

They left Big Jess on the Black Bear Mountain,
Break of day, baby, break of day.

Sweet Mame sits rocking, waiting for the whistle
Long past due, babe, long past due.
The grits are cold, and the coffee's boiled over,
But Jess done gone, baby he done gone.

1938, 1980

Bitter Fruit of the Tree

They said to my grandmother: "Please do not be bitter,"
When they sold her first-born and let the second die,
When they drove her husband till he took to the swamplands,
And brought him home bloody and beaten at last.
They told her, "It is better you should not be bitter,
Some must work and suffer so that we, who must, can live,
Forgiving is noble, you must not be hearthen bitter;
These are your orders: you *are* not to be bitter."
And they left her shack for their porticoed house.

They said to my father: "Please do not be bitter,"
When he ploughed and planted a crop not his,
When he weathers-tripped a house that he could not enter,
And stored away a harvest he could not enjoy.
They answered his questions: "It does not concern you,
It is not for you to know, it is past your understanding,
All you need know is: you must not be bitter."

1939, 1980

LANGSTON HUGHES

1902-1967

Langston Hughes was the most popular and versatile of the many writers connected with the Harlem Renaissance. Along with Zora Neale Hurston, and in contrast to Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen (who wanted to work with the patterns of written literary forms, whether traditional or experimental), he wanted to capture oral and improvisatory traditions of black culture in written form. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, as a child, since his parents were separated, lived mainly with his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. He did, however, live intermittently both with his mother in Detroit and Cleveland, where he

Don't you fall now—
 For I'se still goin', honey,
 I'se still climbin',
 And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.

Besides,
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed—

I, too, am 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.

It's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on de shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.

He played a few chords then he sang some more—

"I got de Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got de 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.

1925

Mulatto

I am your son, white man!

Georgia dusk

And the turpentine woods.

One of the pillars of the temple fell.

You are my son!

Like hell!

The moon over the turpentine woods.

The Southern night

Full of stars,

Great big yellow stars.

What's a body but a toy?

Juicy bodies

Of nigger wenches

Blue black

Against black fences.

O, you little bastard boy,

What's a body but a toy?

The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.

What's the body of your mother?
Silver moonlight everywhere.

What's the body of your mother?
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.

*Naw, you ain't my brother.
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.*

Niggers ain't my brother.
The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

O, sweet as earth,
Dusk dark bodies
Give sweet birth
To little yellow bastard boys.

*Git on back there in the night,
You ain't white.*

The bright stars scatter everywhere.
Pine wood scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy.

I am your son, white man!

A little yellow
Bastard boy.

Song for a Dark Girl

Way Down South in Dixie¹
(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.

1. Last line of "Dixie," the popular minstrel song, probably composed by Daniel D. Emmett

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

1927

Genius Child

This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can—
Lest the song get out of hand.

5

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?

10

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him—and let his soul run wild!

1937, 1947

Visitors to the Black Belt

You can talk about
Across the railroad tracks—
To me it's *here*
On this side of the tracks.

5

You can talk about
Up in Harlem—
To me it's *here*
In Harlem.

You can say
Jazz on the South Side—

Kitchenettes
With no heat
And garbage
In the halls.

Who're you, outsider?

Ask me who am I.

Note on Commercial Theatre

You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,¹
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*²
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*³
And in everything but what's about me—
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me—

Black and beautiful—
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!

I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

1. Outdoor concert amphitheater constructed in the 1920s.

2. An all-black musical (1943), loosely based on the opera *Carmen* by French composer George Bizet (1838–1875), focused on African American life during World War II. An all-black production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), set in Haiti, was

a Broadway success in 1936.

3. During 1939, two different all-black versions of *The Mikado* (1885), a comic opera by the British team of W. S. Gilbert (1836–1911) and Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), competed on Broadway: *The Swing Mikado* (which premiered in Chicago 1938) and *The Hot Mikado*.

Vagabonds

We are the desperate
 Who do not care,
 The hungry
 Who have nowhere
 To eat,
 No place to sleep,
 The tearless
 Who cannot
 Weep.

1941, 1947

Words Like Freedom¹

There are words like *Freedom*
 Sweet and wonderful to say,
 On my heart-strings freedom sings
 All day everyday.

There are words like *Liberty*
 That almost make me cry.
 If you had known what I know
 You would know why.

1943, 1967

Madam and Her Madam

I worked for a woman,
 She wasn't mean—
 But she had a twelve-room
 House to clean.

Had to get breakfast,
 Dinner, and supper, too—
 Then take care of her children
 When I got thorough.

Wash, iron, and scrub,
 Walk the dog around—
 It was too much,
 Nearly broke me down.

10

1. Originally published under the title "Refugee in America."

I said, Madam,
Can it be
You trying to make a
Pack-horse out of me?

She opened her mouth.
She cried, Oh, no!
You know, Alberta,
I love you so!

I said, Madam,
That may be true—
But I'll be dogged
If I love you!

Freedom [1]¹

Freedom will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say,
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

1. Originally published under the title "Democracy."

Madam's Calling Cards

I had some cards printed
The other day.
They cost me more
Than I wanted to pay.

I told the man
I wasn't no mint,
But I hankered to see
My name in print.

MADAM JOHNSON,
ALBERTA K.
He said, Your name looks good
Madam'd that way.

Shall I use Old English
Or a Roman letter?
I said, Use American.
American's better.

There's nothing foreign
To my pedigree:
Alberta K. Johnson—
American that's me.

Silhouette

Southern gentle lady,
Do not swoon.
They've just hung a black man
In the dark of the moon.

They've hung a black man
To a roadside tree
In the dark of the moon
For the world to see
How Dixie protects
Its white womanhood.

Southern gentle lady,
Be good!
Be good!

1944, 1949

1943, 1949

Theme for English B

The instructor said,

*Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.*

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.¹
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.²
I guess being colored doesn't make me *not* like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

1. The City College of the City University of New York. Winston-Salem and Durham are cities in North Carolina.

2. Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), German

composer of the Baroque era. Bessie S. (1897–1945), noted blues singer. "Bop": jazz style that developed in Harlem during World War II.