



Downtown Caddo, Oklahoma. (Photo by
Dorothea Lange, Farm Security Administration.)
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Chapter 5

SURVIVOR

"No cracked earth, no blistering sun, no burning wind, no grasshoppers are a permanent match for the indomitable American farmers and stockmen and their wives and children, who have carried on through desperate days and inspire us with their self-reliance, their tenacity, and their courage."

Thus spoke President Franklin D. Roosevelt during a fireside chat broadcast from Washington, D.C., on 6 September 1936. After a campaign swing that took him through nine states experiencing drought, Roosevelt witnessed firsthand fields blasted with heat and the "forgotten Americans" faced with blowing winds. While surveying the dreadful scene, he pledged to fight on behalf of federal programs to assist the down but not yet out. Roosevelt expressed solidarity with folks in no ordinary time, then, as his moving rhetoric elevated the plight of afflicted residents struggling against forces beyond their control.¹

His story of the dust bowl recognized the struggle of the people as heroic, if only for a fleeting moment. The historian James Gregory explored how this struggle resonated with working people who saw themselves as victims of the Depression. The Depression generation socially constructed an obsessive devotion to stubborn determination and physical courage, that is, the "cult of toughness." Group identity was expressed by a

willfulness to fight against the powerful forces of nature. It composed a hyper-masculine, neopopulist style, which became quintessential for an "Okie" subculture and for "Plain Folk Americanism." The style was indicative of a sense of exceptionalism, as people found inscrutable faith in the belief that they shared a special fortitude for overcoming loss.² Grounded in hard times, the survivors fashioned a modern identity as rugged as the environment itself.

John L. McCarty, who edited the *Dalhart Texan*, wrote about the ways that the land and the people had become inseparable. In 1935, the irascible McCarty organized the Last Man's Club, whose hundred or so members pledged to remain in the dust bowl "until hell freezes over and skate out on thin ice." His fellow Dalhart boosters hired Tex Thornton, an explosives expert and self-proclaimed rainmaker, to detonate TNT and solidified nitroglycerin jelly on a day with low cloud cover. After the rainmaking venture, dirt blasted into the air and mixed with the winds to exacerbate the discomfort of a blowing duster. Although some broken residents limped out of the blight, McCarty and his cohorts gestured to the skies and admonished them to fight with brute strength: "Grab a root and grow!" They raged against the woebegone reports of journalists and the horrifying paintings of artist Alexandre Hogue, complaining that the scenes of deserts ignored the stories of success.³

In some sense, the rhetoric of the Last Man's Club appealed to a collective outrage over the discouraging words of the Depression. In one stirring rant, "A Tribute to Our Dust Storms," McCarty captured the cult of toughness in a most compelling form:

Let us in stentorian tones boast of our terrific and mighty sandstorms and of a people, a city, and a country that can meet the test of courage they afford and still smile. Let us humbly and in shame admit our part in the capacity our land has suffered at our hands, but vow, with the raging winds of the prairies, that we will with God's help carpet our lands once again with grass and vegetation and with our heads unbowed, our spirit undaunted, view the majestic splendor and beauty of one of the great spectacles of nature gone rampant—a Panhandle sandstorm—and smile even

though we may be choking and our throats and nostrils so laden with dust that we can not give voice to our feelings.⁴

Across the Great Plains, editors extolled the virtues of those who never gave up or never gave in when facing defeat.

Editors, moreover, spun tall tales about the virtues of the country. Eugene A. Howe, the editor of the *Amarillo Globe* of Texas, preferred the pseudonym Kemal Erasmus R. Tack in his whimsical column "The Tactless Texan." Without superficial sophistication, the column featured self-deprecating humor accentuating bad weather, local customs, and the "Old Woman"—Howe's denigrating euphemism for the Texan's wife. When receiving letters about a divine curse placed on the region, "Old Tack" with tongue in cheek asserted: "I can't believe He would select the very best people for punishment when there are others so much more deserving of His wrath." In another yarn, he joked that the billowing sandstorms provided higher levels of "Vitamin K," claiming that "we've never been fatter, healthier, or dirtier." With his idiomatic buffoonery, he added: "And the women folks have never been jumpier." Howe's parodies repeated other homespun anecdotes, including one about a man discovering a cowboy hat on a sand dune. Under the hat appeared a cowboy's head. The cowboy claimed to be doing fine, although he quipped that he was on horseback. The diversions of the Tactless Texan encouraged the forlorn to grimace at their misfortune but cling to their homeland.⁵

Clinging to the homeland, then, constituted a revered subject for editorial cant. The editor of the *Earth* answered the "erroneous impressions" of the dirty thirties "as temperately as a Western man could," reporting that the multitudes "through years of trials and tribulations have wrested from the wilderness" a region intolerant to "quitters."⁶ In the *Kansas Farmer*, an editor announced: "I pay tribute to real courage." While blistering in the sun, the "common man" contended against "not only a rising tide of cost of government and rising cost of living" but also the "forces of nature" allied against him.⁷ The *Daily Oklahoman* also mused that "truly we have wrested a realm from the primitive raw." The hardy boys "have brought order and law into a region where the jungle law had been the only limitation of

conduct." The "last frontier is still ours," claimed the vignette, as the raw materials of "The Land of the Fair God" awaited "the magic touch of toil and intelligence to make them bloom like the rose." Newspaper columns highlighted a special place demonstrating with full effect the will of the people.⁸ In particular, stories praised the stubborn resolve of the "stickers," that is, those who stayed despite the tempests.⁹

Stories about women who struck through hard times displayed this resolve in peculiar ways. Caroline Henderson, a graduate of Mt. Holyoke College, a farmer's wife, and an Oklahoma resident, composed a series of letters printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*. She shared worrisome lines about her family's hardships in a "No Man's Land," where dust obliterated the dreams of the faint of heart. "Our little locust grove which we cherished for so many years has become a small pile of fence posts," Henderson mourned. "With trees and vines and flowers all around you, you can't imagine how I miss that little green shaded spot in the midst of the desert glare." With undaunted courage, she and her husband, Will, refused to leave the spot because their "twenty-seven years of life together" were forever "bound up with the little corner to which we have given our continued and united efforts."¹⁰ Observe her blending of hearth and nature, which oriented her perspective upon tragedy.

As the Oklahoma woman gazed upon the dying wheat fields, she reflected on her sorrowful state. The country, Henderson observed, was "lying asleep like the princess in the fairy tale." She pined with a "painful longing" that soon the "enchantment may be broken, that the deliverer may come with the soft footfalls of gentle rain and waken our homeland once more into gracious, generous life." In romantic tones, she imagined the teasing of a suitor who brought water to arid landforms. Nevertheless, the woman farmer wondered if barren fields, ruined pastures, buried fences, dead trees, abandoned wells, and desolate homes reflected the insensitive pride of foolhardy gamblers. On days when there was little more than dust to eat, Henderson questioned whether "the traits we would rather think of as courage and perseverance are not actually recklessness and inertia." Under the guise of gender, she associated surviving with the ability to shoulder burdens, to withstand pain, and to persevere through tribulations.¹¹

Narratives in magazines contemplated surviving as well. Lawrence S. Morris, for instance, suggested that problems for drought-stricken farmers began with Adam and Eve, when from "a world of plenty they were driven straight into the bleakest scarcity." Toilers unhappily ever after were destined to struggle "against drouths, frost and cloudbursts, insects, and hunger with its accompaniment of human exploitation." Paul C. Ellis claimed that "our garden spot was almost a desert," yet the human acts of "courage and spirit are tremendous national assets." Buren Sparks offered a parable titled "When Rain Came to the Desert," in which a modern Elijah prayed with congregations for a cloudburst "until it looked like the whole country was a sea instead of a desert." S. Plouffe worried about "going back to desert" but pleaded for resilience. They survived the worst, asserted Plouffe, because "the true westerner has his roots deep and can't be driven out by dust storms and drought." Most significant, the allegorical language fashioned a new Adam "neither defeated nor discouraged" rising "out of the dust" of a Great American Desert.¹² The episodic failures, then, recalled familiar parables and refashioned them as a literature for self-making.

Even the mass media presented episodic failure as part and parcel of an epic conflict. *Time* in 1935 reported that frustrated folks "in ten Midwestern States had sand in their beards, in their hair, in their ears, in their eyes, in their mouths, in their pockets, in their pants, in their boots, in their milk, coffee, soup and stew."¹³ Asserting that the sweltering heat "blackened" the earth, *Newsweek* depicted legions of doom "traveling with herds like nomadic biblical tribes." One dispatch compared the refugee exodus—"those provincials displaced from their land—to 'Israel's eleven sons,' who likewise 'trekked somberly through parched lands.' In a country with 'dried-out alkali lakes' and where 'sloughs lay white as buffalo skulls,' a 'caravan of derelicts' limped westward. Coughing up clouds of dirt, their ranks included 'thousands of weary farmers, victims of recurrent cycles of droughts, poor crops, low prices.' They looked 'to Washington for some Joseph to load their sacks with grain and money against seven years of famine when all the plenty shall be forgotten in the land of Egypt.'"¹⁴ Alarmed by the Depression, the bearers of bad news highlighted a diaspora of rural Americans.

H. L. Mencken, one of the most noted and notorious journalists of his time, complained in the *American Mercury* about that diaspora. With his signature wit and sarcasm, Mencken in 1936 described the dust bowl as "the very Zion of the eternal but bogus Farm Problem. Here is the Holy land of locusts, droughts, whirlwinds, and big freezes." The landscape contained the "bogus farmers" who were responsible for creating the costly disaster. Land speculators and suicide farmers pervaded the agricultural system there, at least "unless and until the whole region is emptied of its present hopeless population and turned back to the Indian and the buffalo."¹⁵ With hyperbole and exaggeration, such stories focused on a place remote from the personal experience of urban readers as symbolic of national ills.

Mencken, of course, earned a national reputation for his caricatures of rural simplicity during the roaring twenties, but he was no less iconoclastic during the dirty thirties. He charged that "no farmer of any sense could ever have been tempted into that harsh wilderness, with its murderous climate, its thin and fugitive soil, and its remoteness from good markets." Why, he asked, did those "unhappy herds of Ishmaelites flock into the desert," dragging their "helpless wives and children"? Ignorance, he answered. These drifters "pushed their blundering way into the wilderness, scratched casual and meager livings from its unwilling soil," but by the mid-1930s, "it lay too far buried in primeval chaos for civilization ever to overtake it." In that "bleak country," his commentary concluded, the rabble constituted a peasantry reduced to "natural barbarism" and clamoring at the gates of the metropolis.¹⁶ Mencken opined: "They lack the hard diligence and pertinacity that are needed to wring a living from the earth, either where they languish or elsewhere. They are not conquerors of Nature, but puerile parasites upon its bounty. . . . Their movement is backward toward the stage of the first pioneers of desert nomads just come to the grasslands. They are on their way back to the Stone Age."¹⁷ Mencken ridiculed the unsophisticated, and his findings challenged the popular appeal of contemporary back-to-the-land movements.

With greater sympathy for the tormented, Sherwood Anderson descended into the dust bowl for a 1935 book titled *Puzzled America*. The picaresque account assessed a netherworld, where "man's eternal struggle" and "tragic war with nature" continued "to be seen, in the raw." Anderson, too,

described a hell-bent personality in the region. "I walked around the country church," he wrote with sadness, and there found that the "long dry year just passed had done its work well." The searing temperatures "had curled up the boards covering the sides of the building so that you could look through and see the daylight streaming in from the opposite side." He imagined a religious service in the midst of the drought with "sun-burned people, men and women" arriving from distant farmhouses. They plodded "past their own fields, where the corn is shriveled away to nothingness, the fields their own hands have plowed, planted, and tended only to see the crops all burn away to a dry ash of dust." The author pitied a fool's paradise, for the poor devils were near their end. "Now it may all blow away," explained a country newspaperman to the author. "They have got this notion of dry farming in their heads. It's dry all right."¹⁸

The travel literature of Walter Davenport uncovered malapropism, violence, and insanity among the woebegone he encountered. He scoffed at the speeches of rainmakers promising, in exchange for proper compensation, an "end of the gr-r-r-a-a-a-at American desert." Clearly, such hucksters lived in a landscape where only "the homely cactus and the scraggy Joshua tree could thrive." In a 1937 narrative of a journey, "Land Where Our Children Die," Davenport encountered "Paw, Maw, and two babies" living where "they've perverted Nature until she too has gone crazy." Scary and incestuous forms of "suckers" and "open-mouths" lived off "a nice crop of subsidies," but infantile dependency was the result. Lacking maturity, these nascent beasts from the fields appeared arrested in development and required a paternalistic government to nurture them. While the government prepared the "dead lands" for their deliverance, the "hapless farmer" for "dust-minded reasons" objected to reform "so holy that his beard has caught fire."¹⁹ Davenport set the scene with a meandering sketch of life and death in the dust bowl:

We were to see the wretched, naked desert the winds had left behind; the ghost villages, once the silvery ballyhoo of real estate racketeers; the abandoned farmhouses, buried to the eaves in eddying dust; the corroded tops of farm machinery, deserted in what had been fields and now buried in sand with only levers and rods protruding from their graves, like pitiful

arms thrust upward, beckoning for help. . . . On our six-hundred-mile ramble from Amarillo to Denver, keeping mostly to the dusty back roads that we might see the bald clay, the dust dunes, the drifted houses, the abandoned farms and the government subsidy farmers, we heard all of the inevitable shifting of responsibility. Preachers hurled Scripture and the Gospels at us.²⁰

Davenport's tragedy degraded the wind-blown pedestrians, but his impressions reinforced prevalent assumptions about the misery of the most unfortunate ones.

The unfortunate ones, of course, became the concern of social workers who were both participants and observers. Traveling Great Plains Schools, organized in the late 1930s by rural social scientists, studied impoverished people devastated by the blight.²¹ The stories of Josephine Strode, for example, illustrated "manifestations of Dust Bowl courage" in 1936. The social worker dignified the poor, who exhibited the ills of Depression America. She told of a "crippled old woman left on a wind scoured farm with two small grandchildren" pulling herself about on the floor and crawling on hands and knees. She told of another woman, Liz, who lived in a dugout with two small boys. There was a one-room prairie shack housing eight people and a homesteader and his family living in a patched-up henhouse. Kansans greeted social workers with defiant slogans interpolated with environmental references—"It takes grit to live out here," "We may be dusty but not in the head," "Weak in crops but strong in spirit." They said, too, that folks "know ways to take a dust storm. They can take it on the chin, in the eyes, ears, nose and mouth, down the neck, and in the soup." The veracity of the stories seemed less important than the underlying values they expressed for group identity. Even the social worker claimed a common pioneer stock, acting out the symbolic order of the frontier in her tenacious endeavors to uplift the downtrodden.²²

Paul S. Taylor of the University of California collaborated with his wife, Dorothea Lange, on a study of rural poverty, *American Exodus* (1939). Seeking to demonstrate poverty and despair, they provided "a record of human erosion." Taylor found that black clouds of dust were "leaving land and life impoverished," while a "shifting of human sands" evoked the imagery of

the covered wagon as jalopies sifted down the highways. Featuring "white Americans of old stock," a social drama detailed by Taylor placed "long, lanky Oklahomans with small heads, blue eyes, an Abe Lincoln cut to the thighs, and surrounded by tow-headed children" in the lead. "God only knows why we left Texas, 'cept he's in a movin' mood," moaned a wife when forced to accept a husband's decision to relocate. Ultimately, the poor family was forced to "grope for help" in "squatters' camps and rural slums." Taylor concluded: "Thus the refugees seeking individual protection in the traditional spirit of the American frontier by westward migration are unknowingly arrivals at another frontier of social conflict."²³ This uprooting of society, however, made the narrative primarily a tale of woe.

Woe punctuated a short story about the uprooted, "Dark Retreat," which appeared during 1937 in *Frontier and Midland*. Eric Thane, the author, wrote about a family escaping from a wrecked homestead in the "lousy dust bowl of hell." Unable to find "El Dorado" where the "Injuns' an' buffalo" roamed, "great granddaddy Riggs" rode in an automobile passing "dust duned across the road" and "intermittent waves over a tumbleweed-choked fence of which only the post tops were now visible." The author made the landscape a simile for aging manhood, limning "a grey, grey waste, twisting, writhing in tortured folds under the scourge of the wind." "It's terrible!" explained the grandson who rescued the old homesteader from self-destruction. "The Great American Desert, grandpop! Dust Bowl is right!" The younger generation, then, led the old-timers away from a tragic rural life that "was reaping the whirlwind."²⁴ Instead of the vigorous moving westward—a long-enduring tradition in American fiction—Thané's "Dark Retreat" reversed the lines in the face of the landscape. Nevertheless, the story retained the symbolic order of character development, albeit moving in a refractory direction.

No better illustration of character development exists than in Morrow Mayo's caricature of "the man with a tractor." In a 1938 story for *Harper's*, he followed the unbroken routine of a panhandle wheat producer named Sank, "just an ordinary-looking man, just an average-looking farmer, with arms and legs, a mouth and eyes, a wife and two children." Appropriating the tools of modernity, the lonesome rider "looked like a product of a more advanced civilization," even if "some horrible, sightless, anthropoidal thing

with a snout." Preparing for roll, he "oiled and watered and fueled the tractor and lubricated both tractor and drill." While he planted hybrids in the soil to create "the staff of life," the mechanized warrior raised the discs out of the ground and drove his tractor over the "impregnated earth." Wet with moisture that washed away a dusty film, "he sat erect in the tractor seat, steering the juggernaut to the house." Clearly, the author blended the phallus and the machinery, referencing the metamorphosis of Miller's man with a hoe. "Driving that tractor," observed Mayo, "Sank didn't look like a humble and degraded tiller of the soil." Moreover, he no longer resembled "a hay-chewing rube with chin whiskers, or a dunghill yokel, or a peasant without thought or hope." In fact, futuristic technology transformed "a farmer from a clod into an operator" and "from a dumb brute into a mechanic." Whereas poverty degraded the weak, Sank rose from abysmal conditions endowed with optimism.²⁵

John Steinbeck's classic novel *The Grapes of Wrath* endowed the populace with little more than optimism. This 1939 novel electrified the nation with its fictive tale of one "Okie" family, the Joads, driven from their shanties. The story's main theme of collective resistance obtained the fullest development in the far western "factories in the field." Steinbeck, a resident of California's Salinas Valley, sought to expose the conditions evident in these migrant camps; the dust bowl offered a dramatic setting for introducing characters in terrible misery. One Oklahoma congressman, Lyle Boren, called the opening scenes "dirty, lying, filthy," as he ranted: "I would to Almighty God that all citizens of America could be as clean and noble and fine as the Oklahomans that Steinbeck labeled Okies." To be sure, the tragedy of sharecroppers and tenant farmers reflected more accurately the economic structure of the American South than of the Great Plains. Moreover, the fictional account confused the location of the decade's severe weather by describing blowing sand along the corn and cotton fields of eastern Oklahoma. Nevertheless, the book featured ordinary folks not only caught up in a struggle against nature—the droughts and the floods—but also raging against a mechanistic order.²⁶

The story of life's most adverse conditions began in deserts across the continental interior. Steinbeck revealed a "thin hard crust" on the surface, and as the "sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red coun-

try and white in the gray country." Herein appeared a parody of the Old Testament creation account. When the dust blew, the "dawn came, but no day," for in "the morning the dust hung like fog," and the "sun was as red as ripe new blood." The country thus created primitive Joads, Oklahoma tenant farmers facing restless days when "the dust sifted down from the sky, and the next day it sifted down" until an "even blanket covered the earth." In the beginning, Steinbeck blended culture and nature into deformed hybrid beings as desolate as the dust bowl itself.²⁷

Moving in a slowed motion, a drifter offered signs of life in these scenes. Into this empty wasteland, Tom Joad, paroled from a McAlester, Oklahoma, prison, "turned about and faced the dusty side road that cut off at right angles through the fields." When he took a few steps, "the flour-like dust spurted up" in front of his new yellow shoes, even as the yellowness disappeared "under the gray dust." He did not walk alone for long, though. Jim Casey, a former preacher, fled from the dark recesses of a "wilderness" with the seeds of a spiritual union planted in his mind. When offering baptism for human salvation, the evangelist "used to get an irrigation ditch so full of repented sinners half of 'em like to drowned." Water represented a privileged signifier in Steinbeck's narrative, and its absence in the agricultural fields denoted the presence of a malevolent system. With Casey as the voice crying out from a wilderness and Joad yet unconscious of his mission, the dynamic duo awaited a baptism by a fire for social justice.²⁸

Crossing the deserts, Joad and Casey searched for their calling among sharecroppers and tenants who trekked westward. As the Okies walked "toward the horizon," the "dust road stretched out ahead of them, waving up and down" into the distance. They noticed the smell of "burned dust" in the dry air, which kept "mucus in the nose dried to a crust, and the eyes washed to keep the eyeballs from drying out." According to Steinbeck, an evil force with its tractors and machines brought the agony, when the "land ate under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or cared, it had no prayers or curses." Forged from the landscape, the working people appeared grotesque and disembodied. Beginning their quest for a new field of dreams, the Okies as Americans writ small clung to a vintage paradise lost.²⁹

The quest insinuated a theme in another novel about surviving hard times, *The Golden Bowl*. Frederick Manfred, while working as a reporter for the *Minneapolis Journal*, wrote his first draft of the tale in 1937. Manfred traveled, lived, and worked among the populace about which he wrote. During 1939, he rewrote the narrative as a play for the local Federal Theater Project, and the social drama of fear and loathing in South Dakota appeared in book form in 1944. His setting of barns and silos was "deserted," while a "gray dust films everything, even the moving things." Rotting bodies of dead animals lay facing empty water tanks, and skeletons of farms remained in "a dusty slumber." Accordingly, "dust beat on the grain and killed it. Dust beat on the animals and choked them. Dust battered the barns and the houses." Throughout a series of vignettes, the "wind drove and the sun burned, drying and cracking and breaking the land."³⁰ Descending into the mythic bowels of the earth, the living took a beating.

Celebrating the spirit of the rainmaker, Manfred's novel emphasized the human will to resist fate when faced with awesome challenges. The Thors, a valiant family adhering fiercely to a plot of land, refused to abandon their homestead. Of course, Manfred invoked the name of the mythic Norse god of thunder as their patron. The wandering protagonist of the novel, Maury Grant, who rejected farming and nature as evil, in one early scene proclaimed: "I don't know what's wrong with you, but I know for sure that I ain't workin' in a desert."³¹ In contrast to the young Maury's wanderlust, Pa Thor demonstrated a profound sense of place, one of affection for the soil despite its barrenness.

Maury, who desired to be "free as the wind," left the blighted domain to chase the illusion of wealth in the gold mines of the Black Hills. Nevertheless, the odyssey ultimately led him back to the Thor home and to the fertile Kirsten—the family's young daughter. Despite the infertility of the landscape, the family stayed in the fields and continued to hope for a return of rain. Manfred's concluding chapter unfolded as diabolical forces assailed them, with "the great earth dying" while "the drought wrinkles the skin of the old creature." Sand dunes "rise and billow," he limned, and drifts "move slowly in the lee of the boulders and the posts and the stones back and forth, beside and above the buildings and the machines and the graves of men. And then a desert drifts where once a home had been tucked

away in a valley."³² Maury accepted his unforeseen destiny, then, and assumed the lead in coaxing moisture from thin air.

Coming back to the place of the story's beginning, the return of a warrior king promised deliverance. Wiser and stronger, Maury rose at dawn to confront an enshrouding storm at its height, to wrestle with nature, and to protect the pregnant Kirsten. Manfred set the scene: "Dust charged the mountains, fell upon the gutted prairies, droned across Colorado and Nebraska, tumbling, twisting, cutting, spilling, over the knolls and buttes, stirring the silt of the Dakotas." With the nature of the story against him, Maury believed that "it wasn't a wind they were wrestling with, but a malevolent being, and one of such unmatchable size that, if it wanted to, it could kill them all." After he "bound up his wounds against the dust," the virile youth surveyed a stillborn countryside with extended drifts and dunes—rising, falling, billowing. What failed to kill the toiler only made him stronger, he affirmed, refusing to bow under the physical pain inflicted on him. Renewing the cycle, the living embraced a long-suffering quest for a mythic golden bowl.³³

The quest for a better place also figured prominently in Woody Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads*, but the unsettling landscape stuck with him as he roamed across it. During the dirty thirties, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie, whose permutations included the "Dustbowl Troubadour" and the "Okie Balladeer," began to evolve from a restless saloon singer into a visionary folk musician. With a great deal of wanderlust, he envisioned himself as "bound for glory" and with a mission to preach the restoration of community and democratic fairness. After experiencing firsthand the dusts that hit Pampa, Texas, he left his family and took to the road in 1937 for a pilgrimage to the "golden state," California. The boom in country music on the radio had brought folk ballads to KFFD in Los Angeles, and listeners enjoyed Guthrie's folk songs depicting a distant homeland and "cornpone" philosophy. He evangelized his audiences about the exploitation of the Okies by a system of greed and corruption. With his own restless sense of place, the balladeer adhered to the drama of dust as a lyrical setting, developing songs about class consciousness.³⁴

While reciting experiences seemingly long ago and far away, Guthrie's lyrics captivated his audiences with ditties about hard luck. Guthrie

recalled that he watched the black blizzard of 14 April 1935 hit his home "like the Red Sea closing in on the Israel children." He complained about "teachers, preachers, screamers" unable to comprehend "such awful and terrible dust storms . . . and you might be able to stand the dust, if it was the dust alone."³⁵ In the "Dust Storm Disaster," he sang of their fear "as a curtain of black rolled down." Sitting helplessly in isolation as "the worst of the dust storms that ever filled the sky" appeared, folks "thought the world had ended, and they thought it was their doom." While he sang a chorus refrain, "so long, it's been good to know you," people ran for cover, usually to their neighborhood church. With frightened ones seeking answers about the upheaval, Guthrie wailed the line that this "dusty old dust is a-getting my home, and so I got to be moving along."³⁶ The ballads depicted the desert as a dramatic background for the laborer's passage to freedom.

Ranging from whimsical to sober, Guthrie's ballads revered the toughness of working people refusing to quit. In "Dust Can't Kill Me," the unfolding tragedies were contrasted with the coda "It can't kill me, Lord." "End of My Line" told of "a devil of a fix," as he mused that "there aint no country worth a dime if I'm just a mile from the end o' the line."³⁷ The ballader identified with the "Dust Bowl Refugees" of the era and, in effect, reinvented himself as a member of an extended family. He reminisced with the audience of "a little farm and I called that Heaven," at least until the dust "turned my farm into a pile of sand." In "Blowin' Down the Road," the uprooted were "goin' where the water tastes like wine" only to tumble into more misfortune in each verse. In a parody of a jolly Baptist hymn popularized by the Carter family, he wrote "I Aint Got No Home" to describe his outrage when "my brothers and my sisters are stranded on this road" and impoverished in "this wide wicked world." The ballad "Do Re Mi" further illustrated a bum's rap, as gangs of Okies were searching for "a paradise to live in"; the underclass arrived where "you won't find it so hot, if you aint got the do re mi."³⁸ Crafting the traits of a rural proletariat, Guthrie's musical narratives revealed the people's ordeal by fire.

Guthrie hoped that socialism offered solidarity for this proletariat, even while he sang about a primitive rebel in a nascent state of consciousness. In the ballad "Tom Joad," Guthrie narrated the plight of an ex-con escaping

injustice, calling on "workin' folks" to unionize and to create "one big soul." The outlaw "Pretty Boy Floyd" appears as another working-class hero in the collection.³⁹ Perhaps Guthrie's social bandits traveled with him in the classic anthem "This Land Is Your Land." He personalized the experiences of the Okie, who viewed endless vistas, natural wonders, and new worlds. In the original version, he "roamed and rambled" in search of refuge until he heard the voices of his fellow travelers:

When the sun come shining, then I was smiling
In the wheat fields waving, and dust clouds rolling
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting:
God Blessed America for me.⁴⁰

In the spirit of the land, the dispossessed would ultimately inherit the earth.

In *An Empire of Dust* (1940), Lawrence Svobida depicted his own dis-possession as a wheat farmer in Mcade County, Kansas. "From my experience I have written a true, inside story of the plight of the average farmer in the Dust Bowl," he wrote, where "an area extending over the greater part of ten states is rapidly becoming depopulated and appears doomed to become, in drear reality, the Great American Desert shown on early maps and so described by writers until less than eighty years ago." An agricultural march into the modern era sounded "the death knell of the Plains," which arrived with the adoption of powerful tools for extensive farming. According to Svobida, the whirlwinds and dunes devastated the homesteads.⁴¹ In confessing the sins of his generation, he contemplated the errors of his youthful, ambitious judgment.

While many local and national leaders denied a sense of guilt about the permanent devastation, Svobida provided a depressing account in his *epologia*. The drought might have been only a temporary setback to the region as a whole, he suggested, but "the winds began to attack the soil which was no longer anchored by the grass roots." Furthermore, "the black clouds of dust that blot out the sun, cross half a continent, and travel far out to sea" left behind the remnants of "the new Great American Desert." A desolate scene appeared when the storm lifted, as "cattle had huddled in fence

corners, by trees, in ditches, behind steep banks," but "they were all dead." While ranchers buried the "decaying carcasses," he believed that wheat farmers were "coming to the belief that it may already have become established beyond the knowledge and skill of the Government conservation experts to restore the wasted land, or even to check seriously the processes of destruction now in operation in the Great Plains." Even the fleet-footed jackrabbits succumbed to the sand, although many of them were slaughtered by hunters.⁴² Despite the disappointments, Svobida resolved to save the wheat kingdom.

The transplanted Kansan felt as if nature toyed with him, even while the dusts deflated his buoyant resilience. With a consuming desire to make the prairies produce, he became bitter and weak with "dust sickness." He lifted himself with humor and faith, but his heart fell to "the depths of utter despair."⁴³ During an encounter between a service station attendant and a tourist in Liberal, Kansas, Svobida observed his quandary: "The tourist stated with emphasis: 'Why, this country is nothing but a desert!' The filling station attendant, resentful of this remark coming on the heels of the visitor's impressions of Death Valley, retorted: 'You went through worse desert back there in California.' 'Yes, that is true enough,' the tourist agreed with a smile, 'but there aren't any fools out there trying to farm it!'"⁴⁴ Svobida persisted through the terrible year of 1935, as he witnessed men and women suffering starvation and disease, frustrated by a future without hope.

At the end of his tale of woe, there was no place of grace in a troubled country once known as the national breadbasket. The self-destruction left behind a population of fools going adrift and committing suicide. With no work available, the proverbial job observed fields "completely bare, unprotected from the sunrays, which they absorbed like fire brick in a kiln, creating the wind which, in turn, brought it to our land, to the destruction of our growing crops." While making a "last stand in the Dust Bowl," another resident considered commitment "to an asylum." The "greatest desert in the United States" generated hot winds blistering the face so that "the skin peeled off." Despite "heroic efforts to stop the march of destruction," Svobida concluded that the "whole Great Plains region is already a desert that

cannot be reclaimed through the plans and labors of men."⁴⁵ With a poignant mea culpa, the narrator left the dust bowl behind after 1939.

Revisiting a community he had studied fifteen years before, Thomas Alfred Tripp narrated the "Dust Bowl Tragedy" for the readers of the *Christian Century* in 1940. The population changes amazed him, for he noted that the "weaker ones were weeded out," while the sticklers "have the place and long to escape it." Unmarried professional women, for instance, told him: "There is no chance to progress in this dried-up, God-forsaken hole." The visitor drifted across unmarried men "loafing about the streets, slovenly dressed, drinking and telling unprintable yarns in the pool halls and taverns." He also uncovered anecdotes about sexual irregularity, clandestine affairs, and partner swapping. While blaming "the drabness of the dust laden surroundings" and "the drudgery of the harsh existence" for moral decline, he mused how religion uplifted the collective spirit. "Class differences are deeper," he confessed, accounting in part for the growth of "angelical 'Holy Rollers.'" In his nostalgia, Tripp recalled "a lesson from the frontier days," when "the best side of human nature in the local folk" enabled them to endure loss. Despite the losses, he revered the community's determination to survive.⁴⁶

With the end of the Depression one popular magazine sanctified the survivors. Don Eddy in *American Magazine* summarized the war versus "a savage enemy" in the "gaunt, gray wilderness," where the perils of the climate threatened to erase "new farms from the desert." The "men of God" possessed a divine conviction of their ordination "to subdue the wilderness." As underdogs facing an inferno, they battled with great severity against "drought, grasshoppers, tornadoes, crop blights." Against all odds, they had overcome. In Eddy's victory parade, a tour of duty through the fenced fields affirmed American strength "stirring deep in the dust of the Great Plains." With true grit, the cultural narratives displayed the virilities of heroism.⁴⁷

As the country seemed to melt down into a hot, arid, lifeless desert, the hero of the cultural hero appeared crucial for the vitality of communities. A hero possesses a thousand faces, explained the anthropologist Joseph Campbell, but only a limited number of responses to the riddles of life. The

archetypal form, nonetheless, symbolically expresses desires to transcend human weakness and frailty. With a world turning upside down, stories about heroes seductively fuse sacred and secular codes into a recognizable mask for the observer to don. Escaping from the Depression, audiences recognized it in the humorous facade of Will Rogers, a celebrated Cherokee satirist from Oklahoma. They recognized it in the celluloid of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Plainsman* (1937), or at least as Gary Cooper playing Wild Bill Hickok. The hero was there in two of John Ford's classic films, *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), in both of which actor Henry Fonda played the lead role. Clinging to a self-image insinuating bravery and innocence, modern societies no less than ancient ones have imagined heroes for their sense of exceptionalism.⁴⁸

Indeed, the popular view of President Roosevelt tapped into this conception of heroism. Perhaps the physical debilitation of polio, which required him to use a wheelchair and to wear leg braces, made him a potent symbol for communities disabled by hard times. Delivering a speech at Devil's Lake, North Dakota, in 1934, he told the crowds there that they were "up against the forces of nature." Praising their spirited resistance, he admonished them to "keep up that courage and, especially, keep up the faith." The local pundits called him a rainmaker, that is, one who lifted the spirits of drought-stricken villagers by delivering federally funded relief. When he was on a campaign visit to a sultry Amarillo, Texas, in 1938, rain fell on the president as he rose to speak about the "battle" against the dust bowl. Although the effects of blight lingered for another year, folks took the patrician's words to heart as they donned their gauze masks to fight the dust.⁴⁹ Through radio addresses of the decade, he spoke in flattering tones about fortitude to the down though not out in a plain, friendly, and direct voice. In homes across the country, moreover, they hung his portrait next to a picture of Jesus or the Madonna. People beheld a survivor, who noted no fear but fear itself.⁵⁰

Through a kind of liminal mimesis, Depression America socially constructed a cult making people more powerful than the circumstances confronting them. Mustering physical courage and determination through stories, folks knocked down by the blows of disaster resolved to get up again. Even if the experience scarred them, they tended to discount the as-

sistance of modern mechanisms. The survivors resented the intruding presence of the modern state, although the visible hand of federal government agencies making a New Deal relieved thousands of Americans in the dust bowl. The inconsistency between faith and practice permitted the selective thinking that glorified rugged individualism but accepted bureaucratic dependence. The Tactless Texan undoubtedly found solace in the cult of roughness: "But folks, at least we have a real he-man in the White House and he has a backbone of corrugated iron."⁵¹