

## **This Land: Pampa**

Pampa, Texas, was a boom town that went bust. Boom towns tend to do that.

Once affluent, Woody's dad suffered failure after failure. Woody Guthrie followed his father there to Pampa in the Texas panhandle after his father moved from Okemah, Oklahoma. He went there to stay with family and try to recover his life after his daughter's death by fire, his injuries from trying to rescue her, his failure in business, the cyclone destroying their home, his worsening pain from too many fist-fights, and him committing his wife to an asylum. Pain, and lots of it. After she died in the asylum, the \$1.50 she owned was sent to Woody, which was how he learnt of her death. \$1.50 was the sum of her entire estate..

Dad eventually got work managing a boarding house. He bought a home on the south side of the tracks, locally nick-named 'little Juarez.' The rougher neighborhood. Woody loved it.

But Woody's dad had arrived at the end of the boom. Bad timing again. The wells already had been dug. The roughnecks headed to the next boom. As Woody wryly wrote: "the oil filled the rich people's tanks."

Woody served as his Dad's occasional assistant at the boarding house. Young Woody, left to his own pleasures, occasionally attended high school, fought other kids, played music on the wide streets for dimes, painted store signs, and visited the library so often that the librarian and he struck up a lifetime friendship. He also earned a few coins by helping selling root beer at a drug store on South Cuyler Street of Little Juarez.

What do you with your pain?

The drugstore sold more than root beer. On the sly they sold 'Jake,' a mixture of ginger and alcohol.

*I caint eat and I caint talk,  
Been drinking Jake and now I caint walk,  
Lost my clothes and working shoes  
I'm a Jake Walk Daddy with the Jake Walk Blues.*

Pure rot-gut. Not much better than Sterno strained through a rag. But when you got a thirst on, you'll drink rubbing alcohol. What do you do when life is a poker game and you keep getting dealt a lousy hand? Jake was one way to forget worries. It ain't about getting high, its about dulling the pain.

Optimists boast the glass is half full,  
As if a glass is a personality exam  
Pessimists say it is half empty

For me, it entirely depends on how thirsty I am

Not everyone makes positive choices when crushed by the weight of negatives. We need good choices, better choices. We need to know we are loved and precious. We matter.

What do you do with your pain? No wonder many choose to escape in downhill ways.

A young woman came to the boarding house from the town of Mobeetie, about 38 miles east of Pampa. It's not really a town. More of farm to ranch, ranch to farm, farmland to farmland. I drove by and saw the sign: Population 101.

She -- farm girl looking in despair at the rest of her life hoeing the garden, scrubbing laundry, having babies, looking old, wrinkled, weathered, by the time she was thirty -- came looking for work. Lonely Girl came hoping to find in the big town a chance, maybe a man, a new life, something happy amidst a whole lot of unhappy. She came hoping to find her escape in the oil fields. She hadn't hopes enough to find her fortune.

Happiness is interesting. Is it a goal or a by-product?

Forgive me if this sounds fatuous, self-serving, or even "poor, poor, pitiful stuff," but here in my sixty-fourth year I believe I was born never to be a truly happy man.

Yes, I have experienced outbursts of happiness.

The freedom of a dance.

That surge of unrestrained laughter in Honduras over a decade ago.

The wonderment of our children born.

Then in the expressions of love I have received: I need the enjoyment of the tactile and passion to assure me, bring me out of myself -- it is my need and weakness.

Again, forgive me if this sounds way too sententious. I begin to see why I've been so restless and hungry all my life. I believe such unhappiness goes with this calling. To live with a broken heart which sometimes causes a broken heart. Yes, there can cheerfulness but never the relief from the heartache. Never the relief when others are sad or unwell or lonely or unfairly treated. Perhaps it comes because the calling demands that you cannot be happy when the other is unhappy. Perhaps that is why at parties I like to cook -- that others will enjoy. Enjoyment from others enjoying. I can be so selfish.

To be born to be an unhappy man. Not dour or depressed. Quite the contrary, I love life. I've always loved being robust, immoderate. I am a most grateful man for those with whom I have

shared my life and moments. But my joy is neither bubbly nor effervescent but subterranean and churning, colored by a sad loneliness too many feel too often. A joy that is measured in melancholy and even in anger.

The anger of frustration when, as in "Far from a Madding Crowd," the mob ganged up on the young woman.

The anger of frustration when they invited the police to patrol our High School hallways.

The anger of frustration when others do not receive the love they deserve.

The anger of frustration when a little girl named Erin couldn't be saved so many years ago, or when our daughter Penelope suffered the loss of her Harrison and the world was helpless.

It makes a person like me a perpetual outsider, perhaps a spectator. Even as a boy I realized I never have fit in or gone along easily. Lord, I hate Facebook. I believe my mother understood it about me. Hence the back-scratches to soothe my childhood fits.

I need not to be important but useful, dependable. To have a purpose. I want a worthwhile life more than a happy life. Aside from those moments of abandoned affection, I am happiest when there is a worthy work accomplished. When I've been able to contribute something that might last. Of course, the Sisyphean curse is that there is always more work to do. There always will be heartache to be absorbed.

Such as the heartache of our FARM GIRL.

Lonesome and broke, she met a fellow who owned a small restaurant. She worked there for a dollar a day. Mostly, he told her how he liked her company. He told her she was pretty. He listened to her. He was nice to her. He listened to her. He made her feel good. Woody heard them one day through the boarding house walls doing what he called the "two cylinder celebration."

What do you do with your pain? With your loneliness? Your hurt?

Our Farm Girl hungered for the warmth of flesh. The touch of skin. Even if for an hour's unreality.

The hunger to feel human again.

Farm Girl soon entered a new way of making money. Her friend helped her.

Another of Woody's favorite songs was the song called, "The House of the Rising Sun." There really isn't a place in New Orleans you can find that can claim being the original place even

though several places claim that distinction, but then the House of the Rising Sun is more than a place. It is a human condition. A human need, our human sorrow. The original song, the one Woody sang, is sung by older sister who ran away with a gambler and drunk. Soon she was working the brothel.

The real song is her warning her little sister about her sad choices. It's not a fun song. It's not a nice song.

*There is a house in New Orleans  
You call the Rising Sun.  
It's been the ruin of many a poor soul  
And me, oh God, I'm one.*

*If I'd listened to what mama said,  
I'd be at home today.  
Being so young and foolish, poor girl  
I let a gambler lead me astray .*

*Go and tell my baby sister  
Never do like I have done.  
Shun that house down in New Orleans  
That they call that Rising Sun.*

Where have you found hope and healing and love instead of futile escape from pain?