



STERLING BROWN

STRONG MEN

1931

The strong men keep coming on.
SANDBURG¹

*They dragged you from homeland,
They chained you in coffles,²
They huddled you spoon-fashion in filthy hatches,
They sold you to give a few gentlemen ease.*

*They broke you in like oxen,
They scourged you,
They branded you,
They made your women breeders,
They swelled your numbers with bastards. . . .
They taught you the religion they disgraced.*

*You sang:
Keep a-inchin' along
Lak a po' inch worm. . . .*

*You sang:
Bye and bye
I'm gonna lay down dis heaby load. . . .*

*You sang:
Walk togedder, chillen,
Dontcha git weary. . . .
The strong men keep a-comin' on
The strong men git stronger.*

*They point with pride to the roads you built for them,
They ride in comfort over the rails you laid for them.
They put hammers in your hand
And said — Drive so much before sundown.*

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Originally published in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931); later published in *Southern Road* [Brown's first book of poems] (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932). Reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp. 56-58. Permission pending from HarperCollins.

¹ Carl Sandburg (1878-1967): white American poet; lines from "Upstream," in *Slabs of the Sunburnt West*, 1922. In Brown's *Southern Road* (1932), the single line from "Upstream" precedes the poem, as above. In the 1980 *Collected Poems*, two lines from "Upstream" precede the poem: "The young men keep coming on. / The strong men keep coming on."

² Coffles: groups of slaves chained or otherwise bound together, usually for being transported on land for sale.

You sang:

*Ain't no hammah
In dis lan',
Strikes lak mine, bebbby,
Strikes lak mine.*

*They cooped you in their kitchens,
They penned you in their factories,
They gave you the jobs that they were too good for,
They tried to guarantee happiness to themselves
By shunting dirt and misery to you.*

You sang:

*Me an' muh baby gonna shine, shine
Me an' muh baby gonna shine.
The strong men keep a-comin' on
The strong men git stronger. . . .*

*They bought off some of your leaders
You stumbled, as blind men will . . .
They coaxed you, unwontedly soft-voiced. . . .
You followed a way.
Then laughed as usual.*

*They heard the laugh and wondered;
Uncomfortable,
Unadmitting a deeper terror. . . .
The strong men keep a-comin' on
Gittin' stronger. . . .*

*What, from the slums
Where they have hemmed you,
What, from the tiny huts
They could not keep from you —
What reaches them
Making them ill at ease, fearful?
Today they shout prohibition at you
"Thou shalt not this"
"Thou shalt not that"
"Reserved for whites only"
You laugh.*

*One thing they cannot prohibit —
The strong men . . . coming on
The strong men gittin' stronger.
Strong men. . . .
Stronger. . . .*

