



WHAT MICHAEL SAID
TO THE CENSUS-TAKER



BY JAMES RORTY

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES PRINTED
BY EDWIN GRABHORN OF SAN FRANCISCO
IN FEBRUARY, MCMXXII.



BY JAMES RORTY

ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY COPIES PRINTED
BY EDWIN GRABHORN OF SAN FRANCISCO
IN FEBRUARY, MCMXXII.



BY JAMES D. BORTY

[8]

WHAT MICHAEL SAID TO THE CENSUS-TAKER

The Census-taker of the Skies

*By day, by night, in gray and sunny weather,
By moonlight and by starlight goes his rounds,
Counting the young of the field mouse, calling them
out by name,
Counting the seeds of the milk-weed, anxiously watch-
ing each seed where it blows,
Fluttering lightly the leaves of the poplars that bend
on the ridge 'till each leaf has been numbered,
Exulting in harvests of corn, where each kernel is
known and recorded,
Noting, recording, nothing forgetting, nothing despis-
ing, finding nothing strange,
By day, by night, in gray and sunny weather,
The Census-taker goes his rounds and comes at last
Even to a town of Human Folk,
Even to a street, and in that street a house,*

*And in the house a room, and in the room he sees
Michael the poet, desperate, clamoring, alone*

*“What’s this?” and “Who are you?” the Census-
taker asked*

And Michael answered stoutly what he could not know.

If you want to know who I am, I shall tell you.

*I am the yellow dog, yapping on the roadside of the
world;*

*I am the yellow dog, immortal, yap-yap-yapping,
Hunting for something, hunting for something, hun-
gry and curious;*

*Bitter, derisive, adoring; not a chariot has gone by
but I have bitten a spoke out of it;*

*Not a princess or concubine has passed but has given
soft words and a bone for the gleam of my teeth
and my tail wagging gallantly.*

If you want to know who I am, I shall tell you.

*I am the yellow dog, yap-yap-yapping on the road-
side of the world.*

When Cheops built his pyramid, I was there;
 Circling, barking, sitting and casting dung;
 Nipping the heels of the oxen, tongue out and slaver-
 ing in the heat of the sun;
 Sleepy beneath a palm tree, blinking at the Nile;
 When Cheops built his pyramid, I was there.

Homer sang to me, sitting beneath an olive tree, when
 Greece was young;

Homer sang to me, parted his beard and sang.
 In his blind eyes the blue sea foamed, and the white
 blades flickered and gleamed,
 And his gnarled hands plucked hard at his lyre, and
 his old voice bellowed and cracked;

Homer sang to me, and I cocked an ear, sitting be-
 neath an olive tree, when Greece was young.

Jeremiah was my brother—I was the prophet's dog,
 yap-yap-yapping;

“Woe!” cried the prophet, and “Yes, that's right,”
 I yapped, “Woe, woe, woe!”

“Woe unto the sinful people who have forsaken God
and whom God hath forsaken.”

Jeremiah was my brother—God’s terrible old man,
with red eyes and a long beard, screaming at a
cross-roads in Jerusalem,

Bitter as Dead Sea brine, bitter as the desert wind,
bitter as Truth;

Jeremiah was my brother—I was the prophet’s dog,
yap-yap-yapping at a cross-roads in Jerusalem.

When the moon rose over Calvary, I was there;
I saw the cruel lips of the priests, and the rabble that
gibbered and spat and lusted and drank his
blood, and grinned and went away;

I heard the soldiers and the centurions clank off into
the city;

I saw the torches sway and go out.

I saw the Son of Man, His task complete, twisted
upon a cross between two thieves upon a hilltop
in Palestine;

Three crosses on a hill, and the cold moon shining.
 "Is there no mercy under the moon?" I cried, and
 Mary Magdalene, seeing that love was dead,
 wept beside me, watching under the cross;
 And the moon, seeing that love was dead upon the
 earth, was cold;
 And day's breath was stopped, and it could not dawn;
 And a cold wind blew over the hill; the crosses swayed
 and creaked.
 Fearing the moon and the stars and the barren earth,
 I crept to the breast of Mary, and nuzzling close,
 sought shelter from the cold.
 I did not consent to that death, I have never consented;
 You, if you listen, can hear me howling
 Beneath each barren moon, on every hill,
 Hungry and howling, death's stark rebel, gaunt be-
 neath the cross of my desire,
 On every hill, beneath each barren moon.
 When the moon rose over Calvary, I was there.

The Pope said to John Huss: "Recant!"
I was there; I saw the yellow-cheeked cardinals like
mummies in their robes,
And the arch-bishops, and the bishops, and the thin
priests, and the fat priests.
The Pope said to John Huss: "Recant!" Somewhere
a tom-tom beat—
There was a cannibal look in the eye of the eldest
cardinal.
A red glow flushed the cheek of the saint in the
stained-glass window;
I heard the sharp crackle of the flames outside.
John Huss looked at me, and I grinned back at him,
yap-yapping "There you are!"
And John Huss knew that he was alone, and the end
of the road was near, and the world was like a
grain of dust in his hand,
And I saw John Huss smile and put life from him as
one puts a cloak.
John Huss burned clean; the sun rejoiced that day,
and a cool wind trailed the blue smoke over the
land;

And I went crying down the road of time, yap-yapping
 "God, O God, John Huss burned clean!"

The judge said to Gene Debs, "Be reasonable!

"You're an old man, you ought to know better,
 what's the use?"

"Everybody's doing it,—speak easy, you can't do
 any good."

I was there; the court-room was full of infidels, brother,
 and I heard the buzz of ten thousand trapped
 infidels the world over, buzzing for a way out,
 And I saw the gleam of ten thousand picks, poised
 in the air, waiting for a word;

And I heard a world-whisper of hunkies, rough-
 necks, broken-toothed wobblies—"Jesus Christ,
 Gene, what do you say?"

I saw the shine of the old man's head, I heard the
 click of the old man's jaw;

I saw the judge shrivel to a pin-point, and the court-
 room too, and I heard the old man say:

"From the crown of my head to the soles of my feet,
 I'm Bolshevik!"

Ten thousand picks struck granite then, ten thousand
gleaming picks,
Laughter and cursing in ten thousand brown and
corded throats,
A gleam in the sky, and a tremor in the earth,
A joyous rumor rippling the wheat fields of far off
steppes,
A new voice crying in the market place of time.....
Down in Atlanta, there was I, squatting in the court-
yard, grinning at the jailer,
And the jail's open door flapping, flapping in the
wind.

If you want to know who I am, I shall tell you;
I am the yellow dog, yap-yap-yapping on the road-
side of the world.

I am the yellow dog, homeless, masterless, disloyal.
Lifted lip and yellow fang, raging heart and burning
head,
Bristling hair and quivering haunch, stretched lungs
and baying throat—

My world is not your world, O Census-taker, — See,
 I swim in tides that are not your tides;
 Death is in my heart and life, and the past for me is
 like the present and the future.
 There is not one of your laws that I have not rejected;
 There is not one of your gods whose idol I have not
 mud-bespattered in broad daylight;
 There is not one of your goodnesses that has not
 broken my heart;
 There is not one of your sins that I have not tried and
 found wanting;
 There is not one of your sanctities that has not sent
 me forth baying under the moon.

If you want to know who I am, I shall tell you;
 I am the yellow dog, yapping on the roadside of the
 world,

Homeless, masterless, disloyal, hunting for some-
 thing, hunting for something, hungry and
 curious,

Bitter, derisive, adoring—I am the yellow dog, yap-
 yap-yapping on the roadside of the world.

The Census-taker of the skies
By day, by night, in gray and sunny weather,
By moonlight and by starlight goes his rounds,
Counting "One!" for each apple that thumps on the
ground in November,
Counting "Two!" for each star that flares and falls
in the night;
Calling the roll of the creeping things under the sod,
each answering shrilly in its turn;
Counting the waves of the sea, and the eyeless fishes
under the sea, and the coral cells that strive and
multiply in the depths.
Aeons of time for the counting—casual, scrupulous,
unpressed,
See, where the Census-taker goes his rounds.

