

# CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

- ITS CHARACTERISTICS AND THEMES

# What is American Literature?

- **American literature**, the body of written works produced in the English language in the United States.
- The Period after the World War II may be comfortably read as the Modern or Contemporary American Literature.
- Malcolm Cowley described the years between the two world wars as a “second flowering” of American writing.

Time line of CAL

## **The Contemporary Period (1945 to present)**

Themes of CAL

- Alienation
  - Transformation
  - Consumption
  - Relativity of truths
- 
- Advances in science and technology brought about a sense of unprecedented progress

The 1950s and '60s brought significant cultural shifts within the United States driven by the civil rights movement and the women's movement.

American literature had become a much more complex and inclusive story grounded on a wide-ranging body of past writings produced in the United States by people of different backgrounds and open to more Americans in the present day.

Literature written by African Americans during the contemporary period was shaped in many ways by Richard Wright, whose autobiography *Black Boy* was published in 1945. He left the United States for France after World War II, repulsed by the injustice and discrimination he faced as a black man in America; other black writers working from the 1950s through the 1970s also wrestled with the desires to escape an unjust society and to change it.

Among the important poets of this period are

Anne Sexton

Sylvia Plath

John Berryman

Donald Hall

Elizabeth Bishop

James Merrill

Nikki Giovanni

Robert Pinsky

Adrienne Rich

Rita Dove

Yusef Komunyakaa

W.S. Merwin

Tracy K. Smith

## IF

If freckles were lovely, and day was night,  
And measles were nice and a lie warn't a lie,  
Life would be delight,-  
But things couldn't go right  
For in such a sad plight  
I wouldn't be I.

If earth was heaven, and now was hence,  
And past was present, and false was true,  
There might be some sense  
But I'd be in suspense  
For on such a pretense  
You wouldn't be you.

If fear was plucky, and globes were square,  
And dirt was cleanly and tears were glee  
    Things would seem fair,-  
    Yet they'd all despair,  
    For if here was there  
We wouldn't be we.

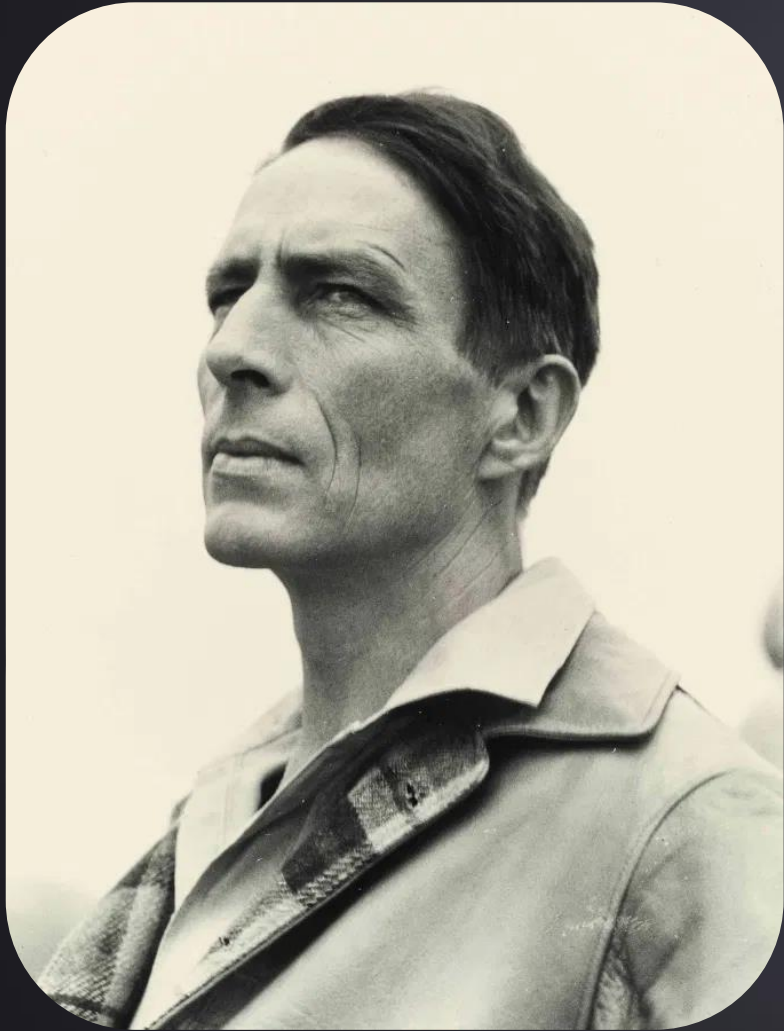
E. E. Cummings

A close-up, slightly blurred photograph of the American flag, focusing on the blue field with white stars and the red and white stripes. The flag is positioned on the left side of the frame, with the rest of the background being a solid dark color.

Shine, Perishing Republic  
- Robinson Jeffers



# About the Poet



*Robinson Jeffers*  
(1887 – 1962)

- Jeffers was an American poet, known for his work about the central California coast.
- Born in Pennsylvania, he is known for his philosophy of ‘inhumanism’

## About the Poem

- The poem *Shine, Perishing Republic* was first published in 1925 in the collection *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems*

While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire  
And protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out, and the mass hardens,

I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots to make earth.  
Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness and decadence; and home to  
the mother.

You making haste haste on decay: not blameworthy; life is good, be it stubbornly long or  
suddenly

A mortal splendor: meteors are not needed less than mountains: shine, perishing republic.

But for my children, I would have them keep their distance from the thickening center;  
corruption

Never has been compulsory, when the cities lie at the monster's feet there are left the  
mountains.

And boys, be in nothing so moderate as in love of man, a clever servant, insufferable master.  
There is the trap that catches noblest spirits, that caught – they say – God, when he walked  
on earth.

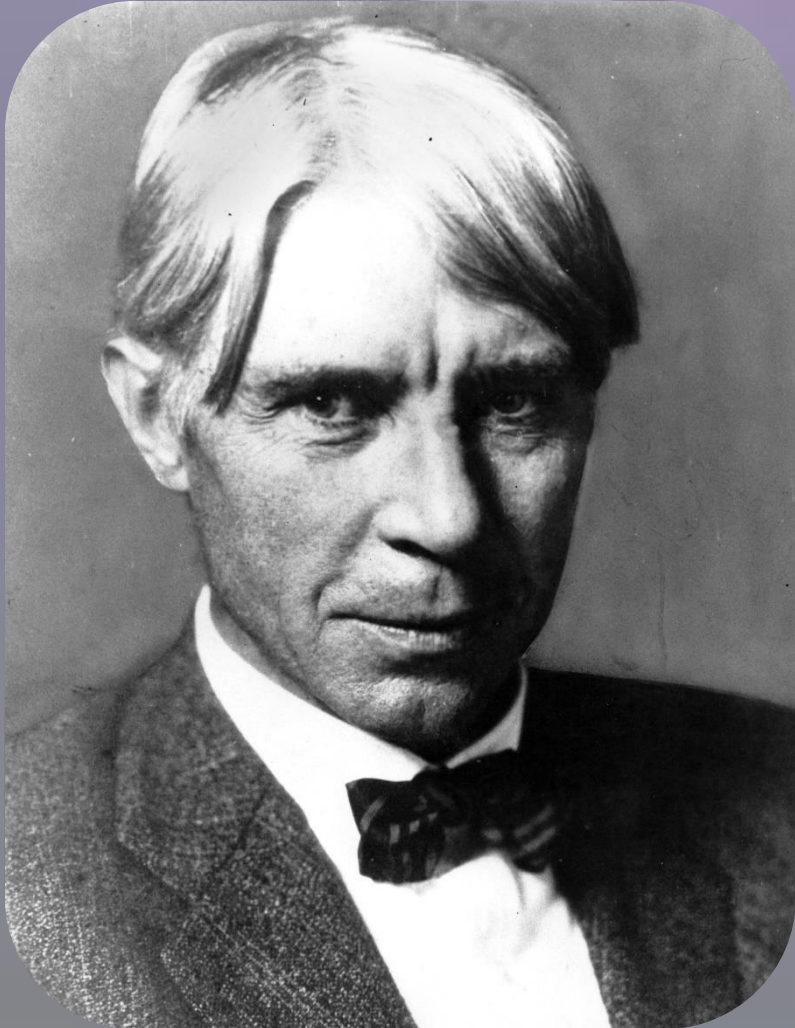
Thank you



A photograph of the Chicago skyline at dusk, with the city lights reflecting on the water of Lake Michigan. The sky is a mix of purple and blue, and the buildings are illuminated with warm lights. The text "Chicago by Carl Sandburg" is overlaid in a white, cursive font.

*Chicago*  
*by*  
*Carl Sandburg*

# About the Poet



*Carl Sandburg*  
(1878 – 1967)

- Carl August Sandburg was a Swedish-American poet, biographer, journalist, and editor.
- Born in Galesburg, Illinois, United States
- He won three Pulitzer Prizes: two for his poetry and one for his biography of Abraham Lincoln.

## About the Poem

- The poem *Chicago* was first published in *March*.
- It was republished in 1916 in Sandburg's first mainstream collection of poems, also titled *Chicago Poems*.

Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under  
the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and  
go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have  
seen the marks of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them  
back the sneer and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and  
strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid  
against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the  
wilderness,



Bareheaded,  
Shoveling,  
Wrecking,  
Planning,  
Building, breaking, rebuilding,  
Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,  
Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,  
Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,  
Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the  
heart of the people,  
    Laughing!  
Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating,  
proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads  
and Freight Handler to the Nation.

- Carl Sandburg

*A Supermarket in California*  
- Allen Ginsberg



# About the Poet



*Allen Ginsberg*  
*(1926 – 1997)*

- Irwin Allen Ginsberg was an American poet and writer.
- Born in Newark, New Jersey, United States

## *About the Poem*

- "A Supermarket in California" is a poem by American poet Allen Ginsberg first published in *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956.

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.



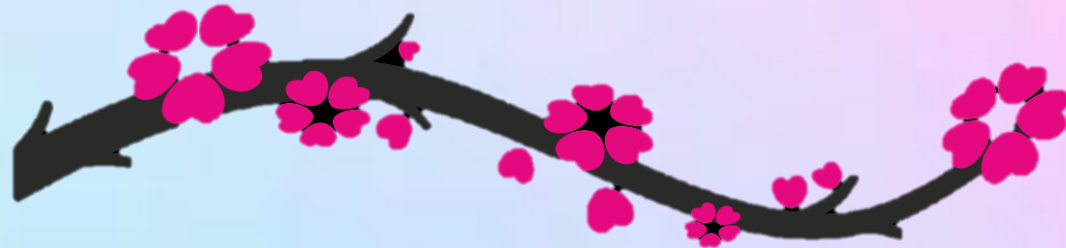
Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?



*The Mind is an Enchanting*

*Thing*

**-Marianne Moore**

# About the Poet



*Marianne Moore*  
(1887 – 1972)

- Marianne Craig Moore was an American modernist poet, critic, translator, and editor.
- Born in Kirkwood, Missouri, United States
- She won a Bollingen Prize, a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts, US & Canada, American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Poetry, National Book Award for Poetry, Robert Frost Medal



# *About the Poem*

- “The Mind Is an Enchanting Thing” appeared in the 1944 publication of *Nevertheless*.

is an enchanted thing like the glaze on a katydid-wing subdivided by sun till the nettings are legion. Like Gieseeking playing Scarlatti;

like the apteryx-awl as a beak, or the kiwi's rain-shawl of haired feathers, the mind feeling its way as though blind, walks with its eyes on the ground.

It has memory's ear that can hear without having to hear. Like the gyroscope's fall, truly unequivocal because trued by regnant certainty,

it is a power of strong enchantment. It is like the dove-neck animated by sun; it is memory's eye; it's conscientious inconsistency.

It tears off the veil; tears the temptation, the mist the heart wears, from its eyes - if the heart has a face; it takes apart dejection. It's fire in the dove-neck's

iridescence; in the inconsistencies of Scarlatti. Unconfusion submits its confusion to proof; it's not a Herod's oath that cannot change.



A photograph of a forest floor covered in fallen leaves, with a large stack of cut logs on the right side. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# *A Timbered Choir*

*- Wendell Berry*



# About the Poet



*Wendell Berry*  
*(1934 – 1993)*

- Wendell Erdman Berry is an American novelist, poet, essayist, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer.
- Born in Henry County, Kentucky, United States

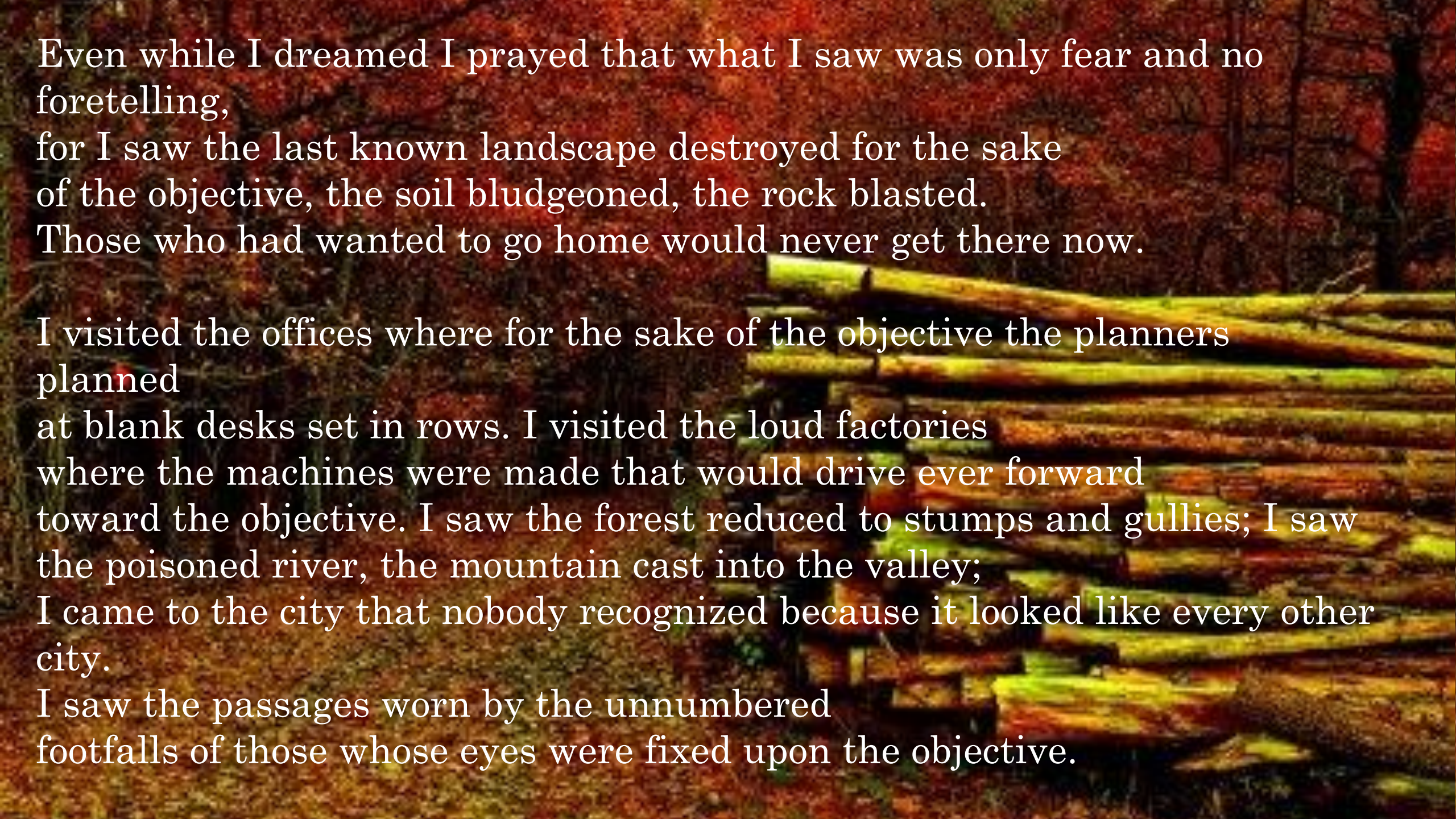


# About the Poem

- The poem *A Timbered Choir* was first published in 1996



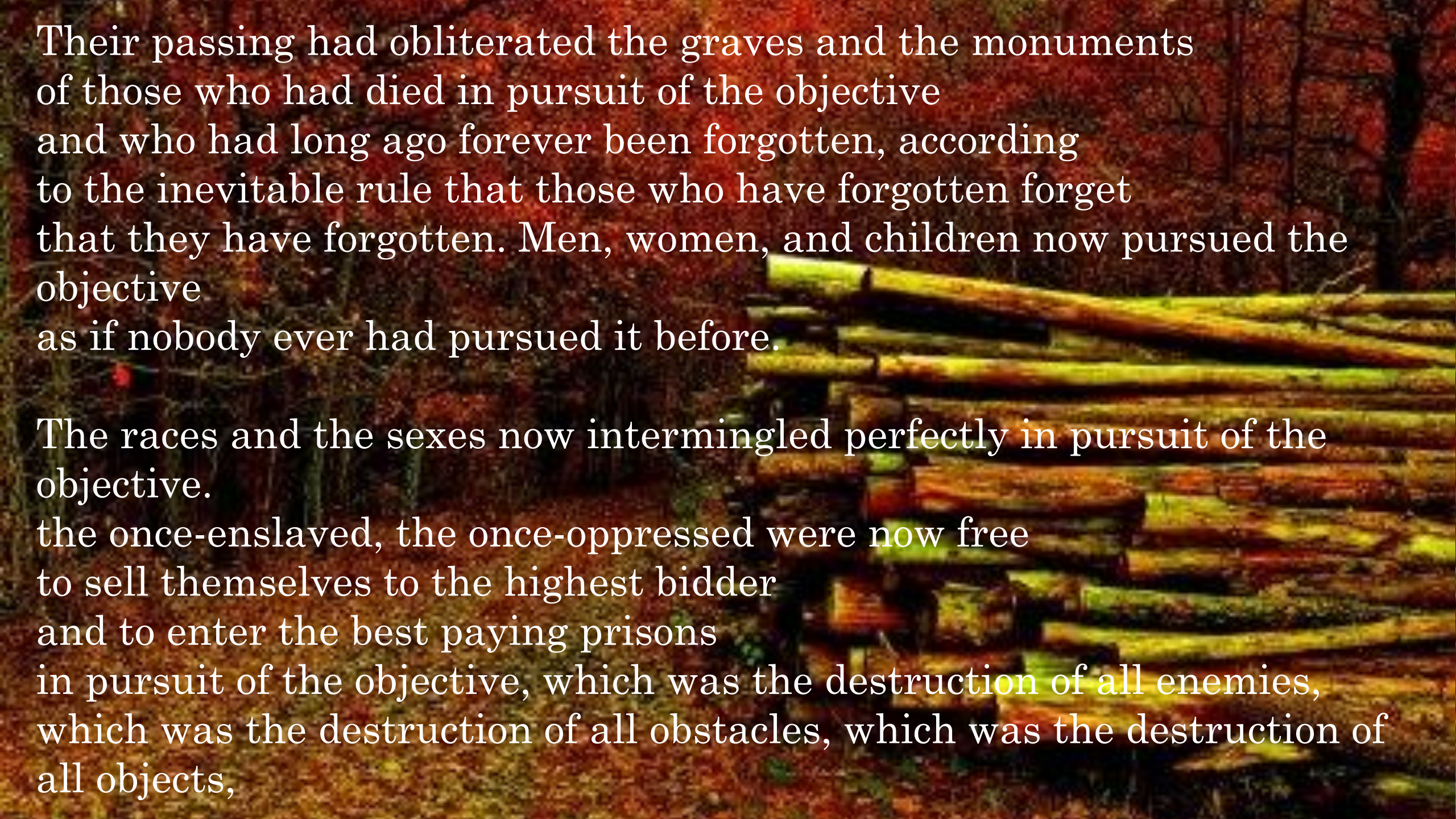




Even while I dreamed I prayed that what I saw was only fear and no foretelling,  
for I saw the last known landscape destroyed for the sake of the objective, the soil bludgeoned, the rock blasted.  
Those who had wanted to go home would never get there now.

I visited the offices where for the sake of the objective the planners planned  
at blank desks set in rows. I visited the loud factories where the machines were made that would drive ever forward toward the objective. I saw the forest reduced to stumps and gullies; I saw the poisoned river, the mountain cast into the valley;  
I came to the city that nobody recognized because it looked like every other city.  
I saw the passages worn by the unnumbered footfalls of those whose eyes were fixed upon the objective.

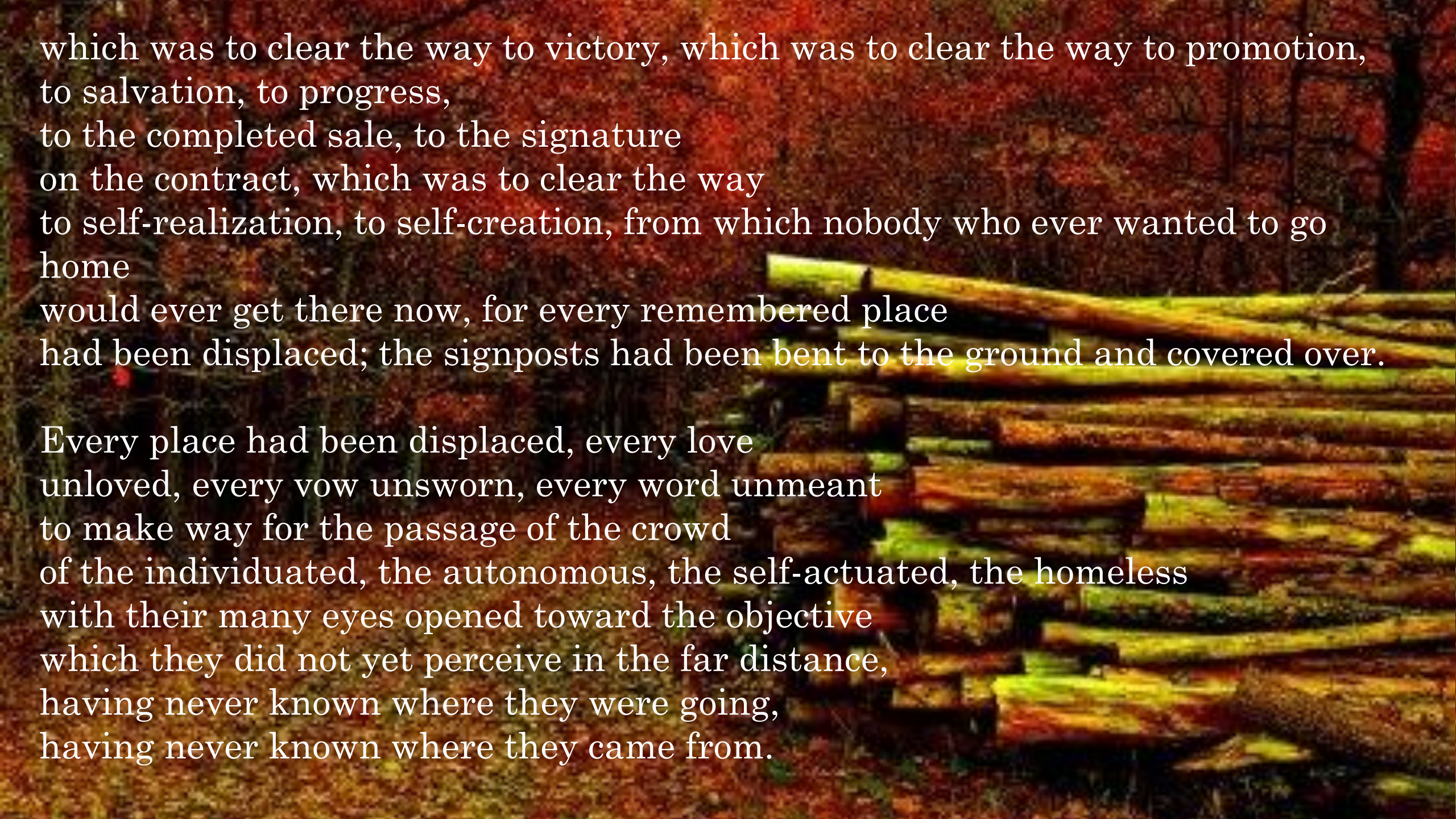




Their passing had obliterated the graves and the monuments of those who had died in pursuit of the objective and who had long ago forever been forgotten, according to the inevitable rule that those who have forgotten forget that they have forgotten. Men, women, and children now pursued the objective as if nobody ever had pursued it before.

The races and the sexes now intermingled perfectly in pursuit of the objective. the once-enslaved, the once-oppressed were now free to sell themselves to the highest bidder and to enter the best paying prisons in pursuit of the objective, which was the destruction of all enemies, which was the destruction of all obstacles, which was the destruction of all objects,





which was to clear the way to victory, which was to clear the way to promotion,  
to salvation, to progress,  
to the completed sale, to the signature  
on the contract, which was to clear the way  
to self-realization, to self-creation, from which nobody who ever wanted to go  
home  
would ever get there now, for every remembered place  
had been displaced; the signposts had been bent to the ground and covered over.

Every place had been displaced, every love  
unloved, every vow unsworn, every word unmeant  
to make way for the passage of the crowd  
of the individuated, the autonomous, the self-actuated, the homeless  
with their many eyes opened toward the objective  
which they did not yet perceive in the far distance,  
having never known where they were going,  
having never known where they came from.