

## THE BUM

*Giovannitti, Arturo, 1884-1959*

The dust of a thousand roads, the grease  
And grime of slums, were on his face;  
The fangs of hunger and disease  
Upon his throat had left their trace,  
The smell of death was in his breath,  
But in his eye no resting place.

Along the gutters, shapeless, fagged,  
With drooping head and bleeding feet,  
Throughout the Christmas night he dragged  
His care, his woe, and his defeat;  
Till gasping hard with face downward  
He fell upon the trafficked street.

The midnight revelry aloud  
Cried out its glut of wine and lust;  
The happy, clean, indifferent crowd  
Passed him in anger and disgust;  
For - fit or rum - he was a bum,  
And if he died 'twas nothing lost.

The tramp, the thief, the drunk, the brute,  
The beggar, each withdrew his eye;  
E'en she, the bartered prostitute,  
Held close her skirts and passed him by;  
For, drunk or dead, the street's the bed  
Where dogs and bums must sleep and die.

So all went on to their debauch,  
Parade of ghosts in weird array.  
Only a tramp dog did approach  
That mass of horror and decay -  
It sniffed him out with its black snout  
Then turned about and limped away.

And there he lay, a thing of dread,  
A loathsome thing for man and beast;  
None put a stone beneath his head,  
Or wet his lips, or rubbed his wrist,  
And none drew near to help or cheer -  
Save a policeman and a priest.

Yet neither heard his piteous wail,  
And neither knelt by where he fell.  
The man in blue spoke of the jail,  
Until he heard his rattle tell,  
And hearing that, he motioned at  
The man in black to speak of hell.

To speak of hell, lest he should hope  
For peace, for rest untroubled, deep,  
Where he no more need roam and grope  
Through dark, foul lanes to beg and weep,  
Where in the vast warm earth at last  
He'd find a resting place to sleep.

To sleep - not standing tired and sick  
By grimy walls and cold lamp poles,  
Nor crouched in fear of the night stick,  
To beat his sore and swollen soles,  
Nor see the flares of green nightmares  
And ghastly dawns through black rat holes;

To sleep beneath the green, warm earth  
As in a sacred mother's womb,  
And wait the call of a new birth,  
When his dead life again shall bloom -  
For it shall pass into the grass;  
The lamb will graze upon his tomb.

Not he, not he shall think of this,  
Not he the wretched, the down trod;  
Beyond the club of the police  
Shall reach the ruthless hand of God,  
For like a ghoul the rich man's rule  
Will seek him out beneath the sod.

He must know hell, lest he should guess  
That all his weary tramp is o'er-  
A hell of hunger and distress  
Where he, cold, naked and footsore,  
Alone and ill, must wander still  
Through endless roads for evermore.

Nay, nay, my brother, 'tis a lie!  
Just like their Christ, their love, their law!  
They brewed a wolfish fiend on high,

Just like their hearts perverse and raw,  
To damn or save the dying slave,  
So those who live should serve in awe.

So that in trembling fear they'd hold  
Upon their neck their masters' sway,  
So that they'd guard their masters' gold  
And starve and freeze and still obey,  
So when for greed they toil and bleed,  
Instead of rising they should pray.

That's why they come to huts and slums!  
'Tis not to soothe or to console,  
But just to stay the hungry bums  
With this black terror of the soul,  
And bend and blight with chains of fright  
What chains of steel could not control.

And yet, and yet the thunderbolt  
Shall fall some day they fear the least,  
When flesh and sinews shall revolt  
And she, the mob, the fiend, the beast,  
Unchained, awake, shall turn and break  
The bloody tables of their feast.

But you, my brother, will be dead,  
And none will think of you for aye!  
Still by your spirit I'll be led,  
If like their cattle you'll not die,  
If you'll but show before you go  
That mine can be your battle cry!

Aye, brother, death all woes relieves  
Yet this low world that well you knew,  
This Christian world of sainted thieves  
And fat apostles of virtue.  
This world of brutes and prostitutes,  
Must see its end revealed by you!

Rise then! Your rags, your bleeding shirt,  
Tear from your crushed and trampled chest,  
Fling in its face its own vile dirt,  
Your scorn and hate to manifest,  
And in its gray cold eyes of prey  
Spit out your life and your protest!

(Salem Jail, Nov.20, 1912.)