

The Long Table

America at 250

Come on people now, smile on each other — Love is but a song we sing so keep on singing

I.

Two hundred and fifty years,
and the morning still comes up over this land
the way it came before there was a flag to salute it,
red over the Atlantic shoals,
gold across the wheat,
the long light walking west on its own schedule,
asking no one's party, checking no one's papers.

Say the number slowly, it has weight.
A quarter of a thousand years
of an argument that we are still, thank God, having —
not a settled thing, not a finished thing,
a thing we wake each morning and choose again.

II.

Let me sing the way Walt taught us to sing,
not the generals on their horses,
not the names carved into the marble downtown,
but the wide and ordinary us,
the body of the country breathing.

I sing the woman closing the diner at midnight in Toledo,
wiping the counter one last time,
her feet a quiet sermon on endurance.
I sing the kid in McAllen translating the lease for his mother,

holding two languages in his mouth like water.
I sing the lineman in the ice storm,
climbing toward the dark houses to give them back their light.
I sing the nurse on the third night shift,
the farmer reading the sky-like scripture,
the welder, the teacher, the trucker
threading the mountain pass at 4 a.m.
so the shelves will be full when your children wake.

I sing the hands, all of the hands.
Brown and pale and freckled and scarred,
the manicured and cracked,
the hands that lay brick and the hands that lay babies down,
the hands that have never once been thanked
and lifted the whole country anyway.

III.

This is the land they move across,
and it is a stunner, neighbor, it always was.

The Smokies in their blue exhaling fog.
The Mississippi taking its slow brown time.
The red rock holding the print of an older ocean.
The corn going on past where the eye gives up.
The neon and the cathedral hush of the cities,
the porch light in the holler,
the surf and the saguaro and the prairie
that has its own opinion about the wind.

We did not make this. It was handed to us,
the way a lamp is handed, still warm,
and the only rent it asks
is that we keep it lit and pass it on unbroken.

IV.

And here is where love tells the truth,
because the song would be a lie if it only flattered.

The table was set long time ago
with a promise large enough for everyone:
that we arrive equal as we arrive crying,
the grain of sand and the wheat alike,
and we have spent two hundred and fifty
years dragging up chairs for the ones left standing.

It came late for the woman who wanted her vote.
It came late and at a terrible cost,
for the ones who built the wealth and were owned by it.
It is still arriving. The table is still getting longer.
And that is not the country's shame.
That is the country's actual work,
the slow and stubborn widening of the word around us
until it finally means what it always said it meant.
We are not a finished people.
Thank God. The finished are only the dead.
We are the ones still pulling up chairs.

V.

So do not let them sell you the small story:
that is us against the others at the door,
that the country is a fortress or a brand
or one man's name across a wall that belongs to all of us.

\The truth is older and far more generous.
The boatman and the president,
the immigrant and the great, great grandson of immigrants,
(which is to say the immigrant),
the one who prays five times and the one who prays to nothing,
the bride and the bride, the groom and the groom,
the one still quietly becoming their own name,
the one who votes the way you do a
nd the one who never will,
the same son, as the poem keeps saying,
wearing a billion different faces
and not one of those faces less American
than the loud ones on the screen.

VI.

Here's what I want for the next stretch of years,
and I will not dress it up in policy.

I want the table longer.
I want the rules to fit the grandmother
exactly as they fit the man with the tower,
no more, no less. The way one set of weights
makes the whole market honest.

I want the kid translating the lease
to grow old in a country
that learned, at last, to read him back.

I want us to disagree the way a family disagrees,
at a table it refuses to leave,
loud and wounded and still passing the bread.

I want the porch light and the city light
to recognize each other as the same fire.

VII.

This is not the work of presidents.
It never was. It's the jury chair,
the off-year ballot no one's watching,
the phone call to the office that wasn't listening,
the hard conversations held in love
instead of let go in anger.
It is the neighbor's driveway shoveled.
It is the harder, realer kindness
that costs you something and gives you more.

It is in the end just this:
to look at the whole impossible crowd of us
and decide, again, today,
that the stranger is just as good as you.
I was taught that young and I have found it to be true.

VIII.

So happy birthday to the experiment,
to the beautiful unfinished thing,
to the long table under the walking light.

Pull up a chair, there is room.
There was always meant to be room.
That was the whole idea.

And when you pass the bread to the next hand —
the hand that does not look like yours,
the hand that did not vote like yours,
the hand that is, beneath everything, your own,
you will feel it,
the fine thread, the current, the things the old songs knew:

that there is no them.
There is only the table,
and the light,
and the two hundred and fifty years of us
still, somehow, against all odds,
getting up to make more room.

Come on, people.
Let's get together.
We have a country to keep.

*A poem by Rob Chavez, 2026
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