

## Knoxville: Summer of 1915

*Text* James Agee, 1935

*Composer* Samuel Barber, 1948

*Image* Looking north on Gay Street from near Clinch Avenue, Knoxville, Tennessee, between 1900 and 1915, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division



It has become the time of evening  
when people sit on their porches,  
rocking gently and talking gently  
and watching the street  
and the standing up  
into their sphere of possession of the trees,  
of birds' hung havens, hangers.  
People go by; things go by.  
A horse, drawing a buggy, breaking his hollow iron music on the asphalt;  
a loud auto; a quiet auto;  
people in pairs, not in a hurry,  
scuffling, switching their weight of aestival body, talking casually,  
the taste hovering over them of vanilla, strawberry, pasteboard and starched milk,  
the image upon them of lovers and horsemen, squared with clowns in hueless amber.  
A streetcar raising its iron moan:  
stopping, belling and starting; stertorous; rousing and raising again its iron increasing moan  
and swimming its gold windows and straw seats on past and past and past,  
the bleak spark crackling and cursing above it like a small malignant spirit set to dog its tracks;

the iron whine rises on rising speed;  
still risen, faints; halts; the faint stinging bell;  
rises again, still fainter, fainter, lifting, lifts, faints forgone: forgotten.  
Now is the night one blue dew.  
Now is the night one blue dew,  
my father has drained,  
now he has coiled the hose.  
Low on the length of lawns,  
a frailing of fire who breathes ...  
Parents on porches: rock and rock.  
From damp strings morning glories hang their ancient faces.  
The dry and exalted noise of the locusts from all the air at once enchants my eardrums.  
On the rough wet grass of the backyard my father and mother have spread quilts.  
We all lie there, my mother, my father, my uncle, my aunt, and I too am lying there ...  
They are not talking much, and the talk is quiet,  
of nothing in particular, of nothing at all in particular, of nothing at all.  
The stars are wide and alive, they seem each like a smile of great sweetness, and they seem very near.

All my people are larger bodies than mine, ...  
with voices gentle and meaningless like the voice of sleeping birds.  
One is an artist, he is living at home.  
One is a musician, she is living at home.  
One is my mother who is good to me.  
One is my father who is good to me.  
By some chance, here they are, all on this earth;  
and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth,  
lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of the night.  
May God bless my people, my uncle, my aunt, my mother, my good father,  
oh, remember them kindly in their time of trouble;  
and in the hour of their taking away.

After a little I am taken in and put to bed.  
Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her:  
and those receive me, who quietly treat me,  
as one familiar and well-beloved in that home:  
but will not, no, will not, not now, not ever;  
but will not ever tell me who I am.