number Seventeen Hundred. And Twenty. Mm-hmm."

"Yes, ma'am."

"The Use of Adobe or Sun Dried Brick for Farm Building." A smile shone through her tears. (p.13)

Dust can be turned into bricks, almost sacramentally transformed from the invading, ever-moving particle to a wall which repels that invasion. The first two of the four chapters describe Tike and Ella May's attempt to stop the dust and collapse, first by putting hope in the pamphlet, celebrating its arrival in an explicit love-making scene which sings of a Whitmanesque "everythingness of everything," to take Faber's astute phrase. The second chapter shows the Hamlins pasting pages from old magazines onto the shack walls in an attempt to seal the cracks. Guthrie puts forward the irony of transient pieces of text being saved to shore up what should be a permanent structure: "Together they laughed at the old pictures of sharp-toed 1910 shoes. They hugged and laughed and pointed at square-built, clumsy models of automobiles with brass trimmings, squeeze honkers, and straps and buckles" (p.97). Outdated magazines are forced into new service. Although Tike and Ella May laugh, the "square-built" cars feel more solid than the walls their images now cling to.

It is in the third chapter, though, that the home is thoroughly invaded; not by rot or termites, but by Blanche, a midwife who has come to help Ella May give birth. Thus far, the triumph of the novel has been its construction of Tike and Ella May's relationship. It is built out of jokes, teasing, and a private language: a difference and a sameness, a movement and a foundation. Blanche arrives and interrupts this rhyme. To Tike she is a part of the outside, the possibility of something different, of an escape from the shack which traps him even as it blows away in the desert wind. At the moment of his son's birth, though, the discord vanishes, and Tike reconciles the desire to move with the desire to be still:

"Ya. Ha. Boy! Yepsir. He's a boy, all right, and he's all boy, too. Gosh, ya'd outghta get a look at 'im, Lady." Tike had invented purely by accident some sort of a dance, a dance much like the one the early tribes now buried in the shale of the Cap Rock danced, possibly the world's simplest and one of its most graceful dances. A dance that is danced standing still. Tike's two feet were still, yet the rest of him danced on the floor and the door and at the mouths of rivers. (p.200)

While he dances, he watches Ella May on the bed, and "saw that her face, her eyes, her thoughts, danced out past the shack." They are trapped, but their dance lets them take a trip outside the boundaries of their life: they both find a beyond within.

The novel is a structural and poetic success, then, but also a success in the wider culture of Dust Bowl writing. In a 1941 letter to the Almanac Singers, Guthrie writes a paeon to the experiences of different groups of American workers:

Where the works of the Oakies is mainly in following the crops and praying for a little forty of their own [...] the workers in the other parts of the country have their mines, mills, croppin farms, factories, etc. from which their songs of their work must come and the answer to *Tobacco Road* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. It would be a sorry world if there was no answer.⁸⁰

House of Earth is an answer to several questions. It relates the experience of the farmers who hung on, who were forced into sharecropping as opposed to being tractored off their land onto that 66. It also sits well between Guthrie's literary touchstones: Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. *House of Earth* resembles *Tobacco Road* at a glance, in its small focus on one piece of land and a family who refuse to leave it. But whereas *Tobacco Road* is one of the most needlessly depraved and least sympathetic pieces of literature to emerge from twentieth-century America, *House of Earth* has an elegiac beauty, a humor, and an anger. Caldwell's novel is a grubby fable of the same mistakes being made again and again; Guthrie's novel is a hymn of looking forward. The hymn is raised to a pitch in the novel's closing with the birth of a child, a boy who Tike immediately sets in motion with the nickname "Grasshopper." After the birth, Tike sings the novel to an end, his tragically unfulfilled verses the last thing to invade the shack:

Tike's song seeped in through the cracks of the boards and in under the wallpaper with a frozen brittle tone. His shovel struck against the icy dirt, and Blanche noticed he sang in pretty accurate pitch with the ringing

*Well the Grasshopper says to that landlord
You can drive your tractor all around
You can plow, you can plant, you can take in your crop,
But you cain't run my earth house down, down, down!
No! You cain't run my earth house down!*

(p.211)

Tike is digging a hole for the afterbirth, breaking ground for new life, but the family's future looks dark, and he may as well be digging a grave.

As a novel of much greater subtlety than *Tobacco Road*, *House of Earth* fills the space of domestic drama left by Steinbeck's epic of movement. Route 66 is in the novel's background, frequently mentioned and measured against: "[Ella May] laid her head back against the wallpaper again and smelled the rot and the filth of the

place. Exactly one mile out the window and to the north she saw two cars running past on the 66" (p.68). Ella May is static, laid back against the rot like a corpse, while the 66 promises speed and motion. Not everyone departed for the conflicted freedom and restriction of the road, and in his family home in Brooklyn, with another child on the way, Guthrie wrote the story of staying behind.

Conclusion: Keeping Up



Figure 8. WGA, Photographs Series 1 Box 2

This photograph was taken in 1940 during a performance by Sophie Maslow's New Dance Group. Guthrie played the music for two of Maslow's choreographies, *Dust Bowl Ballads* and *Folksay*, and it was while working with her that he met Marjorie Greenblatt Mazia, whom he would soon marry, and who would become the first person to attempt a comprehensive preservation of Guthrie's writing. The photograph is remarkable in its delineation of movement and stillness. It transitions, almost exactly at the center line, from a sharp focus on Guthrie and Tony Kraber (another folk musician) to a blurry impression of two dancers in motion. Guthrie looks uncharacteristically somber in his concentration. He later wrote of how difficult he found it to play his songs as he had played them on his records, to which the dancers had practiced, accustomed as he was to adding pauses wherever he fancied.⁸¹ There are slight hints of

motion in Guthrie's body: his right hand is softened by blur, and the fingers of his left are hovering somewhere on the way to or from a C major chord. But he is entirely detached from the more insistent motion on the other side of the photograph. The dancers have their backs to him, and where Kraber gazes at them intently, Guthrie looks oblivious, in a different world.

Woody Guthrie could never keep up. His archive is full because there was always something else to write about: every funny, remarkable thing Cathy Guthrie said or did in her four years needed noting down; every morning paper brought another story of injustice which needed turning into another song. This work needs to be revived from its shallow role as mere historical texture. Guthrie was fully aware of his writing as writing: he struggled at and with it in a constantly renewing encounter with the volatile present. Future study of Guthrie and other "folk" writers of the Depression could benefit from acknowledging that folk writers are still writers, fully invested in the capacity of their form to reckon with political realities.

For all Guthrie's travels through America, America relentlessly traveled past him. In the introduction to *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, Guthrie recalls waiting at the side of the road: "I know how it was with me, there's been many a time that I set around with my head hanging down, broke, clothes no good [...] and then a seeing other people all fixed up with a good high rolling car, and good suits of clothes, and high priced whiskey [...]"⁸² The sight of the car stirs up thoughts of what could be bought with the wealth it displays. Just one of the diamonds on the passenger's finger, Guthrie says, "would buy a little farm with a nice little house and a water well and a gourd dipper." This image of the house returns to him again and again, "every time I seen a drunk man with three drunk women a driving a big Lincoln Zephyr down the road." The Lincoln Zephyr, the wealthy future of America, speeds past Guthrie, taunting him with the motion he prized, and leaving in its wake a picture of the home he would never quite find.

In addition to all untitled notebook writings and correspondence by Woody Guthrie, the author is grateful for permission to quote from the following writings, all words by Woody Guthrie, © copyright Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc., all rights reserved, used by permission: "Light Brigade," "Talking Ice Skating Blues," and "Talking Jukebox."

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NOTES

¹ Guthrie was a consistently idiosyncratic speller. To avoid clutter, his variations from standard spelling have not been marked with “[sic].” Quoted lyrics have been transcribed from *The Asch Recordings*, unless noted otherwise.

² Woody Guthrie, Introduction, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People*, ed. Alan Lomax, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012 [1967]), p. xxiii. Further references abbreviated to “HHS.”

³ HHS, p. 224.

⁴ Martin Butler, “‘Always On the Go’: The Figure of the Hobo in the Songs and Writings of Woody Guthrie,” in *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie*, ed. John Partington (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp.85-97 (p. 97).

⁵ Timothy Cresswell, “Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac’s *On the Road*,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 18: 2 (1993): 249-262 (p. 260).

⁶ Simeon Strunsky, *The Living Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1939), p.180.

⁷ Mark Allan Jackson, *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 12.

⁸ Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.97.

⁹ John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), p. 5.

¹⁰ Greenway, p.3.

¹¹ Bryan Garman, *A Race of Singers* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 83.

¹² HHS, p. xx.

¹³ Christopher Ricks, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin* (London: Viking, 2003), p. 32.

¹⁴ Guthrie’s role as documentary artist is troubled by his role as documentary subject. When Alan Lomax recorded his sessions with Guthrie in 1940, he was doing so in his capacity as a folklorist, and he treats Guthrie as an informant, not an artist. Guthrie is trapped in a strange middle.

¹⁵ Interestingly, across various editions of Eric Partridge’s *A Dictionary of Clichés* (London: Routledge, 1940), there are no entries relating to walking or talking in the senses under scrutiny. Indeed, across seven editions none of the following clichés appear: actions speak louder than words, practice what you preach, put your money where your mouth is. No cliché about doing what you said you’d do appears in a book which said it would collect clichés.

¹⁶ 1 John 3:18.

¹⁷ Woody Guthrie, “My Best Songs,” in Guthrie, *Born To Win*, ed. Robert Shelton (New York: Collier Books, 1967), pp. 46-63 (p. 46).

¹⁸ Christopher Ricks, “Clichés,” *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Guthrie, *Born To Win*, pp.17-19 (p. 17).

²⁰ William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 38.

²¹ Philip Rahv, “The Cult of Experience,” in Rahv, *Essays on Literature and Politics 1932-1972* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 19.

²² Stott, p. 39.

²³ Edward Comentale, *Sweet Air: Modernism, Regionalism, and American Popular Song* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 136.

²⁴ Guthrie, *Born to Win*, p. 17.

²⁵ Simon Jarvis, “How To Do Things With Tunes,” *ELH*, 82: 2 (2015), 365-383 (p. 373).

- ²⁶ W. K. Wimsatt, "One Relation of Rhyme to Reason," *Modern Language Quarterly* 5 (1944), 323-338 (p. 335).
- ²⁷ HHS, p. 228.
- ²⁸ Woody Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 41.
- ²⁹ John Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 161.
- ³⁰ Robert DeMott, "Introduction," *Working Days* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. xlii.
- ³¹ "Grapes of Wrath 75th Anniversary," *Visalia Times-Delta*, December 12, 2014: <http://vtd-tar.co/1DpO7tu>.
- ³² Frank J. Taylor, "California's 'Grapes of Wrath,'" *Forum and Century*, November 1939, p. 232.
- ³³ Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters*, p. 162.
- ³⁴ Jeff Morgan, "Hard Travelin': Constructing Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl Legacy," in Partington, ed., *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie*, pp. 99-114 (p.112).
- ³⁵ Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir*, Vol. I. (London: Macmillan, 1897), p. 381.
- ³⁶ Woody Guthrie Archives (hereafter "WGA"), Notebooks Series 1, Item 4, p. 136.
- ³⁷ WGA, Lyrics Series 1, Box 5.
- ³⁸ Ricks, *Dylan's Visions of Sin*, p. 39.
- ³⁹ John Berryman, "Prufrock's Dilemma," *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 270-278 (p. 270).
- ⁴⁰ Woody Guthrie, *Bound For Glory* (London: Penguin, 2004 [1943]), p.280. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- ⁴¹ WGA, Manuscripts Box 4, Folder 22. 2.
- ⁴² WGA, Lyrics Series 1, Box 9.
- ⁴³ Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie's Modern World Blues* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), p. 69.
- ⁴⁴ Steinbeck, *A Life in Letters*, p. 158.
- ⁴⁵ Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (London: Boriswood, 1938), p. 74.
- ⁴⁶ Cecelia Tichi, *Shifting Gears* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 230.
- ⁴⁷ WGA, Notebooks Series 1, Item 77.
- ⁴⁸ Greenway, p. 275.
- ⁴⁹ Kaufman, p. 5.
- ⁵⁰ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 53.
- ⁵¹ Jackson, p. 103.
- ⁵² Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 55.
- ⁵³ Strunsky, p. 2.
- ⁵⁴ WGA, Notebooks Series 1, Item 77.
- ⁵⁵ Butler, p. 90.
- ⁵⁶ "Shaving Brushes," Burma Shave billboard advertising campaign: http://burma-shave.org/jingles/1930/shaving_brushes3.
- ⁵⁷ Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 136.
- ⁵⁸ Indeed, Burma Shave ran a road safety campaign. It would be interesting to know if any accidents were caused by drivers distracted by poems about safe driving practice.
- ⁵⁹ Roger N. Casey, *Textual Vehicles: The Automobile and American Literature* (New York: Garland, 1997), p. 3.

⁶⁰ WGA, Lyrics Series 1, Box 9.

⁶¹ WGA, Lyrics Series 1, Box 9.

⁶² WGA, Lyrics Series 1, Box 9.

⁶³ Greenway, p. 287.

⁶⁴ WGA, Lyrics Series 1, Box 8.

⁶⁵ Elijah Wald, "Woody Guthrie and the Blues," *Woody Guthrie Annual* 1 (2015), 7-17 (p.15).

⁶⁶ Strunsky, p. 178.

⁶⁷ *HHS*, p. 228.

⁶⁸ Woody Guthrie, "Talking Dust Bowl Blues," *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Folkways Records, 1964 [1940]).

⁶⁹ Nick Hayes, *Woody Guthrie and the Dust Bowl Ballads* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014).

⁷⁰ WGA, Notebooks Series 1, Item 77.

⁷¹ Comentale, p. 132.

⁷² Klein, pp. 307, 314.

⁷³ Klein, p. 331.

⁷⁴ Douglas Brinkley and Johnny Depp, "Introduction," in Woody Guthrie, *House of Earth* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), p. xlvii. Further references cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷⁵ Michel Faber, "House of Earth by Woody Guthrie — Review," *Guardian*, February 14, 2013: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/14/house-earth-woody-guthrie-review>.

⁷⁶ Thomas Conner, "'Our Unseen Friend': Early Radio and the Tuning In of Woody Guthrie's Performing Persona," *Woody Guthrie Annual* 1 (2015), 18-40.

⁷⁷ WGA, Manuscripts Box 3, Folder 55. Guthrie's description of the typewriter is typically colloquial, but it sounds like it was a 1947 Royal Quiet Deluxe.

⁷⁸ Steinbeck, *Working Days*.

⁷⁹ Greenway, p. 281.

⁸⁰ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 54.

⁸¹ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 74.

⁸² *HHS*, p. xxii.