

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.



Kenneth Rexroth was born in South Bend, Indiana and frequently moved around the Midwest during his childhood. He led a tumultuous life that included being orphaned at 14, constant traveling both in the US and abroad, intense political activism, and four marriages. Largely self-educated, he is one of the most well-read poets of the 20th century. His poems, which influenced Beat writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, reflect this tremendous reading, and emphasize ecology, sexuality, and mysticism. In his poem "Discrimination," Rexroth shows a more political side as he cleverly mocks racial stereotypes.