

## TALKING DUST BOWL BLUES (Woody Guthrie) (1930s)



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As March sunlight gilded their breakfast tables, Washingtonians read in their morning papers that in about two weeks the Japanese cherry trees around the Tidal Basin would be in full bloom. The same day Kansans breakfasted by lamp light and read in their morning papers that one of the worst dust storms in the history of their State was sweeping darkly overhead. Damp sheets hung over the windows, but table cloths were grimy. Urchins wrote their names on the dusty china. Food had a gritty taste. Dirt drifted around doorways like snow. People who ventured outside coughed and choked as the fields of Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska and Oklahoma rose and took flight through the windy air.

During last week's dust storm, which lasted four days (and in the heart of the drought district ran on for twelve consecutive days), police closed highways to prevent accidents. Airplanes were grounded. Schools and businesses were closed. Health officers advised every one to stay at home. Three children and several adults were reported dead of pneumonia after breathing dust. During the height of the storm, railway traffic was at a standstill. When high winds swept the dust Eastward Kansas City had night at midday and people walked the streets with handkerchiefs tied across their faces. How great was the crop damage remained largely a matter of guesswork. Oklahoma grimly reported that 50% of the wheat in the Western part of the State was ruined. An Oklahoman was said to have fainted when a drop of rain fell on his head, to have been revived only when two buckets of sand were thrown in his face.

**TIME, Apr 1, 1935**

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In "Talking Dust Bowl," which he [Woody Guthrie] wrote and rewrote endlessly while riding the freights in 1936 and 1937, he re-created the migrant experience in six bitter, exquisitely simple verses.

Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life*, London, 1981, p. 84

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Lyrics as recorded by Woody Guthrie, RCA Studios, Camden, NJ, 26 Apr 1940, released on "[Dust Bowl Ballads](#)," transcribed by Manfred Helfert.  
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Back in Nineteen Twenty-Seven,  
I had a little farm and I called that heaven.  
Well, the prices up and the rain come down,  
And I hauled my crops all into town --  
I got the money, bought clothes and groceries,  
Fed the kids, and raised a family.

Rain quit and the wind got high,  
And the black ol' dust storm filled the sky.  
And I swapped my farm for a Ford machine,  
And I poured it full of this gas-i-line --  
And I started, rockin' an' a-rollin',  
Over the mountains, out towards the old Peach Bowl.

Way up yonder on a mountain road,  
I had a hot motor and a heavy load,  
It's a-goin' pretty fast, there wasn't even stoppin',  
A-bouncin' up and down, like popcorn poppin' --  
Had a breakdown, sort of a nervous bustdown of some kind,  
There was a feller there, a mechanic feller,  
Said it was en-gine trouble.

Way up yonder on a mountain curve,  
It's way up yonder in the piney wood,  
An' I give that rollin' Ford a shove,  
An' It's a-gonna coast as far as I could --  
Commence coastin', pickin' up speed,  
Was a hairpin turn, I didn't make it.

Man alive, I'm a-tellin' you,  
The fiddles and the guitars really flew.

That Ford took off like a flying squirrel  
An' it flew halfway around the world --  
Scattered wives and childrens  
All over the side of that mountain.

We got out to the West Coast broke,  
So dad-gum hungry I thought I'd croak,  
An' I bummed up a spud or two,  
An' my wife fixed up a tater stew --  
We poured the kids full of it,  
Mighty thin stew, though,  
You could read a magazine right through it.  
Always have figured  
That if it'd been just a little bit thinner,  
Some of these here politicians  
Coulda seen through it.

