

## FOR NELSON ALGREN

A country built upon stolen land by stolen people –  
the ultimate alienation.

What does it mean to be an American?

I am Irish, I am Italian, I came

because I heard the streets were paved with gold.

Now that we have colonized our land,

heirs to thieves, heirs to “huddled masses,”

we live to wring a profit from the place

until it is dry, then throw away the husk.

The myth of meritocracy was a fraud.

It fooled my father, galled forever after,

enraged I emulated the social worker.

“Dirt rubs off,” he roared. In front of her.

I found work at a mental home for children.

I remember law and medicine

as practiced there. A Massachusetts trooper,

tall and handsome, read to a four-year-old boy:

“Because you are a dangerous epileptic,

by law, you must be confined for life.”

The beautiful child gazed with wondering eyes

at the man and his splendid uniform.

He never cried, but the trooper wept his way

all through his terrible words.

A girl was sent for a lobotomy”

because her equally dull and shapeless mother

said she couldn’t cope: true enough,

but then how did it follow that neither could we?

Algren was my friend on the farm as a girl,

“The Man With The Golden Arm” hidden with care:

Full of compassion for “the people who live  
on that shabby back street where nearly all  
humanity now lives.”

By great perception, he included them,  
showing their feelings were those we knew so well.

Even I, the nonconformist hick  
was strangely friended.