The Bad Old Days

By Kenneth Rexroth

The summer of nineteen eighteen

I read The Jungle and The
Research Magnificent. That fall

My father died and my aunt

Took me to Chicago to live.

The first thing I did was to take

A streetcar to the stockyards.

In the winter afternoon,

Gritty and fetid, I walked

Through the filthy snow, through the

Squalid streets, looking shyly

Into the people’s faces,

Those who were home in the daytime.

Debauched and exhausted faces,

Starved and looted brains, faces

Like the faces in the senile

And insane wards of charity

Hospitals. Predatory

Faces of little children.

Then as the soiled twilight darkened,

Under the green gas lamps, and the

Sputtering purple arc lamps,

The faces of the men coming

Home from work, some still alive with

The last pulse of hope or courage,

Some sly and bitter, some smart and

Silly, most of them already

Broken and empty, no life,

Only blinding tiredness, worse

Than any tired animal.

The sour smells of a thousand

Suppers of fried potatoes and

Fried cabbage bled into the street.

I was giddy and sick, and out

Of my misery I felt rising

A terrible anger and out

Of the anger, an absolute vow.

Today the evil is clean

And prosperous, but it is

Everywhere, you don’t have to

Take a streetcar to find it,

And it is the same evil.

And the misery, and the

Anger, and the vow are the same.


Source: The Collected Shorter Poems (1966)