

## Skyscraper

By day the skyscraper looms in the smoke and sun and  
has a soul.

Prairie and valley, streets of the city, pour people into it  
and they mingle among its twenty floors and are  
poured out again back to the streets, prairies and  
valleys.

It is the men and women, boys and girls so poured in and  
out all day that give the building a soul of dreams  
and thoughts and memories.

(Dumped in the sea or fixed in a desert, who would care  
for the building or speak its name or ask a policeman  
the way to it?)

Elevators slide on their cables and tubes catch letters and  
parcels and iron pipes carry gas and water in and  
sewage out.

Wires climb with secrets, carry light and carry words, and  
tell terrors and profits and loves—curses of men  
grappling plans of business and questions of women  
in plots of love.

Hour by hour the caissons reach down to the rock of the  
earth and hold the building to a turning planet.

Hour by hour the girders play as ribs and reach out and  
hold together the stone walls and floors.

Hour by hour the hand of the mason and the stuff of the  
mortar clinch the pieces and parts to the shape an  
architect voted.

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*from* Paul Berman, ed. *Carl Sandburg: Selected Poems* (American Poets Project, 2006), pp. 19–21.

Hour by hour the sun and the rain, the air and the rust,  
and the press of time running into centuries, play on  
the building inside and out and use it.

Men who sunk the pilings and mixed the mortar are laid  
in graves where the wind whistles a wild song with-  
out words

And so are men who strung the wires and fixed the pipes  
and tubes and those who saw it rise floor by floor.

Souls of them all are here, even the hod carrier begging  
at back doors hundreds of miles away and the brick-  
layer who went to state's prison for shooting another  
man while drunk.

(One man fell from a girder and broke his neck at the end  
of a straight plunge—he is here—his soul has gone  
into the stones of the building.)

On the office doors from tier to tier—hundreds of names  
and each name standing for a face written across with  
a dead child, a passionate lover, a driving ambition  
for a million dollar business or a lobster's ease of life.

Behind the signs on the doors they work and the walls tell  
nothing from room to room.

Ten-dollar-a-week stenographers take letters from cor-  
poration officers, lawyers, efficiency engineers, and  
tons of letters go bundled from the building to all  
ends of the earth.

Smiles and tears of each office girl go into the soul of the  
building just the same as the master-men who rule  
the building.

Hands of clocks turn to noon hours and each floor empties its men and women who go away and eat and come back to work.

Toward the end of the afternoon all work slackens and all jobs go slower as the people feel day closing on them.

One by one the floors are emptied. . . The uniformed elevator men are gone. Pails clang. . . Scrubbers work, talking in foreign tongues. Broom and water and mop clean from the floors human dust and spit, and machine grime of the day.

Spelled in electric fire on the roof are words telling miles of houses and people where to buy a thing for money. The sign speaks till midnight.

Darkness on the hallways. Voices echo. Silence holds. . . Watchmen walk slow from floor to floor and try the doors. Revolvers bulge from their hip pockets. . . Steel safes stand in corners. Money is stacked in them.

A young watchman leans at a window and sees the lights of barges butting their way across a harbor, nets of red and white lanterns in a railroad yard, and a span of glooms splashed with lines of white and blurs of crosses and clusters over the sleeping city.

By night the skyscraper looms in the smoke and the stars and has a soul.