

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## American Names

STEPHEN VINCENT BENÈT

Page | 1

*Born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Stephen Vincent Benèt (1898–1943) was a prolific poet who authored nearly a dozen books in the course of his career. Despite a bout of scarlet fever at the age of three that permanently affected his eyesight and overall health, Benèt loved to read and write. The poetry he wrote as a young teenager quickly caught the attention of others. By 1915, he had already published his first poetry collection, Five Men and Pompey. Benèt attended Yale University, where he excelled in his studies and became editor of the student literary magazine. He continued to write poetry after leaving Yale, with two of his works—John Brown’s Body (1928) and Western Star (published posthumously in 1943)—winning Pulitzer Prizes. He also wrote short stories, the best known of which include “The Devil and Daniel Webster” (1936), “By the Waters of Babylon,” (1937), and “The King of Cats” (1937). In 1943, at the age of 44, he suffered a heart attack while in New York City and died.*

*“American Names,” first published in Ballads and Poems, 1915–1930, celebrates American place-names as poems in and of themselves. The poem also examines the differences between “the sharp names that never get fat” of American towns and the “silver spoons” of European cities. As you read the poem, look up any names with which you are unfamiliar. Additionally, reading the poem aloud will help you to maximize the difference in sounds between the American names and the European ones. How do the sounds of the names differ? What emotions do they evoke? What are the reasons Benèt lists for remembering—and loving—American names?*

I have fallen in love with American names,  
The sharp names that never get fat,  
The snakeskin-titles of mining-claims,  
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,  
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

Seine and Piave are silver spoons,  
But the spoonbowl-metal is thin and worn,  
There are English counties like hunting-tunes

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

Played on the keys of a postboy's horn,  
But I will remember where I was born.

I will remember Carquinez Straits,  
Little French Lick and Lundy's Lane,  
The Yankee ships and the Yankee dates  
And the bullet-towns of Calamity Jane.  
I will remember Skunktown Plain.

I will fall in love with a Salem tree  
And a rawhide quirt from Santa Cruz,  
I will get me a bottle of Boston sea  
And a blue-gum nigger to sing me blues.  
I am tired of loving a foreign muse.

Rue des Martyrs and Bleeding-Heart-Yard,  
Senlis, Pisa, and Blindman's Oast,  
It is a magic ghost you guard  
But I am sick for a newer ghost,  
Harrisburg, Spartanburg, Painted Post.

Henry and John were never so  
And Henry and John were always right?  
Granted, but when it was time to go  
And the tea and the laurels had stood all night,  
Did they never watch for Nantucket Light?

I shall not rest quiet in Montparnasse.  
I shall not lie easy at Winchelsea.  
You may bury my body in Sussex grass,  
You may bury my tongue at Champmedy.  
I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass.  
Bury my heart at Wounded Knee.

Page | 2