

**HARLEM RENAISSANCE  
SELECTED POETRY**

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**Langston Hughes**

**Let America Be America Again**

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!

Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home—  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.  
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,

## The Weary Blues

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,  
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,  
I heard a Negro play.  
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night  
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
He did a lazy sway. . . .  
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.  
With his ebony hands on each ivory key  
He made that poor piano moan with melody.  
O Blues!  
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool  
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  
Sweet Blues!  
Coming from a black man's soul.  
O Blues!  
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—  
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,  
Ain't got nobody but ma self.  
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'  
And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.  
He played a few chords then he sang some more—  
"I got the Weary Blues  
And I can't be satisfied.  
Got the Weary Blues  
And can't be satisfied—  
I ain't happy no mo'  
And I wish that I had died."  
And far into the night he crooned that tune.  
The stars went out and so did the moon.  
The singer stopped playing and went to bed  
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.  
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*.  
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Source: *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes* (University of Missouri Press (BkMk  
Press), 1987)

### **Poem for a Dark Girl**

Way Down South in Dixie  
(Break the heart of me)  
They hung my black young lover  
To a cross roads tree.

Way Down South in Dixie  
(Bruised body high in air)  
I asked the white Lord Jesus  
What was the use of prayer.

Way Down South in Dixie  
(Break the heart of me)  
Love is a naked shadow  
On a gnarled and naked tree.

### **The Negro Speaks of Rivers**

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and  
I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Copyright © 2002 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates, Inc.

## Claude McKay

### If We Must Die

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

### America

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth.  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate,  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
Yet, as a rebel fronts a king in state,  
I stand within her walls with not a shred  
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.  
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
And see her might and granite wonders there,  
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

Claude McKay, "America" from *Liberator* (December 1921). Courtesy of the Literary Representative for the Works of Claude McKay, Schombourg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

## **Africa**

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought forth light,  
The sciences were sucklings at thy breast;  
When all the world was young in pregnant night  
Thy slaves toiled at thy monumental best.  
Thou ancient treasure-land, thou modern prize,  
New peoples marvel at thy pyramids!  
The years roll on, thy sphinx of riddle eyes  
Watches the mad world with immobile lids.  
The Hebrews humbled them at Pharaoh's name.  
Cradle of Power! Yet all things were in vain!  
Honor and Glory, Arrogance and Fame!  
They went. The darkness swallowed thee again.  
Thou art the harlot, now thy time is done,  
Of all the mighty nations of the sun.

## **The Harlem Dancer**

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes  
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;  
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes  
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.  
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,  
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;  
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm  
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.  
Upon her swarthy neck black shiny curls  
Luxuriant fell; and tossing coins in praise,  
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,  
Devoured her shape with eager, passionate gaze;  
But looking at her falsely-smiling face,  
I knew her self was not in that strange place.

From *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922) edited by [James Weldon Johnson](#). This poem is in the public domain.

## COUNTEE CULLEN

### Heritage

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?  
So I lie, who all day long  
Want no sound except the song  
Sung by wild barbaric birds  
Goaded massive jungle herds,  
Juggernauts of flesh that pass  
Trampling tall defiant grass  
Where young forest lovers lie,  
Plighting troth beneath the sky.  
So I lie, who always hear,  
Though I cram against my ear  
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,  
Great drums throbbing through the air.  
So I lie, whose fount of pride,  
Dear distress, and joy allied,  
Is my somber flesh and skin,  
With the dark blood dammed within  
Like great pulsing tides of wine  
That, I fear, must burst the fine  
Channels of the chafing net  
Where they surge and foam and fret.

Africa? A book one thumbs  
Listlessly, till slumber comes.  
Unremembered are her bats  
Circling through the night, her cats  
Crouching in the river reeds,  
Stalking gentle flesh that feeds  
By the river brink; no more  
Does the bugle-throated roar  
Cry that monarch claws have leapt

From the scabbards where they slept.  
Silver snakes that once a year  
Doff the lovely coats you wear,  
Seek no covert in your fear  
Lest a mortal eye should see;  
What's your nakedness to me?  
Here no leprous flowers rear  
Fierce corollas in the air;  
Here no bodies sleek and wet,  
Dripping mingled rain and sweat,  
Tread the savage measures of  
Jungle boys and girls in love.  
What is last year's snow to me,  
Last year's anything? The tree  
Budding yearly must forget  
How its past arose or set  
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,  
Even what shy bird with mute  
Wonder at her travail there,  
Meekly labored in its hair.  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?

Meekly labored in its hair.  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who find no peace  
Night or day, no slight release  
From the unremitting beat  
Made by cruel padded feet  
Walking through my body's street.  
Up and down they go, and back,  
Treading out a jungle track.  
So I lie, who never quite  
Safely sleep from rain at night—  
I can never rest at all  
When the rain begins to fall;  
Like a soul gone mad with pain  
I must match its weird refrain; Ever must I twist and squirm,  
Writhing like a baited worm,  
While its primal measures drip



Through my body, crying, "Strip!  
Doff this new exuberance.  
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!"  
In an old remembered way  
Rain works on me night and day.  
Quaint, outlandish heathen gods  
Black men fashion out of rods,  
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,  
In a likeness like their own,  
My conversion came high-priced;  
I belong to Jesus Christ,  
Preacher of humility;  
Heathen gods are naught to me.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,  
So I make an idle boast;  
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,  
Lamb of God, although I speak  
With my mouth thus, in my heart  
Do I play a double part.  
Ever at Thy glowing altar  
Must my heart grow sick and falter,  
Wishing He I served were black,  
Thinking then it would not lack  
Precedent of pain to guide it,  
Let who would or might deride it;  
Surely then this flesh would know  
Yours had borne a kindred woe.  
Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,  
Daring even to give You  
Dark despairing features where,  
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,  
Patience wavers just so much as  
Mortal grief compels, while touches  
Quick and hot, of anger, rise  
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.  
Lord, forgive me if my need  
Sometimes shapes a human creed.  
All day long and all night through  
One thing only must I do:  
Quench my pride and cool my blood,  
Lest I perish in the flood.  
Lest a hidden ember set  
Timber that I thought was wet  
Burning like the dryest flax,  
Melting like the merest wax,

Lest the grave restore its dead.  
Not yet has my heart or head  
In the least way realized  
They and I are civilized.

### **Tableau**

Locked arm in arm they cross the way  
The black boy and the white,  
The golden splendor of the day  
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare  
And here the fair folk talk,  
Indignant that these two should dare  
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word  
They pass, and see no wonder  
That lightning brilliant as a sword  
Should blaze the path of thunder.