

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON [1869-1935]

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

[1897]

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR [1872-1906]

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

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[1896]

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
 I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
 Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
 When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
 By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
 Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

[1915]

CLAUDE MCKAY [1890–1948]

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.

[1922]