

KARL SANDBERG

THE RABBIT DRIVE

*They were of the old people, two sisters
With their measured tones and gunnysack
Of nickels, dimes, and quarters
To take out and polish when they met,
Telling as if the time were new
How False Teeth Hill had got its name,
Or how the people when they cleared
The valley had heaped the brush piles high
To burn at night and thus to greet
Each other across the empty spaces.
And always they rehearsed how they
Had surprised the world in contradiction —
God had said "Thou shalt not kill,"
But this commandment was a lesser law,
For in every living thing
There was commandment written inward
To live and thrive, and thus to kill.
And God said to the beasts,
"Divide and multiply and fill up the earth,"
But God also said,
"Let man subdue the earth and have dominion
Over the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field."*

So it was not wrong to kill the rabbits.
By thousands they laid waste whole fields of grain,
Could overnight crop gardens close, or eat
From underneath a stack of hay until it fell.
The prairie dogs people could poison,
But rabbits they had to drive,
Walking in a long curved line,
Moving the rabbits before them
Into a netwire pen on the flat.

Yes, the rabbit drive was justified
By logic, for it had to be,
And by the Lord, for the world is such
You can't just walk straight through, not breaking
One commandment or another,
They said, and as they told their tales,
It was justified by a slant in the morning sun
And the meetinghouse bell tolling a break in time,
For this is the day the Lord hath made
Out of milk and manure on bib overalls,
Sweat congealed in the stuff of shirts,
Wind and dust rubbing thin on cheeks,
In nostrils sage and manzanita pinching,
And talk, oh Lordy, talk,

A break in time, the girl shouting
With the others, sending the rabbits
Bounding, leaping through the brush,
This day her first in a rabbit drive,
The cry contagious, the walking light
Through the sage standing shoulder high,
The cry, the cry, and the morning.

Rabbits now by hundreds dashing,
Crossing zig-zag, the line moving them forward,
The line closing to a three-quarter circle,
Driving the rabbits into the netwire pen,
The men running up to the pen
And drawing the front wire tight.

Away from the pen the women talk,
The dam of silence broken, words
Rushing out, who has been sick,
What is in the garden, whose
Relatives have written, what
Has been sent for C.O.D. in the catalogue,

Who is pregnant, Ida Steed
Brought a harmonium from Salt Lake,
And she has it in her house: words
That mean nothing but bear the weight
Of the soul, which craves the break in time,
Which must move sometime with abandon
Lest it die. The girl, apart, sees

the men climbing over the wire,
Some with axe-handles, some with clubs or hatchets,
Now walking in a phalanx through the pen,
Smashing the rabbits' heads, some expert
And practiced with one stroke, others
Clubbing the animals pulpy to kill them,
Some methodical as if wielding a scythe,
Others, eyes glistening, shouting,
Dashing out of line, to catch
A leaping rabbit with a club,
"Home run!" the cry, Arthur Tuttle,
Swinging wildly, catching old man Schneider
On the shoulder, he replying,
"Every hunter becomes a hare."
Five times through the pen, a thousand and seven
Rabbits dead upon the ground,
And one remaining still alive
Having five times sprung past the clubs,
Willy-do Jackson, 17,
Hatchet in hand, "Let me get him,"
Running the rabbit to a corner, crouching
To meet the rabbit's leap, the rabbit
Darting to the side, Willy-do springing,
The arm and hatchet striking out,
The blade splitting the rabbit's skull,
The rabbit convulsing, its hind legs jerking,
Willy wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

The girl sees the rabbit die.
She knows it must, and still, she hears
What Bertha Rapplay says, out loud,
And wishes a moment she might be
A Rapplay, too, so she could say
The words: "The poor bastards."

And yet the day was justified
For that night in the hewn log meetinghouse
Archie Drew, his fiddle, and a pint

Of whiskey played for a dance. Now
Archie had rhythm and knew the chords
Of the fiddle's music, and the Lord's.
Sundays he led the hymns of praise
That tuned the heart to purer ways,
And led in a way that showed he meant
To find in the chords the Lord's intent,
But he was himself and was not ready
To follow a path too cramped or steady.
He knew (oh, life is full of choices)
The Spirit speaks in many voices:
It speaks when the fasting soul is lean,
But just as well when the grass is green,
So tonight he drinks from a generous cup
And turns and tunes his fiddle up,
Then talks of things through gut and wood
That never a bishop in sermon could,
First a trickle and then a flood
Of sudden truths to warm the blood,
Impertinent truths, and sly and frisky,
Celestial gossip passed on by whiskey.

Feet that never have followed a master
Follow the fiddle fast and faster
As Archie's foot and the fiddle's sound
Spin the hall and the night around.
Babies lie bundled at the end of the hall
On two wood benches against the wall,
Bottled or nursed when they start to cry,
"The Pretty Quadroon" their lullaby.

The women go back when each dance ends
To talk alone with women friends
While men, outside, tip up a bottle,
As an engineer will slide the throttle.
Agreed that wise men would have refrained,
But the soul must once move unrestrained.
We know the bottle for a slippery crutch—
The morning will never amount to much—
But for now it will tear the shrouds apart
That hang so heavy about the heart.
It is now, and the now is the soul's concern.
The music starts and the men return
To the middle of the floor with a swaying slide,
Waving partners from the other side.

A look from Willy invites the girl.
The people, the hall begin to whirl,
For foot must follow the spheres about,
Lips must cry and the throat must shout,

For all is true and nothing false,
Then Archie's fiddle jigs up a waltz,
Letting never a foot be stayed
(This is the day the Lord hath made,
laughter fat that once was thin,
let all rejoice and be glad therein)

The girl was never again a child.
She knew the cry of Spirit is wild.
She knew as she felt the free blood run
The cry of the spirit and blood are one.

The music and hours are a flooding tide
The dark is deep, but the heart is wide,
And the world awhile is justified,
For everyone dances, the spirit rises
As Archie's fiddle philosophizes
"If ninety-nine girls want to be missed,
If ninety-nine girls want to be kissed,
Why don't you?"

then

Good-night ladies
Good-night ladies
We're going to leave you now.

Long after the dance, on her mattress atop
A bin of grain for the summer night,
Looking motionless at the stars,
The girl went on hearing the fiddle
And kept whirling with the dancers in the hall,
While she listened to the howling
And yipping of coyotes, hundreds of them,
From the direction of the rabbit pen.