Jean Toomer (1894–1967)

Jean Toomer once told his publisher, Horace Liveright: "My racial composition and my position in the world are realities that I alone may determine." He would brook no narrow definitions of race, either for himself or for his iconic work published in 1923, *Cane*. Yet, in his insistence that *Cane* not be marketed as a "negro" work, Toomer distanced himself from the culture that indeed made his most famous book so memorable. Inasmuch as he turned away from his African American heritage – a turn consummated especially in the decades after *Cane* – he shifted as a writer from the modernist topics of love and conflict between blacks and whites to the doctrines of mysticism and Quaker religiosity in which the contemporary meanings of "race" are multiple and fluid.

The racial realities of Gilded Age segregation shaped Toomer's early life. Born Nathan Pinchback Toomer in Washington, DC, in 1894, he came into the world exactly two years before the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* sanctioned racially "separate but equal" public spaces. When Toomer was very young, his father (also named Nathan Pinchback Toomer) abandoned his wife, Nina, who moved back into the home of her parents. Toomer's maternal grandfather, Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback, had had an illustrious Reconstruction-era political career, being the first person of African descent to govern a state in the United States. Aside from a few years in a predominantly white neighborhood in New Rochelle, New York, Jean Toomer spent most of his time in former Governor Pinchback's Washington, DC, home.

The careers of Jean Toomer and P.B.S. Pinchback are a study in contrast. Whereas Toomer eventually disavowed his African ancestry and the public recognition of it, Pinchback traded in them. Born in Georgia to a former slave of mixed Native American, African, and European ancestry, Pinchback was an antebellum hustler and gambler who became active in Reconstruction-era Republican politics in Louisiana, his combative style appealing to African Americans in the South. He rose to become Acting Lieutenant Governor under Republican Henry Clay Warmouth in 1871, and then served as Interim Governor for 35 days when Warmouth was impeached. Elected to both the House of Representatives and the Senate for the United States, Pinchback faced fierce opposition from white Democrats, who were eventually seated in his place. By 1880, he was one of the founders of all-black Southern University, a federal appointee under President Chester Arthur, and a member of the Comité des Citoyens, the civil rights group that helped drive Homer A. Plessy's challenge to railroad segregation in 1892.

Growing up in the shadow of this history, Jean Toomer alleged that his grandfather was a white man masquerading as part-black. Still, Toomer's lifestyle in part resulted from his grandfather's successful and lucrative political career. Toomer attended the prestigious Dunbar High School, one of the leading African American secondary schools of the era; and,

after his graduation in 1914, he pursued an education at various colleges and universities, including the University of Wisconsin, the University of Chicago, and New York University. When he returned to DC in 1919, Toomer had already finished the short story "Bona and Paul," which would eventually become part of *Cane*. Within the next year he was in Greenwich Village forming friendships with experimental writers like Waldo Frank and Gorham Munson. Later, Toomer's service as a temporary principal at the segregated Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute in Georgia personally exposed him to racial segregation, disfranchisement, and discrimination. Yet the cultural power of African American folklore and the possibility of its decay amid the Great Migration also moved him. Thus, in late 1921, by the time he returned to New York, his manifold experiences inspired him to write "Kabnis," one of the most moving sections of *Cane*. Published with a foreword by friend and fellow Greenwich Village artist Waldo Frank, this book of tightly woven poems and short stories was remarkable particularly for bridging African American vernacular with modernist experimentation. (Sherwood Anderson's 1919 book of short stories *Winesburg, Ohio* was a formative influence in the latter respect.) Nonetheless, *Cane* barely sold five hundred copies.

Even as *Cane* occupies a seminal place in African American literature, Toomer spent the rest of his career writing literature that distanced him from this book and from the African American folk life it illustrated. (An exception is *Balo*, subtitled "a sketch of Negro life," that he wrote in 1922 but did not see staged until 1924, when the Howard Players produced it during their 1923–1924 season, and published until 1927, when the collection *Plays of Negro Life: A Source-Book of Native American Drama*, edited by Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory, appeared.) He said once that he viewed *Cane* as the "song of an end," and did not know why people wanted him to write more books like it.

Divorcing the underlying creative impulses of *Cane* from those of his subsequent literary career would be a mistake, however. Even though the spiritualism and theories of human development of Armenian mystic George I. Gurdjieff inspired Toomer, especially after he started engaging the doctrine in 1924, spiritual aesthetics and racial ambivalence had long been twin themes in his writings. As Matthew Guterl notes, regarding Toomer's 1928 short story "York Beach": "If, as Toomer wrote to Liveright in 1923, 'his racial composition' and his 'position in the world' were 'realities' that he 'alone' could shape, 'York Beach' is an attempt to lay out the psychological mechanism that enabled this Promethean ability. It is most interesting, as well, that these questions should emerge from a text without any sustained discussion of skin color and race." Such an assessment guides a reading of the other short story Toomer published in 1928, "Winter on Earth," and the essay he published a year later, "Race Problems in Modern Society," in which he explains why race remains such a "somewhat confused and uncertain subject" amid a modern American society whose cultures, ideologies, and technologies remain "in flux." Finally, his long poem, *The Blue Meridian* (1931), likewise envisions a future in which white, black, and red-skinned people fuse into new, blue men.

Toomer was twice married. Margery Latimer, his first

wife, died in childbirth in 1932; and Marjorie Content, his second, moved with him to Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in 1940. He joined the Quakers and largely withdrew from society until his death in 1967.

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Extract from Cane

Bona and Paul

1

On the school gymnasium floor, young men and women are drilling. They are going to be teachers, and go out into the world ... thud, thud ... and give precision to the movements of sick people who all their lives have been drilling. One man is out of step. In step. The teacher glares at him. A girl in bloomers, seated on a mat in the corner because she has told the director that she is sick, sees that the footfalls of the men are rhythmical and syncopated. The dance of his blue-trousered limbs thrills her.

Bona: He is a candle that dances in a grove swung with pale balloons.

Columns of the drillers thud towards her. He is in the front row. He is in no row at all. Bona can look close at him. His red-brown face –

Bona: He is a harvest moon. He is an autumn leaf. He is a nigger. Bona! But dont all the dorm girls say so? And dont you, when you are sane, say so? Thats why I love – Oh, nonsense. You have never loved a man who didnt first love you. Besides –

Columns thud away from her. Come to a halt in line formation. Rigid. The period bell rings, and the teacher dismisses them.

A group collects around Paul. They are choosing sides for basketball. Girls against boys. Paul has his. He is limbering up beneath the basket. Bona runs to the girl captain and asks to be chosen. The girls fuss. The director comes to quiet them. He hears what Bona wants.

"But, Miss Hale, you were excused – "

"So I was, Mr. Boynton, but – "

" – you can play basket-ball, but you are too sick to drill."

"If you wish to put it that way."

She swings away from him to the girl captain.

"Helen, I want to play, and you must let me. This is the first time I've asked and I dont see why – "

"Thats just it, Bona. We have our team."

"Well, team or no team, I want to play and thats all there is to it."

She snatches the ball from Helen's hands, and charges down the floor.

Helen shrugs. One of the weaker girls says that she'll drop out. Helen accepts this. The team is formed. The whistle blows. The game starts. Bona, in center, is jumping against Paul. He plays with her. Out-jumps her, makes a quick pass, gets a quick return, and shoots a goal from the middle of the floor. Bona burns crimson. She fights, and tries to guard him. One of her team-mates advises her not to play so hard. Paul shoots his second goal.

Bona begins to feel a little dizzy and all in. She drives on. Almost hugs Paul to guard him. Near the basket, he attempts to shoot, and Bona lunges into his body and tries to beat his arms. His elbow, going up, gives her a sharp crack on the jaw. She whirls. He catches her. Her body stiffens. Then becomes strangely vibrant, and bursts to a swift life within her anger. He is about to give way before her hatred when a new passion flares at him and makes his stomach fall. Bona squeezes him. He suddenly feels stifled, and wonders why in hell the ring

of silly gaping faces that's caked about him doesnt make way and give him air. He has a swift illusion that it is himself who has been struck. He looks at Bona. Whir. Whir. They seem to be human distortions spinning tensely in a fog. Spinning ... dizzy ... spinning ... Bona jerks herself free, flushes a startling crimson, breaks through the bewildered teams, and rushes from the hall.

2

Paul is in his room of two windows.

Outside, the South-Side L track cuts them in two.

Bona is one window. One window, Paul.

Hurtling Loop-jammed L trains throw them in swift shadow.

Paul goes to his. Gray slanting roofs of houses are tinted lavender in the setting sun. Paul follows the sun, over the stock-yards where a fresh stench is just arising, across wheat lands that are still waving above their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago.

He is at Bona's window.

With his own glow he looks through a dark pane.

Paul's room-mate comes in.

"Say, Paul, I've got a date for you. Come on. Shake a leg, will you?"

His blond hair is combed slick. His vest is snug about him.

He is like the electric light which he snaps on.

"Whatdoysay, Paul? Get a wiggle on. Come on. We havent got much time by the time we eat and dress and everything."

His bustling concentrates on the brushing of his hair.

Art: What in hell's getting into Paul of late, anyway? Christ, but he's getting moony. Its his blood. Dark blood: moony. Doesnt get anywhere unless you boost it. You've got to keep it going –

"Say, Paul!"

– or it'll go to sleep on you. Dark blood; nigger? Thats what those jealous she-hens say. Not Bona though, or she ... from the South ... wouldnt want me to fix a date for him and her. Hell of a thing, that Paul's dark: youve got to always be answering questions.

"Say, Paul, for Christ's sake leave that window, cant you?"

"Whats it, Art?"

"Hell, I've told you about fifty times. Got a date for you. Come on."

"With who?"

Art: He didnt use to ask; now he does. Getting up in the air. Getting funny.

"Heres your hat. Want a smoke? Paul! Here. I've got a match. Now come on and I'll tell you all about it on the way to supper."

Paul: He's going to Life this time. No doubt of that. Quit your kidding. Some day, dear Art, I'm going to kick the living slats out of you, and you wont know what

I've done it for. And your slats will bring forth Life ... beautiful woman ...

Pure Food Restaurant.

"Bring me some soup with a lot of crackers, understand? And then a roast-beef dinner. Same for you, eh, Paul? Now as I was saying, you've got a swell chance with her. And she's game. Best proof: she dont give a damn what the dorm girls say about you and her in the gym, or about the funny looks that Boynton gives her, or about what they say about, well, hell, you know, Paul. And say, Paul, she's a sweetheart. Tall, not puffy and pretty, more serious and deep – the kind you like these days. And they say she's got a car. And say, she's on fire. But you know all about that. She got Helen to fix it up with me. The four of us – remember the last party? Crimson Gardens! Boy!"

Paul's eyes take on a light that Art can settle in.

3

Art has on his patent-leather pumps and fancy vest. A loose fall coat is swung across his arm. His face has been massaged, and over a close shave, powdered. It is a healthy pink the blue of evening tints a purple pallor. Art is happy and confident in the good looks that his mirror gave him. Bubbling over with a joy he must spend now if the night is to contain it all. His bubbles, too, are curiously tinted purple as Paul watches them. Paul, contrary to what he had thought he would be like, is cool like the dusk, and like the dusk, detached. His dark face is a floating shade in evening's shadow. He sees Art, curiously. Art is a purple fluid, carbon-charged, that effervesces beside him. He loves Art. But is it not queer, this pale purple facsimile of a red-blooded Norwegian friend of his? Perhaps for some reason, white skins are not supposed to live at night. Surely, enough nights would transform them fantastically, or kill them. And their red passion? Night paled that too, and made it moony. Moony. Thats what Art thought of him. Bona didnt, even in the daytime. Bona, would she be pale? Impossible. Not that red glow. But the conviction did not set his emotion flowing.

"Come right in, wont you? The young ladies will be right down. Oh, Mr. Carlstrom, do play something for us while you are waiting. We just love to listen to your music. You play so well."

Houses and dorm sitting-rooms are places where white faces seclude themselves at night. There is a reason ...

Art sat on the piano and simply tore it down. Jazz. The picture of Our Poets hung perilously.

Paul: I've got to get the kid to play that stuff for me in the daytime. Might be different. More himself. More nigger. Different? There is. Curious, though.

The girls come in. Art stops playing, and almost immediately takes up a petty quarrel, where he had last left it, with Helen.

Bona, black-hair curled staccato, sharply contrasting with Helen's puffy yellow, holds Paul's hand. She squeezes it. Her own emotion supplements the return pressure. And then, for no tangible reason, her spirits drop. Without them, she is nervous, and slightly afraid. She resents this. Paul's eyes are critical. She resents Paul. She flares at him. She flares to poise and security.

"Shall we be on our way?"

"Yes, Bona, certainly."

The Boulevard is sleek in asphalt, and, with arc-lights and limousines, aglow. Dry leaves scamper behind the whir of cars. The scent of exploded gasoline that mingles with them is faintly sweet. Mellow stone mansions overshadow clapboard homes which now resemble Negro shanties in some southern alley. Bona and Paul, and Art and Helen, move along an island-like, far-stretching strip of leaf-soft ground. Above them, worlds of shadow-planes and solids, silently moving. As if on one of these, Paul looks down on Bona. No doubt of it: her face is pale. She is talking. Her words have no feel to them. One sees them. They are pink petals that fall upon velvet cloth. Bona is soft, and pale, and beautiful.

"Paul, tell me something about yourself – or would you rather wait?"

"I'll tell you anything you'd like to know."

"Not what I want to know, Paul; what you want to tell me."

"You have the beauty of a gem fathoms under sea."

"I feel that, but I dont want to be. I want to be near you. Perhaps I will be if I tell you something. Paul, I love you."

The sea casts up its jewel into his hands, and burns them furiously. To tuck her arm under his and hold her hand will ease the burn.

"What can I say to you, brave dear woman – I cant talk love. Love is a dry grain in my mouth unless it is wet with kisses."

"You would dare? right here on the Boulevard? before Arthur and Helen?"

"Before myself? I dare."

"Here then."

Bona, in the slim shadow of a tree trunk, pulls Paul to her. Suddenly she stiffens. Stops.

"But you have not said you love me."

"I cant – yet – Bona."

"Ach, you never will. Youre cold. Cold."

Bona: Colored; cold. Wrong somewhere.

She hurries and catches up with Art and Helen.

4

Crimson Gardens. Hurrah! So one feels. People ... University of Chicago students, members of the stock exchange, a large Negro in crimson uniform who guards the door ... had watched them enter. Had leaned towards each other over ash-smeared tablecloths and highballs and whispered: What is he, a Spaniard, an Indian, an Italian, a Mexican, a Hindu, or a Japanese? Art had at first fidgeted under their stares ... what are *you* looking at, you godam pack of owl-eyed hyenas? ... but soon settled into his fuss with Helen, and forgot them. A strange thing happened to Paul. Suddenly he knew that he was apart from the people around him. Apart from the pain which they had unconsciously caused. Suddenly he knew that people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness. There was fullness, and strength and peace about it all. He saw himself, cloudy, but real.

He saw the faces of the people at the tables round him. White lights, or as now, the pink lights of the Crimson Gardens gave a glow and immediacy to white faces. The pleasure of it, equal to that of love or dream, of seeing this. Art and Bona and Helen? He'd look. They were wonderfully flushed and beautiful. Not for himself; because they were. Distantly. Who were they, anyway? God, if he knew them. He'd come in with them. Of that he was sure. Come where? Into life? Yes. No. Into the Crimson Gardens. A part of life. A carbon bubble. Would it look purple if he went out into the night and looked at it? His sudden starting to rise almost upset the table.

"What in hell – pardon – whats the matter, Paul?"

"I forgot my cigarettes – "

"Youre smoking one."

"So I am. Pardon me."

The waiter straightens them out. Takes their order.

Art: What in hell's eating Paul? Moony aint the word for it. From bad to worse. And those godam people staring so. Paul's a queer fish. Doesnt seem to mind ... He's my pal, let me tell you, you horn-rimmed owl-eyed hyena at that table, and a lot better than you whoever you are ... Queer about him. I could stick up for him if he'd only come out, one way or the other, and tell a feller. Besides, a room-mate has a right to know. Thinks I wont understand. Said so. He's got a swell head when it comes to brains, all right. God, he's a good straight feller, though. Only, moony. Nut. Nuttish. Nuttery. Nutmeg ... "What'd you say, Helen?"

"I was talking to Bona, thank you."

"Well, its nothing to get spiffy about."

"What? Oh, of course not. Please lets dont start some silly argument all over again."

"Well."

"Well."

"Now thats enough. Say, waiter, whats the matter with our order? Make it snappy, will you?"

Crimson Gardens. Hurrah! So one feels. The drinks come. Four highballs. Art passes cigarettes. A girl dressed like a bare-back rider in flaming pink, makes her way through tables to the dance floor. All lights are dimmed till they seem a lush afterglow of crimson. Spotlights the girl. She sings. "Liza, Little Liza Jane."

Paul is rosy before his window.

He moves, slightly, towards Bona.

With his own glow, he seeks to penetrate a dark pane.

Paul: From the South. What does that mean, precisely, except that you'll love or hate a nigger? Thats a lot. What does it mean except that in Chicago you'll have the courage to neither love or hate. A priori. But it would seem that you have. Queer words, arent these, for a man who wears blue pants on a gym floor in the daytime. Well, never matter. You matter. I'd like to know you whom I look at. Know, not love. Not that knowing is a greater pleasure; but that I have just found the joy of it. You came just a month too late. Even this afternoon I dreamed. To-night, along the Boulevard, you found me cold. Paul Johnson, cold! Thats a good one, eh, Art, you fine old stupid fellow, you! But I feel good! The color and the music and the song ... A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. O song ... And those flushed faces. Eager brilliant eyes. Hard to imagine them as

unawakened. Your own. Oh, they're awake all right. "And you know it too, dont you Bona?"

"What, Paul?"

"The truth of what I was thinking."

"I'd like to know I know – something of you."

"You will – before the evening's over. I promise it."

Crimson Gardens. Hurrah! So one feels. The bare-back rider balances agilely on the applause which is the tail of her song. Orchestral instruments warm up for jazz. The flute is a cat that ripples its fur against the deep-purring saxophone. The drum throws sticks. The cat jumps on the piano keyboard. Hi diddle, hi diddle, the cat and the fiddle. Crimson Gardens ... hurrah! ... jumps over the moon. Crimson Gardens! Helen ... O Eliza ... rabbit-eyes sparkling, plays up to, and tries to placate what she considers to be Paul's contempt. She always does that ... Little Liza Jane ... Once home, she burns with the thought of what she's done. She says all manner of snidy things about him, and swears that she'll never go out again when he is along. She tries to get Art to break with him, saying, that if Paul, whom the whole dormitory calls a nigger, is more to him than she is, well, she's through. She does not break with Art. She goes out as often as she can with Art and Paul. She explains this to herself by a piece of information which a friend of hers had given her: men like him (Paul) can fascinate. One is not responsible for fascination. Not one girl had really loved Paul; he fascinated them. Bona didnt; only thought she did. Time would tell. And of course, *she* didn't. Liza ... She plays up to, and tries to placate, Paul.

"Paul is so deep these days, and I'm so glad he's found someone[1] to interest him."

"I dont believe I do."

The thought escapes from Bona just a moment before her anger at having said it.

Bona: You little puffy cat, I do. I do!

Dont I, Paul? her eyes ask.

Her answer is a crash of jazz from the palm-hidden orchestra. Crimson Gardens is a body whose blood flows to a clot upon the dance floor. Art and Helen clot. Soon, Bona and Paul. Paul finds her a little stiff, and his mind, wandering to Helen (silly little kid who wants every highball spoon her hands touch, for a souvenir), supple, perfect little dancer, wishes for the next dance when he and Art will exchange.

Bona knows that she must win him to herself.

"Since when have men like you grown cold?"

"The first philosopher."

"I thought you were a poet – or a gym director."

"Hence, your failure to make love."

Bona's eyes flare. Water. Grow red about the rims. She would like to tear away from him and dash across the clotted floor.

"What do you mean?"

"Mental concepts rule you. If they were flush with mine – good. I dont believe they are."

"How do you know, Mr. Philosopher?"

"Mostly a priori."

"You talk well for a gym director."

"And you – "

"I hate you. Ou!"

She presses away. Paul, conscious of the convention

in it, pulls her to him. Her body close. Her head still strains away. He nearly crushes her. She tries to pinch him. Then sees people staring, and lets her arms fall. Their eyes meet. Both, contemptuous. The dance takes blood from their minds and packs it, tingling, in the torsos of their swaying bodies. Passionate blood leaps back into their eyes. They are a dizzy blood clot on a gyrating floor. They know that the pink-faced people have no part in what they feel. Their instinct leads them away from Art and Helen, and towards the big uniformed black man who opens and closes the gilded exit door. The cloak-room girl is tolerant of their impatience over such trivial things as wraps. And slightly superior. As the black man swings the door for them, his eyes are knowing. Too many couples have passed out, flushed and fidgety, for him not to know. The chill air is a shock to Paul. A strange thing happens. He sees the Gardens purple, as if he were way off. And a spot is in the purple. The spot comes furiously towards him. Face of the black man. It leers. It smiles sweetly like a child's. Paul leaves Bona and darts back so quickly that he doesnt give the door-man a chance to open. He swings in. Stops. Before the huge bulk of the Negro.

"Youre wrong."

"Yassur."

"Brother, youre wrong.

"I came back to tell you, to shake your hand, and tell you that you are wrong. That something beautiful is going to happen. That the Gardens are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. That I came into the Gardens, into life in the Gardens with one whom I did not know. That I danced with her, and did not know her. That I felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know. That I thought of her. That my thoughts were matches thrown into a dark window. And all the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals. That I am going out and know her whom I brought here with me to these Gardens which are purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk."

Paul and the black man shook hands.

When he reached the spot where they had been standing, Bona was gone.

1923

Balo

[Autumn dawn. Any weekday.[1] Outside, it is damp and dewy, and the fog, resting upon the tops of pine trees, looks like fantastic cotton bolls about to be picked by the early morning fingers of the sun. As the curtain rises, the scene is that of a Negro farmhouse interior. The single room, at all times used for sleeping and sitting, on odd occasions serves as a kitchen, this latter due to the fact that a great fireplace with hooks for pots and kettles, occupies, together with a small family organ, the entire space of the left-hand wall. This huge hearth suggests that perhaps the place might once have been a plantation cookroom. This is indeed the case, and those who now call it home (having added two rooms to it) remember the

grandmother – in her day MARSA[2] HARRIS' *cook – telling how she contrived to serve the dishes hot despite the fact that the big house was some hundred yards away. The old frame mansion still stands, or rather, the ghost of it, in the direct vision of the front door, its habitable portion tenanted by a poor-white family who farm the land to the south of it and who would, but for the tradition of prejudice and the coercion of a rural public opinion, be on terms of a frank friendship with their colored neighbors, a friendship growing out of a similarity of occupations and consequent problems. As it is, there is an understanding and bond between them little known or suspected by northern people. The colored family farms the land to the north. The dividing line, halfway between the two homes, has no other mark save one solid stake of oak. Both farmers did well last year, resisted the temptation to invest in automobiles and player-pianos,[3] saved their money, and so, this season, though their cotton crop failed with the rest, they have a nest egg laid away, and naturally are more conscious of their comparative thrift and prosperity than if the times were good. As was said, the curtain[4] rises upon the general room of the Negro farmhouse. The man himself, in rough gray baggy trousers and suspenders showing white against a gray flannel shirt, is seen whittling a board for shavings and small kindling sticks to start a fire with. As he faces the audience, the half-light shades his features, giving but the faint suggestion that they are of a pleasing African symmetry. Having enough kindling, he arranges it in the hearth, strikes a match, and, as the wood catches, tends and coaxes it, squatting on his hams. The flames soon throw his profile into relief. It is surprisingly like that of an Indian. And his hair (lack of hair, really), having been shaved close, completes the illusion. A quick glance around the room now reveals a closed door (to the left) in the back wall, underneath which a narrow strip of light shows. To the right of the door, against the wall, is a heavy oak bed which has been perfectly made even at this early hour. In the right wall, by the bed, a curtained window lets in at first the gray, and then as the mist lifts, the yellow light of morning. This side of[5] the curtain is a magnificent[6] oak dresser, a match for the bed, but otherwise out of place and proportion in the room. Both of these are gifts to the family (and have become heirlooms) from old* MARSA. *A window may be understood to be in the wall facing the audience. Likewise, in this wall to the left, a door opens on the outside. The walls are plastered and whitewashed. They are sprinkled with calendars, and two cheap pictures of fruit (such as are supposed to be found in a dining room), and one or two inevitable deathlike family portraits. Chairs are here and there about a central table, in the middle of which, resting on a white covering, is a wooden tray for nut picks[7] and crackers. The floor is covered with a good quality carpet. The fire in the hearth now burns brightly, but fails to fill all but a small portion of it, and so gives one the impression of insufficiency. While* WILL LEE *is still crouching down, the rear door swings open and his wife comes in. Her complexion is a none too healthy yellow, and her large, deep-set, sad and weary eyes are strangely pathetic, haunted, and almost unearthly in the dawnlight. With such a slim*

and fragile body it is surprising how she manages to carry on her part of the contract.]

SUSAN LEE: [*Her voice is high and somewhat cracked*] Come on in. [*She turns about, and re-enters the kitchen.* WILL, *satisfied with his fire, rises and, as he follows her, speaks.*]

WILL: Whar's Bob an' Bettie Kate?

SUSAN: [*Through the half-open door*] Sent them for to catch an' milk th' cows.

WILL: Whar's th' boys?

SUSAN: You-all know they was up all night a-grinding an' a-boiling cane.[8] Come on in. [WILL *passes out, and soon his voice is heard in blessing.*]

WILL: We thank thee, Heavenly Father, fo' yo' blessin's of th' night. Once more thou hast kept yo' children thru' th' time of Satan an' of sin. Bless us, O Lord. Thou hast brought us like th' dew thru' temptations of th' evil darkness inter th' glory of th' morning' light. Have mercy, Lord. Keep us, an' give us strength t' do yo' will terday. An' every day. An' we asks you t' bless this yere food prepared in His dear name. Amen. Amen. [*Just as* WILL *begins his prayer, two young fellows enter through the front door, but on hearing the blessing in progress, stop, and wait with bowed heads until it is over. Whereupon they advance, and are heard by* WILL.]

WILL: That you, Tom?

TOM: [*The larger of the two boys. A Negro farm hand with a smiling*[9] *face and easy gait, distinguished at first from* BALO *only by his taller figure and the fact of a seedy black coat which he wears over his patched blue faded overalls.*] Yassur.

WILL: How much you git?

TOM: Mighty nigh eighty gallons.

WILL: That's right. Had yo' breakfast?

TOM: Yassur.

WILL: That you thar, Balo?

BALO: Yassur, dat's me.

WILL: Reckon you had yo' breakfast too?

BOTH: Yassur we done et.

WILL: Slept any?

BOTH: Nasur, dat we ain't.

WILL: Well, git yo' Bibles down an' read fo' fifteen minutes, then you-all jes' stretch yo'selfs befo' th' fire and I'll wake you up by an' by.

BOTH: Yassur. [*They get their Bibles from the table and stretch out in front the hearth, and begin to read.* BALO *is nearer the audience. As he reads he mumbles his words aloud, and, by the twitching of his face and the movements of his hands, is seen to be of a curious nervous texture beneath his surface placidity.* TOM *soon falls asleep, and begins to breathe deeply and rhythmically. The monotony of this respiration*[10] *together with the sound of his own voice seems to excite* BALO *peculiarly. His strange, half-closed eyes burn with a dancing light, and his entire body becomes animated and alive. At this juncture, young voices and young feet enter the room to the rear.* SUSAN *has trouble in getting them seated, and* WILL *in blessing the food. Laughs, shouts, and admonitions, in reality, continue all*

WILL: That you, Mr. Jennings? Come in, sir.

JENNINGS: [*Coming in. He is their white neighbor – a well-built man with ruddy cheeks and pointed nose, dressed like* WILL *but for his shirt which is of khaki.*] Nothin' ter do, eh, Will, but hold yer hands afor th' fire? Lucky last year put a few dollars in th' bank.

WILL: Yassur, lucky sho'. [*Both remain standing, a little awkwardly despite the friendly greeting.* SUSAN *has kept her seat, and says nothing until directly spoken to.*]

JENNINGS: [*Pointing to the sleeping boys.*] Nothin' fer them ter do, eh, sleepin' away th' days an' it ain't yet Christmas.

WILL: Nasur. Them's been up all night tho', grindin' cane.

JENNINGS: Saw Balo there a while back actin' like he was crazy. An' what do yer think he said? An' kept on repeatin' it, "White folks ain't no more'n niggers when they gets ter heaven, white folks ain't no more'n niggers when they gets ter heaven." [*Laughs.*] How much you get?

WILL: 'Bout eighty gallons.

JENNINGS: Not bad from that little biddie piece of land, eh?

WILL: Nasur, not bad 'tall. But us has more'n we can use, an' 'twouldn't pay t' ship it at th' present price they pays fer it.

JENNINGS: Trade?

WILL: Fer what?

JENNINGS: Corn; turnips.

WILL: Nasur, got too many of them myself. Too much syrup, too. Take some along with you; don't want nothin' sir.

JENNINGS: All right, Will. Notice yer ax handle was busted. I'll send[12] th' boy over.

WILL: Yassur, that's right, sho'.

JENNINGS: What you got ter say 'bout it, Susan?

SUSAN: I don't want him t' preach, Mr. Jennings. Preachin' means neglect th' farm. Up north they say there's lots of things you don't get here. An' I don't know, Mr. Jennings, but I'd like t' get somethin'.

JENNINGS: Wall,[13] what do yer call somethin' if money in the bank ain't somethin' when th' times are hard?

SUSAN: Yassur, money, but there's somethin' more'n life besides all the money in th' world. I want that somethin' else; an' folks say I might could get it if I sent up north.

JENNINGS: How about that, Will?

WILL: Dunno, sir. Maybe so, but I knows this place, an' it don't know that. 'Spects Georgia's big enuf t' hold me till I dies.

JENNINGS: Me, too, Will. Wall, mus' be goin'. I'll send the can here fer that syrup. An' th' handle.

WILL: Don't mind th' can, Mr. Jennings, sir, jest roll th' barrel over, an' roll it back when you is thru'.

JENNINGS: All right. Thanks, Will – return the same some day. So long.

WILL: [*Seeing him to the door*] Yassur, good evenin' Mr. Jennings. [*He closes the door and returns to*

SUSAN. *The boys are still sleeping soundly.*] Wish you'd root me out that book, Susan. [SUSAN *gets up, rummages around, and finds the book.* WILL *immediately drops into his chair, and is at once absorbed. Like* BALO, *though in not quite so pronounced a manner, he too mumbles as he reads.* SUSAN *enters the rear room. At this point the curtain descends for a moment to indicate the passing of the morning, and of the first five hours of the afternoon. When it ascends,* WILL *is seated as before, in front of the fire which now burns briskly and with a sizzling sound in thankful contrast to the dull gray light that filters through the windows. It has clouded up outside, and threatens rain. The boys have left the hearth.* WILL *has exchanged his theology book for the Bible. His eyes seem to be in a concentrated daze, focused on the glowing ashes. A voice coming from the outside arouses him.*]

VOICE: Whoo thar, you, Will?

WILL: [*Collecting himself*] That you, Cousin Bob? Come on in. Don't need no ceremonies t' enter this yer house. Come in. Come in. [COUSIN BOB *and his wife, Negro country folks, and six small children from twelve to two and a half years old enter through the rear door by way of the kitchen.* COUSIN MAMIE *carries a large basket covered with a spotless white napkin.*]

WILL: What's that fer on yo' arm, Cousin Mamie?

MAMIE: Supper, Cousin Will. Know'd you'd hab enuf t' share with us-all, but reckoned I'd jes' tote it wid me, 'kase dese hungry mouths don't nebber git enuf t' eat, does you, honey? [*Addressing the oldest, who shakes his head bashfully in negation*] I'll jes warm 'tup over yo' fire dar when you-all goes in t' eat. [*The family all group themselves in a semicircle around the hearth, the older folks on chairs, the younger ones on the floor or standing, shifting ill at ease from foot to foot, uncomfortable in their Sunday shoes.*]

COUSIN BOB: Cotton po' wid you dis year I 'speck, Will.

WILL: P'oly, Cousin Bob, p'oly. Three bales at th' outset, an' doing good at that.

BOB: Any corn?

WILL: More'n I know what t' do with.

BOB: Pigs?

WILL: Doin' well on hogs, Cousin Bob, doin' well. [*The conversation dies out. They sit in perfect silence. Then* SUSAN *greets the new arrivals, kissing each child.* BOB *and* BETTIE KATE *are boisterous and demonstrative, and take delight in their more backward playmates. By the time* SUSAN*'s ritual is through with, the front door opens and a middle-aged Negro comes in, assisting an old, (no one know how old he is) gray-haired bearded fellow who is blind. This old man has a dignity and a faraway other-worldly expression such as might have characterized a saint of old. Indeed, one immediately thinks of him as some hoary Negro prophet, who, having delivered his message, waits humbly and in darkness for his day to come. He is called* UNCLE NED, *and is so greeted by all as he enters. He returns the greeting.*]

UNCLE NED: [*Deep and low, and remarkably clear*

for one of his infirmities] Chillun, chillun. Blind eyes ain't supposed t' see an' ain't supposed to cry, but, chilluns, voices allus seem t' be so sad, an' I had reckoned as if th' Lord had minded Him t' make sech reservations, fer th' old. An' Uncle Ned has had his chillun since th' days befo' th' war. 'Tain't now like it used t' be – he could see 'em with his two eyes then, an' now he has t' see 'em with his heart. An' 'tain't easy any more. Hearts ain't all a-shinin' as they used to be. [*Abruptly*] God bless and keep you all.

WILL: Th' kind Lord bless an' preserve you, Uncle Ned.

SAM: [UNCLE NED's *companion*] Amen. Amen. [UNCLE NED *is seated in the center, before the fire.* SUSAN *goes out, and presently calls to* WILL. WILL *beckons to* BOB *and* BETTIE KATE, *and then asks all to have a bite with him.*]

WILL: Some supper, folks?

ALL: No, Will, no. Thank y' jest th' same.

MAMIE: I'll take t' feed all those that wants t' eat in here.

WILL: Reckon you will at that. [*He and the children go out.* TOM *comes in with an armful of wood, then follows* WILL. WILL *is heard blessing the food. Everyone in the front room bows his head.*]

WILL: Give us this day, our daily bread, O Lord, an' hearts filled up with thanks for Him in whose dear name all food an' goodness is prepared in. Amen, Amen.

SAM: [*After* WILL] Amen. Amen. [MAMIE *sets about warming up some sweet potatoes, meat, and corn bread. She gets a dish or two from the kitchen, and fixes one for* UNCLE NED. *The children eat from one large pan. The grown-ups talk in undertones.*]

SAM: What's got inter Will he lettin' Susan have a frolic?

BOB: Dunno.

MAMIE: 'Deed I dunno neither. Queer goin's on fer him sho'.

SAM: Ef I was a bettin' man I'd lay a dollar t' a cotton stalk Will'll turn this yer frolic inter a preacher's meetin' afo' he's thru'.

UNCLE NED: That's right; that's true. Will has got t' fear o' God in 'im as sho's you're born.

MAMIE: Ain't many comin' on a night like this.

SAM: That's right; niggers is sho' funny 'bout gettin' theyself wet. [BALO *comes in, but finding no seat around the fire, installs himself before the organ. His feet begin to pump, and his fingers to touch a key here and there. The sequence of notes finally arranges itself into a Negro melody. It is the one called "Steal Away." As his ear catches the tune, he begins to play in earnest.*[14] *The folks all join in, at first by humming and then they sing the words.* UNCLE NED's *gray head swings slowly and with his right hand he seems to be conducting.* TOM *enters from the kitchen. Likewise* WILL *and* SUSAN *and the children. They all sing. As most everyone knows, the words are*:

Chorus:

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus,

Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.

Verse:

My Lord calls me, He calls me by the thunder,
I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord calls me, He calls me by the lightning,
The trumpet sounds within my soul,
The trumpet sounds within my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here.

[*This is repeated several times. At each repetition the emotional excitation becomes greater. At about the third round, the ordered sequence of words is interrupted at will with such phrases as, "O Lord," "Have Mercy," yet the rhythm and the tune are maintained. Thus is achieved one of the striking soul-stirring effects of Negro melody. The song reaches its climax, and then gradually sinks and fades away. After the singers once get well under way,* BALO *stops playing, except that now and then he emphasizes a passage by a full chord. He sings, and his own emotion grows greater than the rest. As the song dies out, this seems to diminish also. And when all is still, he seems quieter*[15] *than the others. But then, after a pause of some seconds, and utterly without warning, he bursts forth.*]

BALO: [*Rising from his seat and going to the center of the room as if in a somnambulistic*[16] *trance*]

An' th' floods came, an' th' winds blew,
An' th' floods came, an' th' winds blew,
An' th' floods came, an' th' winds blew,
Have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord,
On me, O yes, on me, on me,
Have mercy, Lord, on me, on me.

[*The folks do not seem at all surprised at this outburst. A head or two are slowly nodded while it lasts.*]

SAM: [*As* BALO *finishes*] – Amen. Amen.

UNCLE NED: Have mercy, Lord, have mercy.

WILL: Amen. Amen. [*And now voices and raps on the door announce new arrivals. Two couples. They are strikingly similar both in looks and in dress. Black faces that in repose are sad and heavy, but when they break in smiles become light-hearted and gay. The men have on white shirts and collars, loose black coats, pressed dark trousers, and polished black shoes. The two women are in white shirt waists and plain dark skirts. The room, of course, is now quite crowded. The group around the fire breaks up to greet them.* BALO *is again left to compose himself. "Good evenings" and "hellos" are exchanged, and by the time the wraps are disposed of on the bed,* SAM *has proposed a game of "kyards." They all look suspiciously, as if undecided, at* WILL. *He, however, turns his gaze into the fire, and by his silence gives consent. Two tables are arranged. Seated around them are the two recent couples,* SAM *and* SUSAN, BOB *and* MAMIE. *They begin to play, and as they forget* WILL's *presence, become quite lively. Some of the children watch the games. Some are still around the fire.* WILL, *with* BALO, TOM *and*

UNCLE NED *hug the hearth. Their conversation is audible, for the players on the stage reduce their jollity to gestures, etc., though of course in fact such is not the case.*]

UNCLE NED: Cotton drapped this year as wus' as I ever seed it. An' in every weevil I see sho' th' fingers of th' Lord. Reckon you farmers better drap down on your knees an' pray, an' pray ter th' Lord fer ter free you from yo' sins. White folks hit th' same as black this time.

WILL: They sho' is.

UNCLE NED: Boll weevils come ter tell us that it's time to change our ways. Ain't satisfied with sinnin', but gits wus'. An' th' Lord looks down an' is angry, an' he says, "Stop," says he, "ken you stop now? If you ken, you ken be saved. I'm a-warning yer. An' them what heeds my warnin' has time befo' th' Judgement ter repent their sins an' ter be born again. Ter be born again."

WILL: Amen, Uncle Ned, Amen. An' true, true. Like Saul, y'know, Saul of Tarsus,[17] we is all on our way to Damascus, an' breathin' out threatnin's an' slaughter 'gainst th' Lord. But we can be born again. We mus' be born again an' see th' light that Saul saw when he fell down t' th' earth, an' hear th' voice that Saul heard when he lay there kickin' on th' ground an' stirrin' up th' dust on th' road that led inter Damascus. We can be born again, that's sho'. Brother, we can be born again an' go out like Saul an' preach th' gospel of th' Lord. O Lord. [*They all, that is, all around the hearth, slip immediately and easily into humming an indefinite air derived from a melody. As this increases in volume,* BALO *is seen to tilt back in his chair, and his eyes roll ecstatically upward. Even more suddenly than before he jumps to his feet.*]

BALO: *Jesus, Jesus, I've found Jesus.*
Th' light that came t' Saul when he was born again,
Th' voice that spoke t' Saul when he was born again,
Jesus, Jesus, I've found Jesus,
One mo' sinner is a-coming home.

[*Here he falls to his knees, face raised in pain and exaltation,*
hands clasped in supplication above his head]

[*Continuing*]

O Jesus, Jesus, savior of my soul,
One mo' sinner is a-comin' home,
One mo' sinner is a-coming home.
Th' light that came t' Saul when he was born again,
Th' voice that spoke t' Saul when he was born again,
The light that came t' Saul when he was born again,
O Jesus, Jesus, savior of my soul,
Jesus, Jesus, I've found Jesus,
One mo' sinner is a-coming home.

[BALO *stops, and gives a desperate glance around the room. Seeing* UNCLE NED, *who has turned to face him, he throws himself into his arms, and breaks into a violent and spasmodic sobbing.* UNCLE NED *raises one*

arm in blessing, while with the other he encircles him in love. The card players, having become uneasy when UNCLE NED *first began to talk, stopped their game entirely at* BALO*'s outburst, and now file out, heads lowered, in sheepishness and guilt. And as the curtain descends, the others, with the exception of* UNCLE NED *and* BALO, *are seen leaving.*]

Curtain

1922 1924, 1927

Winter on Earth[1]

1.

The physical seasons are still recurring. Winter, Spring, Summer, Autumn – they still recur. The physical seasons recur. The eyes of men who inhabit America have seen these seasons. Ages ago perhaps they started. Ages hence perhaps they will stop. They seemingly start and stop within a period of eighty years for one man. Eighty times a man sees the seasons. But eighty times are not enough for a man to learn that either he has never seen them or else he will see them eternally.

Day and night recur. 29,200 times a man sees day and night. But 29,200 times are not enough for him to learn that either he has never seen them or else he will see them eternally.

Inhalation and exhalation recur. A man breathes 840,960,000 times. But eight hundred forty million, nine hundred sixty thousand times are not enough for a man to learn that either he has never breathed or else he breathes endlessly.

Neither are there enough times or enough man for a multitude of greater or lesser truths to be learned.

What significance does a man derive from his existence?

2.

Reckoning by the Earth's time, that is, according to the way men see this planet's calendar, the body of land called North America, or simply, America, is of recent formation. Perhaps great convulsions and slidings caused its rise. Whatever was the manner of its birth, whether it was merely physical, or organic and accompanied by the great mystery of all organic births, and physical births, America is still a young continent, perhaps not for the first or last time. But for the men who now exist upon it, so short is their time, the continent America is ancient. To be old as the continent is to be very old. Its career extends forward unto disappearance sometime in far off future years. It exists now. It is the geographical base of a great nation. No more. No less.

Ah, yes, much, much less.

The America which dies and is about to live salutes the world!

The big light,
Let the big light in.

There was a time,[2] we may assume, where there were no seasons such as we have now. There was a time when there was no America. And even to-day it is unknown to millions of people who exist elsewhere on

the Earth.[3] People near the North and South Poles, people in the Andes, in Peru, in Africa, in Asia Minor, in India, Tibet and China, in Siberia, even in Europe, yes, even in America there are people who have never even heard of it. Nor will it matter if they never do. Beyond the Earth to hosts of beings who exist on other planets of the Universe, America is of course unknown.

Men move across its surface and act strangely.

These men have seen the recurrence of recently established seasons. They have seen the somewhat longer established recurrent phases of the moon. Within these recurrent changes many things have happened. Even for the short time from the days of the Pilgrims and Indians, through Emerson[4] and Whitman,[5] to the days of Rockefeller,[6] Edison,[7] and Ford,[8] this is a long history rich with natural and material conquests, wars, finance, politics, science, art, and the joys and sufferings of millions of struggling and bored souls.

To what purpose? Why are there seasons? Why is the moon? Why is there time for things to happen in? Why are there men? Why are there eyes? Why do they see? Why do they not see?

For three hundred years the generations of America have witnessed no irregularities in Nature to cause their sight profound disturbance. Nature, save for a tornado here, a flood or an earthquake there, is peaceful now. Does the sun not rise and set regularly, causing regular alternations of night and day? What should the sun not rise, not set? Pity the wild startled eyes of helpless Americans.

They have experienced nothing to cause profound transformations in their souls. Yes, there was the Great War.[9] Well? Do they not regularly wake and sleep? What should they wake up, never again to sleep in the Universe? Suppose men awoke to behold the terror and the glory of what some men mock and most men dream of, and call God? Pity the cowering, shivering souls. What burden and terror there would be while these strangely acting beings who could become souls were acquiring the intelligence, conscience, and ability to exist in God's time in an eternally awake Universe.

What should they fail to acquire intelligence and conscience? No. Suppose intelligence and conscience were not called forth from them?

Suppose they lacked the ability to sustain and transcend the foretastes of this consciousness.

Then would strong fears besiege them and force them to pray for a miracle to cast them from the Cosmos back into the confines of their isolate home called Earth where they habitually exist snug away as if outside the Universe.

They would become devout, devotion of this kind meaning whatever aimed to close their eyes to vast radiance and narrow down to comfort the perceptions of their minds.

They would pray and be religious obversely.

"Deliver us from the living God!"

The Americans are now a devout people. They have a lukewarm infidelity which they are not ashamed to call religion. But they lack the fervor caused by a great necessity. It is easy for them without intensity to dope themselves and to be doped to sleep.

What purpose do they find in sleep? Neither force nor

effort nor intelligence nor conscience is needed to sleep endlessly.

We sleep. Who profits by our dreams?

3.

It was Winter. Intense cold contracted[10] the earth and almost froze the vegetation throughout the entire middle area of America. Nature looked as if she had been turned into a rusty trash-heap and frozen stiff. Fields were colored a dark purplish brown. Foot-paths worn across them were so hard and lumpy that the men who stumbled along them had their spines jolted with each step. A shock rang through anyone who stubbed his toe. Ears and noses knew that the cold was bitter. Blasts of wind swept over the bleak hill and whistled and moaned where anything resisted them. The cold whipped men before it without mercy.

"It is damn cold," said one lean man to another as both stood rocking back and forth and stamping their feet, waiting for the approach of something. Already one foot pained too much to put weight on it. Their threadbare overcoats flapped like gauze and were no protection against zero weather.

"It is cold, hellish cold," said the other as he tried to squeeze into his bones. His jaw was stiff. His head was pulled down into his coat, and he was reluctant to move it. But his long red nose was dripping and freezing; he had to wipe it. It was painful when he tried to remove a worn-out woolen mitten from his right hand, the fingers of which were crooked and stiffened. He did so with difficulty, reached into his hip pocket and could hardly grasp the soiled crusted handkerchief to draw it forth.

"Some poor devil will freeze to death to-night," the first man muttered, as the cold stung his face and nearly took his breath away.

"Yeah. The bastards," the second man cursed against the world.

Their own scrub beards were stiff and brittle.

Their own breaths became watery and froze.

The first man said:

"Old Ormstead always was a cruel bastard, but now he's gone and lost his sense."

"How so?" asked the second lean man. His teeth chattered.

"Leaving them horses out," the first man complained.

Neither of them looked or turned around, but both of them knew that down in the hollow two shaggy old horses were trying to nip grass by an ice-coated pond.

"Ain't they got coats?" the second grumbled.

"Ain't we got coats? What the hell good are coats against this cold?"

"Who the hell fixed this Earth?"[11] the second cursed.

"Go south," the first recommended.

"Yeah, and roast to death."

"No, you don't. I've been there," the first reassured.
"Why didn't you stay there?" asked the second.

The cold made men everywhere begrudge their energies. Everyone was tight, closed-fisted, curt, and surly until he got indoors, where, if it was warm, he thawed out, expanded, and felt jovial and large-hearted.

The newspapers headlined only a fraction of the

number who froze to death. But these figures, accompanied by short descriptions of where and in what conditions the bodies had been found, were enough to make sympathetic people wince, and a few of them even went so far as to condemn the civilization that permitted such things to happen. For to meet death by freezing in a dismal hallway or in some off-street gutter was, they said, a shame and degradation worse than anything that could befall an animal.

Then came the snow.

High above the Earth, it formed, and flurried in wild adventures downward towards the planet's barren surface. The snowflakes were reckless and courageous. Born in space without protection and without support it was their destiny to ride the winds but always fall towards a nameless planetary form.

The white snow was heedless of the terror men would feel where they crystallized in space far above the Earth and made to whirl and fall upon an unknown surface.

The moon glowed in a black sky like a disc of silver.

Where is the planet Earth?

Where do men think they are?

The Young Man Who Tripped[12] On. The Young Man Who Tripped On.

A young man wearing a tailored suit and smart top coat which draped with style over his slender somewhat effeminate body – this young man was tripping down the wintry street swinging his cane jauntily and clicking his heels against the sidewalk. His multicolored muffler, showing above his coat, was more of an ornament than a protection against the cold. His face, still youthful looking, was the kind that girls go crazy about, though already it had lost the apple look that made it irresistible two years ago. It was not so ruddy pink and full. It was a trifle sallow now, with lips still cupid-like but slightly drooping, and under the eyes were the beginnings of bags and dark circles. But his eyes still told the world that there was nothing to do but love the girls. They all fell for him as he tripped down the street swinging his cane jauntily and clicking his heels against the sidewalk.

He had just emerged from an all-night party and breakfast dance. The place, a studio apartment, had been overheated and stuffy, with clouds of smoke and cigarette butts everywhere. Drinks – gin, scotch, and cocktails galore. There were young married couples, and plenty of single members of both sexes. They were as thick and curling as the smoke. Everyone[13] got drunk enough to cut loose and do just what he or she damned well felt like. Their mouths smelt and tasted of alcohol and tobacco. But they could stand a lot, these young people. The laughter was riotous, somewhat forced. There had been a few scraps and ugly sluggish words, but not enough to cramp things. Petting[14] was going on in all the corners and on all the lounges in the swank apartment. Whoever wished to dance, got up, and two others slid into their places on the couches. The music was supplied by a high-priced, studio jazz orchestra. And, when this stopped to rest, the radio was turned on.

Our young man had his eye on the pretty girl-wife of a

people the way home. But their luminosity did not carry far. From the height of a tall building, a skyscraper, if one looked down, feeling dizzy, their feeble glow like pinpoints could still be seen. But a mile from the Earth the lights were lost.

Some few men were still upon the streets – people going home from night clubs and all-night cafes, taxi drivers, stray policemen, waiters, bakers, milkmen, two prostitutes, one, and old timer, the other quite new to the game, she having been broken in only the night before after liquor and dope had had effect on her. These people saw the pure snow falling and felt relief from the intense sterile cold.

One man, hilarious, saluted it and cried, "Hail to you, white snow!"

A few people who remained awake late into the night saw it drifting past their windows and before street lights. If they looked up, the snow seemed to come from nowhere.

One such person, alone, high up in the office of a skyscraper, his the only light to be seen in[19] the high rows of ghost windows, this man cursed the snow because if it fell heavy enough it might spoil the scheme he had been working on all night. Next day he hoped to close a deal with a man who was now sleeping in a little cottage far out in the country. This skyscraper man owned a portion of the Earth which, could he show it off to good advantage, could be sold with large profit to himself. No one wished to see or to buy land in a blizzard. So he cursed the snow.

Another man was reading by the window of his room in a modern apartment hotel. When he looked out and saw snow falling, a swift jet of emotion compelled him to put his book down. Forced to feel what he habitually kept hidden, he began dreaming of a girl whom he had first kissed one snowy night several winters ago, and who had ever since consistently refused to marry him.

One old woman who could not sleep, tired of tossing about, and finally threw back the covers, feebly felt her way from bed, covered herself with a warm kimono,[20] turned on a light and, Bible[21] in hand, let herself down into a large chair drawn close to a cold radiator. When the snow came she was looking out, out somewhere, not seeing the rows of houses across the street. Her mind and feelings were roused now and again by memories of quarrels she had had with the families of her married children. These came to mind quickly, and as suddenly passed away. In the intervals between their coming and going, she pictured and felt that she was still a young girl; and she also felt that death was imminent. She had opened the Bible[22] to the page where it tells of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem.

Two others who saw the snow were sitting in a front parlor near the bay-windows with lights out.

"It is tough to be all alone in the world," the boy said.

The girl did not answer. Her cheek was pressed against his heart. She listened to its beats as it thudded regularly against her. There seemed no cause to stir or speak.

"But now I've got you. We've got each other," he continued in a low voice which revealed love mingled with unformed suffering. He pressed her closer to him, kissed her, and as tenderly[23] as he could stroked her hair. His fingers were rather thick and stubby. His face,

regularly formed, youthful, but somewhat heavy, gave evidence of having had its share of hard knocks. Against his will, his eyes grew moist.

"It's nothing to get sentimental about. But you're the first one ... Gee, it just comes out. When a feller has been alone since he was a kid ... I've told you that my old man and mother died on me. Well ... This world ain't no joke when it comes right down to it. I've seen the toughest of 'em knuckle under when they thought no one was looking, and blubber like kids. Gee, kid, it'll take time for me to get used to it."

He pulled himself together, and felt reassured by the sense of his muscles and the picture of his trim square build.

"Look, Harry," she said softly, snuggling still closer to him, "look, it's snowing."

"How can you see?" he asked, looking down to see her almost enfolded by him.

"With one eye," she answered. They both laughed.

There was a period of silence while they both looked out and saw snowflakes,[24] like tiny white kittens, alight upon the window-sill.

Then, rousing himself, he said:

"Sorry, sweet – I hate to do it, but it's half way across town before I get home. Motormen only run cars between crap games at night. Say, look," he exclaimed, pointing to the snow which was now coming down thick and fast, "if it keeps up this way, they'll have to get the snow plows out. Now, gorgeous ... Up a little bit. Now! There ain't no censor to cut this kiss."

Before daylight, in different places, a number of men-children were born upon the Earth. And there were those who made swift transits, which men call death, into either nothing or into an unimaginable world.

But millions of people did not see the snow until they awoke at various hours the next morning. Already, a white blanket covered everything, and the snow, now in large flakes and faster, was still falling.

After a few days, Chicago, which is midway America, was almost snow-bound.

Chicago is a depression between New York and San Francisco.

Chicago is the greatest city in the world.

The snow fell upon Chicago irrespective of these phrases.

It brought a pure white beauty to the city parks and streets and boulevards. No skyscraper glistened white like it. No drab shanty but what underwent a snow-white transformation.

Shovels had been put to work, and high embankments lined the streets and sidewalks. At first, these piles were almost white, but they soon became soiled and dirty looking. There was too much soot and dirt for pure white snow. During the first phases of the blizzard, the people of Chicago displayed towards each other[25] a good-will and almost joyous friendliness uncommon in the routine life of city dwellers.

Usually these city folk, and, for that matter, most Americans, go down the streets each one shut up behind his own mask as if confined in solitary cells, as if cursed and forbidden to share existence with their fellow-men.

Strange beings! Where do they think they are? Where do they think they are going? What can they possibly tell themselves they are about? What purpose do they think they serve?

Count all of them. Not only Americans, but human beings everywhere: they are all more or less the same. Take the measure[26] of the planet Earth. See it somewhere in a vast universe. Why do its inhabitants act the way they do? Who poisoned them?

See this tiny creature wearing high heels, a skirt, and a fur coat. Where has she come from, where is she going? No one knows. But she is walking down the street rapidly and with some style, going two blocks, and soon to duck into some doorway which will hide her from view. Two blocks is a short distance even when compared to distances which can be known on Earth. It is infinitesimal when compared with transmigration through worlds.

Her face is set, expressionless. She holds[27] herself aloof, body held in and almost rigid. Several people just like her pass by within arm's reach. All are mute. All seem mutually repellent. All are doubtless preserving something from each other. Are they aiming at some great objective? With lips held tight or loose, they look, not at each other, but straight ahead or down – at what?

Where are they going? What are they doing?

Should someone[28] speak to another, the person who spoke would be fearful lest he be rebuffed; and the person spoken to would not like it, and might be offended.

One can be put in prison for speaking to another.

Should one of them be asked the reason, then, if he did not[29] suspect you of being crooked or crazy, he would quickly tell you that his fellow men are not to be trusted, that they are tricky and treacherous, and that if one of them approaches or speaks to you, it is likely to be for his gain and your loss. This information comes from first-hand experience; doubtless the man who gives it knows what he is talking about. But what would be gained? What would be lost? What is gained? What is lost?

Each one feels that he must preserve something worthwhile[30] in the Universe[31] from the attacks of other people who live just where he does and who act just as he does.

Men call such behavior human society in a state of civilization.

Where this lack of ability to be social is most marked – this is indeed a very high state of civilization.

There is much civilization in the great cities of America, including Chicago.

Are human beings born this way? Or do they secretly conspire to make themselves so? Perhaps they are under the illusion that this is the way to become dignified and noble. Perhaps they believe that by acting so they will each gather within eighty years a rich harvest from the Earth experience, and present a radiant face and a great soul when they pass away from their small globe to God.

But while it snowed, some force of Nature thawed men out and allowed them to feel just a little bit that after all they were all in the world together. But there was enough of it to survive these shocks, so that even

conductors had a few good words for the crowds that jammed and jostled in street cars. Automobiles got stuck in ruts of snow. Other cars, instead of honking their heads off with irritation and impatience, honked and sounded for the fun of it, gave the stuck cars boosts, and helped them get started. Men gave their arms to women over crossings. And there was occasional camaraderie[32] gaiety,[33] and laughter, as men and women, all bundled up, trudged and crunched back and forth along the snow-packed sidewalks.

4.

An island rose out of the sea.

From the north it looked formidable and uninhabited. Waves rolled and dashed against a band of rocks, some rounded by the action of the waters, some still jagged and looking as if they[34] had recently broken off and fallen from the towering bleak cliff. Way up, projecting[35] over a wall of solid rock, a huge boulder-stone appeared to be imperfectly balanced and ready to topple over and hurl down to join the ranks of rocks below it. But this huge stone had been perched in this reckless position as far back as the inhabitants of this island knew of. In their language they called it "Lover's Leap."

Mixed in with their legends was the story of how a beautiful island girl had rescued[36] from shipwreck a great prince of the mainland. They had fallen in love. When[37] the prince departed, this girl, left with a broken heart, had leapt[38] off this rock. And ever since it had been called Lover's Leap. And though a few of them ever used it, it did sometimes happen that a young man or young girl dashed away from the town and sought the friendliness of this bleak spot. It was never melancholy which drove them; it was always a deep agony which their stoicism compelled them to face alone with God.

But for the most part, the men and women of this island were too occupied in the struggle and adventure of existence to visit the rock. It was the occasional resting place of screaming white sea birds.

From the south the island stood forth in different aspects. If it were seen against the horizon as the sun-rise illumined and detached it from the sea, it rose up like a legendary castle, and stood isolate and dominant, the sole thing between sky and sea. If it were revealed close at hand as a mist scattered and the sun shone through, it glittered like a gem, its verdant curved hills set in a gold sand beach. But the best time to see it was near noon-time, with the blue sky brilliant and the sea a bottle-green. Then[39] let there be a bracing wind, waves choppy, eager, and a few white clouds moving swiftly overhead. It was then indeed White Island, a miracle of nature, a form so beautiful and wild and free that many on first beholding it doubted that their eyes had seen the real, and suspected it to be the work of instant magic.

On the summit of White Island, high above all else, and where solid rock had once again emerged from under upward sloping green mounds and fields, there was a stone structure. It rested there as if always on the look-out, commanding as it did a full view of the island, the town beneath, and the open sea in all directions. It was nature-worn and ancient. Save for its shape, it

might easily have been taken for a sentinel or lighthouse – in the ordinary sense. It was, in fact, a house of God.

It had been built, so the legends told, by the holy men of this island over a thousand, yea, many thousands of years ago. Its construction showed a workmanship of crude simplicity combined with the art and knowledge of a strangely perfect architecture.

For generations this place, save on rare occasions, had been unused. But there were men in each succeeding generation who learned from their fathers how to replace some worn or weakened part with new and strong materials. It received such watchfulness from year to year that it was now practically the same structure and as solid as when first completed. So it stood, high above all else, a symbol to those people of devotion and of the long chain of their ancestors.

Some distance below it, and towards the north, there was a wood, almost a forest. Here and there clearings had been made, and two roads cut at right angles through it. One clearing had been made into a rough farm, but the others were used for cutting wood. And the roads were mostly used for hauling wood from the forest to the town. But they also served of evenings to reach the foot-paths which wound around this wild part of the island. Young lovers from the town liked to stroll along these paths, sing their folk and love songs, sometimes dance about the forest, and now and again pretend to be engaged in some especially dangerous adventure. The[40] smell of wood was mingled with salt air. And often the wind made weird and fascinating whispers, cries, wailings. One foot-path led to Lover's Leap. Another, to a rocky slope from which the sunset could be seen in all its splendor. All paths abruptly terminated at some surprising spot and there disclosed a start or lovely vista.

Towards the south, there were rolling green hills and fields, places where cattle grazed, and long strips and squares of cultivated farmland. There were springs and brooks, cool and quiet and shaded by green leaves. There were gorgeous flowers, aromatic herbs, and fruit trees. Way down the slope one could see the town, a cluster of red roofs, nestling against a protecting[41] hill. And below and spreading out before the town there was the glittering gold sand beach. And where the beach shelved down, the green sea came. Sometimes it came in gentle laps and ripples. Sometimes it came in great waves and white foam. Then its roar and pounding could be heard and even felt, it seemed, everywhere on White Island.

Behind a high curved arm of land which formed a cove, there was a place where sails and spars were made and where ships were built. In the cove the fishing fleet lay at anchor. Bright colored sails were furled. But everywhere in the harbor there was activity. Men in light swift boats passed to and fro. Sometimes their deep voices carried for miles around. A few men worked on riggings. Some were getting their lines in order. Others mended nets. Some few lolled about and smoked and talked, their bronzed sea-faces shining rivals of the sun.

These were a fishing, sea-faring, farming, religious people.

Some men on the island had, in their day, touched almost every spot on the habitable globe. They had gone to the mainland and shipped as mates and captains.

They returned invariably to White Island, having seen the main ports of America, Europe, Africa and Asia.

It was a long and honored tradition among them that no son must die and be buried on any mainland. Either die at sea and be given a sea burial, or else return and die at home.

There was a tale told of how one of them, having been stricken with fever in a foreign port, and near to die, got up in the quiet night when there was no one to restrain him, and, stumbling down to the water's edge, found a skiff, pushed off in it, rowed with the last strength of a dying man until the harbor lights were dim behind him, and there, just as he failed for the last time, slid his body over the side of the skiff and let it sink into the clean cool water, saying with his last breath as he sank down, "Thy son I am, White Island."

Most often those who had a taste for adventuring in far off seas and countries left home quite young. They saw and experienced all in the world they wished to, and then, just at the age of ripe maturity, they returned to the island, told of what they had seen and learned, and with great joy resumed their places among their people.

Now and again one of them would marry[42] a daughter of the mainland. All of them had the world for love and marriage. As a race they were handsome, tall, and strong, possessed of a natural dignity which carried everything before it. Their fearlessness and stoicism were proverbial. Girls and women everywhere were known to love them madly at first sight. To be from White Island was to have a universal passport.

Nonetheless, and though there was no hard and fast tradition against doing so, they seldom married away from home. Now and again, however, one of them did, and brought his wife to live with him on White Island. They never settled permanently on the mainland. And also, now and again, a son of the mainland married a girl of White Island. In both cases, the mainlanders always came to dwell on the island. Indeed, having once seen and lived on it even for a short while, one could not wish to permanently dwell elsewhere, so beautiful and free and noble was it and its people.

In the language of the White Islanders, the same word which meant "stranger" also meant "guest." Strangers were received as guests: it was their natural privilege to partake of the best to be had. They were welcomed to the food and drink, shelter, work, song, dance, festivals and ceremonies of these people. The island life caught them up in its joyous stream. What was their surprise to see the beauty of the island women! What was their strange joy and sense of liberation to hear the whole island burst forth in soft and robust singing! For this was a custom on White Island: They had songs for all their ways of life, craft-songs, songs of the fields and crops and seasons, songs for the sea and fishing, dance, festival, and songs that were sacred. All on the island, from the very youngest to the oldest, knew these songs. There were times for singing: often at dawn and sunset, always during meals, for marriages, harvests, and events of significance to the whole community. But it was no unusual thing for some man in the fields, or some woman in her home, or some child upon the beach, to start singing because they felt like it, and then to have this song taken up and sung by people all over the island. At such times it was as if the whole place

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was one human organ. Then the song would die away and once again there would be silence save for the sounds of wind and waves.

What was the surprise of visitors to learn how these islanders were governed, and how they shared communal life! All adults on the island worked: it was their joy to be skilled craftsmen, potters, weavers, makers of sails, artists in wood, stone, and with lasting colors which they from ancient times had known how to make. It was said that in one part of the island there was a rich vein of gold; but the islanders kept this knowledge strictly to themselves, and thus it was that nations which had great warships and armies never bothered them. The foreign powers thought the island too small and valueless to be worth even an easy conquest. The islanders themselves never touched the gold. They had no need for it at home; and gold could not buy elsewhere what they had by natural merit on White Island.

The people of White Island governed themselves by a system which seemed very simple, and yet which was in fact quite exacting. When for some reason a new governor was to step forth, the people gathered in and around the house of God upon the summit of their island. Whoever felt compelled by some deep urge within his soul to assume this office, which was at once a privilege and a sacrifice, stepped forth of his own accord and gave his life to guide them. Such a one became at once responsible in his own eyes to God and to his people to be both law-giver and chief instructor in their ancient learning. As he stepped forth, his own conscience had to face the eyes and hearts of those he loved. No one became governor without the ordeal of an inward struggle. No two men had ever been known to step forth at once. Having elected to be governor, and conveyed this fact to the assembled people by fulfilling an ancient ceremony, this man, whoever he was, immediately received the blood and soul allegiance of his people. And so he governed until death or accident or his own inward sense of right and justice caused his removal.

This form of government seemed at first impossible to visitors from the mainland, but they soon became a part of it, and a part of all life on the island. This was their right as guests. They were sternly dealt with if they abused this privilege. Few visitors ever did. The islanders could count on the fingers of one had the number of people during the past hundreds of years who had violated their kindness. These transgressors became so out of place that they were asked to leave the island; conveyance to the mainland was offered them. When they refused to leave, they were then forced to enter the sea and swim in the direction of the mainland. Two of these were said to have perished in the attempt. A third was supposed to have been picked up by a fishing ship and carried to some distant port.

This severe manner of dealing with whoever violated their hospitality was, of course, well known to people on the mainland. But it was not fear of this eventuality which caused visitors to behave as they should. Indeed, if they knew of it, soon after landing they forgot it because of the joy and warmth with which they were received. It was the islanders themselves, their way of living, the largeness, the simplicity, the wisdom of it – it was this which made it almost impossible for anyone[43] to violate their hospitality. To do so was to

violate oneself.

Not all of the men of White Island who went away to foreign places followed the sea. And even those who did, carried an unwritten commission to experience all they could, and to understand the lives of all whom they came in contact with. In this way, White Island kept informed by first-hand experience of conditions everywhere the world over.

Certain of the White Islanders deliberately went abroad to study and acquaint themselves with the types and conditions of existence of different peoples: their governments, customs, commerce, arts, religions,[44] sciences, and philosophies.

One such White Islander, having chosen America as his place of residence and study, grew to like this nation, formed deep friendships there, and came to be a figure of great significance in its culture. He lived at different times and for varying durations in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. And then, having received life and given completely back to life until the age of forty-three, he left America and departed on a long voyage. The people of America never heard of him thereafter. It was assumed that he met with accident. In fact, he returned to White Island, lived long afterwards, and finally, when almost two hundred years of age, peacefully died in the place he loved as he loved no other place on Earth.[45]

Another White Islander, in pursuit of the same purpose, went to live and study in the Orient.

And, from among a number, there was a third – even now his return was expected. The whole island was preparing dance and festival to rejoice and welcome him, by one acclaim, the greatest of White Islanders.

His name was Jend.

He was remembered, twenty years ago, as a youth whose strength and gift of wisdom amazed even them, they themselves a strong wise people. At an early age he had mastered all the crafts on the island. All that could be done with wood and stone he learned, from the felling of trees to the making of simple articles of use, the shaping of spars, the building of ships and houses. He came to understand the soil, the earth: his hand was perfect sowing seed. And to handle a sail and ride the sea were cut for him by nature. He was a striking figure at the helm in a wild high sea: his face, in profile, eagle-like, and, in front view, marvelously cast for man; his body, a muscled symmetry,[46] braced as if it were engaged in victorious contest with wind and waves.

But most extraordinary was the rapidity with which he learned and mastered the knowledge and traditions of his people.

White Island, the legends ran, was so called because the Angels, long ago, had descended and dwelt there. They had been sent down to Earth by God, commissioned to teach and aid the men of Earth to improve their way of living. Everywhere over the broad lands men had departed from universal harmony. And as a result of this their bodies grew sick, and their souls became diseased. The Angels chose this spot from which to direct their ministrations because it was isolate from the mainland and the way between was washed with clean waters.

One day as an Angel strolled[47] along the gold sand beach, absorbed in divine contemplation,[48] he was

suddenly surprised to see a man-child brought in by the waves and deposited as if by hands before his feet. He took this for a sign that this child's destiny was to rule. So he gave the child unto the group of Angels who nursed and reared him. When this child had grown to be a marvelous flower of earth-manhood, he and a young Angel were joined in love; and thus arose the race of White Islanders who sometimes called themselves Children of the Sun.

The Angels remained on Earth long enough to see this well started, to teach them to till the earth, command the sea; to teach them to know themselves and great cosmic mysteries. Here was the source from which sprang the knowledge and the traditions of the White Islanders.

Jend mastered these. From men returned to White Island from far off places he learned diverse languages and customs.

In a time of emergency, young as he was, he even became governor of White Island for a short period.

And then came the compelling urge to see and understand the world. So he set off.

Now, after twenty years, he was expected to return.

The whole island expected him. One of their ships had already been sent to convey him home from the nearest mainland port. And on the island itself everyone[49] was preparing for a three-day continuous day and night ceremony of rejoicing.

Very gay and active in this preparation was Naril, she whom everyone[50] acknowledged to merit Jend's love. Naril, like most of the women of White Island, was a pagan in the gaiety of her body and a priestess in her spirit. Even now she had climbed high to the summit of White Island and stood there, lithe and beautiful in the free winds and bright sun, near the house of God, alternately praying and dancing with joy for the first sight of the great Jend, her Jend, as he came[51] sailing home.

* * * * *

The snow drove in blinding sheets across a prairie. Nowhere could anything be seen save swirls and drives of blinding snow. The glassy road lay across an endless flat-land, a cold white wilderness in which nothing grew or could ever grow. Two people drove a car across a prairie in a blizzard. Four large eyes, straining on the look-out, peered out from behind a frosted wind-shield. A fog-horn should have shrieked for them, for they, driving at great speed, peered out and could see not farther in front of them[52] than where the head-light shot against the whirling blanket of white snow and reflected backwards. The car stood still, rushed on and set the snow a wild dance all around it. The car was metal. On and on the man and woman drove. Four large eyes peered out from behind a frosted wind-shield. On and on they drove across a flat civilization. They were in a car. The car was in snow. The snow was in a closed cold world.

Upward in this Actual.
Octaves beyond the idols
Aspired to in biped picturing.
Not Jacob pillowed on the rock[53]
Could dream *this prospect*
I walk through the Universe

5.

Two men walked in the shadow of a great cathedral.

Its sheer majestic form was as if it had been hewn from a mountain and then carved in a complex harmony of forms exquisitely. Upon blended angles of pure rock a spire rested and pointed upwards.

One of the two men was a thousand years old. His body had the strength of a bull and the litheness of a tiger. It[54] appeared more supple than powerful.

Wide-spaced beneath a broad high brow his eyes shown forth as from a god.

He could look in his brain and see all stars.

Knowledge, life, and power – these in him were perfectly formed and blended in supreme synthesis.

The other man was thirty[55] years old. He wished to know how to be able. His steps were sensitive, as if he felt that he did not merit walking company with the older man. His steps were human.

The older man, using a simple pictorial language, spoke to the understanding of the younger man.

He said:

"Provided that you make effort you will gradually learn what and why you and all men are. But now you must acquire an essential sense of where you and all men are. Men are in the Universe. Without the world-view which arises from this sense of actual location, which is the sense of actual existence, you will not be able to go far.

"Man cannot transcend the Universe and its great laws.

"But man can master all that he need master by first becoming master in power, love, and knowledge of himself.

"Remember."

The Universe above, the Universe below;
The stars above, stars below;
God above, men below.

They had come to the place where they would part company for an unknown duration. They stopped walking.

The elder man then turned to the younger, and, permitting himself to be what he was, he radiated a love so deep and great that the young man, with a sharp pang of instant liberation felt himself surge with force, felt his heart overflowing; instinctively he knelt before the older man with inexpressible veneration.

The maker blessed the young man, bid him rise, and embraced him. Then, without words, each went his way.

The young man strode away rapidly, half in the ecstasy of great devotion, half feeling that his heart had been torn from him.

The old man entered the great cathedral. His vast work on Earth was finished, and the time had come for his return to the Unknown Father, the Prime Source, the great darkness, immovable, more luminous than light.

The young man walked on. The narrow street, quite deserted, up-hill, was half in moonlight, half in shadow. Good people slept peaceably in the low rows of two- and three-story houses.[56]

He finally came to the door of his own house. He

opened it, stepped in, and ascended to his room[57] which was on the top floor. There, seating himself by an open window, he remained active and sleepless.

6.

"Wherever men go, whatever they do, they are in the Universe.

"Are men sleeping, waking, breeding, killing, loving, thinking? They are in the Universe.

"Even if we die we must die in the Universe.

"Wherever men go, whatever they do, they are in the Universe.

"Are men sleeping, waking, breeding, killing, loving, thinking? They are in the Universe.

"Even if we die we must die in the Universe.

"Are men on land, in the air, under the sea, within the earth, on the sea, in deserts, on mountains, at the poles, on ships, in churches, in prisons, in skyscrapers, in huts, in houses, in dentist chairs, on operating tables, in rooms, in beds? Men are in the Universe.

"Are you in a room? Do you think that is outside[58] the Universe? Do you think that the room's ceiling is the upper boundary of the great world? Push back the ceiling and you will see above you and including you a vast space and millions of giant stars. Do you think the room's floor and below you and including you, you will find the great world. Push back your walls. Above, below, and on all sides there is an infinite Universe which inexorably[59] contains you.

"Where are you? What is above, below, on all sides, all around you?

"What reality have your artificial blinds and shutters? One instant of time can expose you to the boundless world.

"You, they, people, I, all of us are in the Universe.

"Be in your grave and you are still in it.

"Be with God and you will find Him in it.

"You cannot escape from the Universe."

7.

"Have you ever been solitary and exposed in a wilderness of unbroken desert?

"Have you ever been solitary and exposed in a wilderness of unbroken ocean?

"Have you ever been solitary and exposed in a wilderness of Earth?

"Are you solitary and exposed in the wilderness of the physical Universe?

"You shrink into your bones.

"No, dear. As I have wished done to me, so I now offer you the open friendliness of one human heart.

"The gift, almost the grace, is over.

"Now step back and for years learn to be powerfully alone."

1928

Race Problems in Modern Society[1]

From whatever angle one views modern society and the various forms of contemporary life, the records of flux and swift changes are everywhere evident. Even the attitude which holds that man's fundamental nature has not altered during the past ten thousand years must admit the changes of forms and of modes which have occurred perhaps without precedent and certainly with an ever increasing rapidity during the life period of the now living generations. If the world is viewed through one or more various formulated interpretations of this period, or if one's estimate rests upon the comparatively inarticulate records of day-to-day experience, the results have the common factor of change. Let it be Spengler's *Decline of the West*,[2] or Keyserling's *The World in the Making*,[3] or Waldo Frank's[4] survey of Western culture, or Joseph Wood Krutch's[5] analysis of the modern temper, and there is found testimony to the effect that the principles of cohesion and crystallization are being rapidly withdrawn from the materials of old forms, with a consequent break-up of these forms, a setting free of these materials, with the possibility that the principles of cohesion and crystallization will recombine the stuff of life and make new forms.

Bertand Russel[6] has indicated the revisions of mental outlook made necessary by recent scientific and philosophic thinking. James Harvey Robinson[7] has shown why we *must* create new forms of thinking and bring about a transformation of attitude. From a different angle, the social science of the world-wide struggle between the owning and the laboring classes, clearly summarized by Scott Nering,[8] comes to much the same conclusion, in so far as the factor of change is concerned. Again, the records of psychology bear striking witness of this factor. For though, on the one hand, there are in vogue a number of dogmas and pat formulas which assume a constant set of simple factors, and allow, say, Leonardo da Vinci[9] to be seen at a glance, and which offer ready explanations of why, say, George Santayana[10] writes, on the other hand, the practice of psychology discloses a surprising and bewildering flux and chaos both in the individual and in the collective psyche. And in general, what is taking place in most fields of life is sufficiently radical for Baker Brownell[11] to see it resulting in a new human universe.

Be it shifting forms of relation between men and women, or the revolt of youth everywhere, or the widespread emergence and concurrence of the machine, mechanical techniques, and civilized instinctive life-rhythms, or the phenomenon of the radio, or the possibility of super-power, or the "rising tide of color" and the change of status among races, or the threat of another war, or the menace of opium, or the counter problems of degeneracy and eugenics, or the effects of mal-education and the efforts to re-educate, or the promise of a general renaissance of art and literature, or the decay of religions and the rising of new teachings and new prophets, or the forming of what appear to be new psychological types of human beings, or the increasing beliefs in vast earth-disturbances and changes – in short, wherever one is placed, and whatever aspect of the world condition he may focus on or experience, he is likely to be aware of

the movement of forces that have at least in part broken from old forms and that have not yet achieved stability in new forms.

This is true, it seems, of the human world in general. Modern society is in flux. The psychology of the main peoples is the psychology of a transitional period.

And at the same time – paradoxical enough – it is also evident that there are certain forms of modern society which, at least for the time being, are not only not changing in the above sense, but are growing and strengthening as they now exist. I refer to the established economic and political systems – and their immediate by-products – of Western[12] nations, especially of the English speaking nations. For despite the disorganized[13] aspect of the economic situation as a consequence of the War, and as described by Keynes,[14] it is, I think, the agreed opinion of students of Western economic and political institutions, particularly of those which obtain in the United States, that these systems, especially the philosophy which has been grown up about them, have become stronger and more organized within the past thirty years. Their development during this period in the United States, for example, is suggested by these general facts: that this country now turns out, and is increasingly turning out, a surplus of both money and products; that it is sending in larger quantities this surplus into foreign fields; that since 1900 it has become a lending, instead of a borrowing nation; that Henry Ford has become a philosopher. One student of economic conditions states that within ten years all the main European boards of directors will be dominated and controlled by Americans. Thus, irrespective of all the changes suggested[15] at the beginning of this article, irrespective of[16] the example and influence of the Soviet Union from without, and of radical and liberal labor and political forces from within, the World War notwithstanding, and despite the protests and revolts of foreign peoples, the business, political, legal, and military organizations and expansion of Western nations have advanced. At the present time they at least appear to be more solid and crystallized than ever. And they are growing stronger. So true is this, and so dominant an influence do these systems exercise on all the other forms of life, that, should one view the modern Western nations from within the business and political worlds – and their outgrowths – one might well conclude that there were no radical changes occurring[17] anywhere, or that at most these changes were taking place only in minor social forms and concerned only an uninfluential minority.

For the growth of business and of business-technique, and the increased support that the political and legal systems give to the dominant economic practices, this growth and this increase have parallels in all the forms of life that are at all connected with these systems. Thus, wealth, and such power as wealth gives, are increasingly considered valuable: more and more men are devoting themselves to their attainment, seeing in them the end of life and the highest goal that life offers. The big businessman is the modern hero. The average man, that is, the average businessman, is already the ideal, even the idol, of millions of people; and there is a

Countée Cullen (1903–1946)

When *The New Negro* appeared in 1925, Countée Cullen was arguably the brightest young talent featured in this groundbreaking anthology, as well as the ideal figuration of the New Negro in the eyes of its editor, Alain Locke. Adept in classical poetic forms and resistant to the label of "racial poet," Cullen was a prototype of intellectual rigor and artistic success, earning accolades and poetry prizes at a dizzying rate. Although his decline was not as rapid as his meteoric ascendance, the fact that, within 10 years, Cullen was teaching secondary-school English and struggling to publish is nonetheless striking. To an extent, his plight encapsulates the struggles of New Negro Renaissance writers in the Great Depression, even as his phenomenal output in the 1920s turned out to be a lasting monument in American poetry.

James Weldon Johnson once wrote of Countée Cullen's youth, of which the poet was rather reticent: "There is not much to say about these earlier years of Cullen – unless he himself should say it." Cullen was born in 1903 to Elizabeth Lucas and John (Henry) Porter in Louisville, Kentucky, but evidently was raised in New York City by an older woman, Amanda Porter, possibly his grandmother. He lived with Porter in New York, and went by the name Countée Porter until her death in 1918. At this point, the Reverend Frederick Cullen and his wife, Carolyn, informally adopted the teenage boy, who then became Countée P. Cullen. Reverend Cullen was the pastor of Harlem's Salem Methodist Episcopal church, and well-connected in African American civic and political life. Countée Cullen formed a close relationship with his adoptive father, although he experienced tension between the stern religiosity of his home and his own more "pagan" inclinations.

Cullen attended the prestigious DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx, New York City, where his intellectual ability and talent for writing became quickly apparent. He edited the school's newspaper, was assistant editor of its literary magazine, and began receiving notice for his own poems. Upon graduating in 1922 he enrolled at New York University, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa three years later. During his time at NYU, he wrote the majority of the poems for his first three volumes of poetry – *Color* (1925), *Copper Sun* (1927), and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927). Starting in 1923, his poems placed in the nationwide Witter Bynner Poetry Contest for undergraduates; "The Ballad of the Brown Girl" won second place in 1923, and "Spirit Birth" received first honorable mention in 1924.

To call 1925, the year of Locke's *New Negro*, a banner year for Cullen would be an understatement. In addition to graduating from NYU, enrolling in a master's program at Harvard, and publishing *Color*, he won first prize in the Witter Bynner Poetry Contest, the John Reed Memorial Prize from *Poetry* magazine, the Spingarn Medal from *The Crisis*, and second prizes from *Opportunity* and *Palm*. He graduated from Harvard the following year with an MA in English and

French, and began working for Charles S. Johnson as an assistant editor at *Opportunity*, where his column "The Dark Tower" also regularly appeared. In 1927 he published *Caroling Dusk*, an influential anthology of African American poetry. To crown his halcyon days, he became the second African American to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship, in 1928, and married W.E.B. Du Bois's daughter, Nina Yolande, at Reverend Cullen's church in the most lavish wedding Harlem had ever seen. The marriage was short-lived. When Cullen left for France on his Guggenheim Fellowship with his close friend Harold Jackman, his wife stayed stateside. By 1930 they were divorced. Cullen would remarry a decade later.

Meanwhile, Cullen's next volume, *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929), was technically ambitious but widely panned. He attempted a novel in 1932, *One Way to Heaven*, but it likewise was faulted as uneven and unrealized. In need of money, Cullen began in 1934 teaching English and French at New York City's Frederick Douglass Junior High School (where he happened to teach James Baldwin). He translated Euripides under the title *The Medea and Some Poems* (1934), and later wrote a pair of children's story collections, *The Lost Zoo* (1940) and *My Lives and How I Lost Them* (1942). None of these endeavors reignited his literary career. Before his sudden death in 1946, which was brought about by high blood pressure and uremic poisoning, he was collaborating with Arna Bontemps in adapting the latter's 1931 novel, *God Sends Sunday*, for the stage as the musical *St. Louis Woman*. A year after Cullen's death, *On These I Stand: An Anthology of the Best Poems of Countee Cullen* was released.

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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.

To John Keats, Poet. At Spring Time*

(For Carl Van Vechten)[1]

From Color

I cannot hold my peace, John Keats;
There never was a spring like this;
It is an echo, that repeats
My last year's song and next year's bliss.
I know, in spite of all men say
Of Beauty, you have felt her most.
Yea, even in your grave her way
Is laid. Poor, troubled, lyric ghost,
Spring never was so fair and dear
As Beauty makes her seem this year.

I cannot hold my peace, John Keats,
I am as helpless in the toil
Of Spring as any lamb that bleats
To feel the solid earth recoil
Beneath his puny legs. Spring beats
Her tocsin[2] call to those who love her,
And lo! the dogwood petals cover
Her breast with drifts of snow, and sleek
White gulls fly screaming to her, and hover
About her shoulders, and kiss her cheek,
While white and purple lilacs muster
A strength that bears them to a cluster
Of color and odor; for her sake
All things that slept are now awake.

And you and I, shall we lie still,
John Keats, while Beauty summons us?
Somehow I feel your sensitive will
Is pulsing up some tremulous
Sap road of a maple tree, whose leaves
Grow music as they grow, since your
Wild voice is in them, a harp that grieves
For life that opens death's dark door.
Though dust, your fingers still can push
The Vision Splendid to a birth,
Though now they work as grass in the hush
Of the night on the broad sweet page of the earth.

"John Keats is dead," they say, but I
Who hear your full insistent cry
In bud and blossom, leaf and tree,
Know John Keats still writes poetry.
And while my head is earthward bowed
To read new life sprung from your shroud,
Folks seeing me must think it strange
That merely spring should so derange
My mind. They do not know that you,

John Keats, keep revel with me, too.

I Have a Rendezvous with Life

From Color

I have a rendezvous with Life
In days I hope will come
Ere youth has sped and strength of mind,
Ere voices sweet grow dumb;
I have a rendezvous with Life
When Spring's first heralds hum.
It may be I shall greet her soon;
Shall riot at her behest.
It may be I shall seek in vain
The place of her downy breast.
Yet I would keep this rendezvous
And deem all hardships sweet,
If at the end of the long white way,
There Life and I should meet.
Sure some would cry it better far
To crown their days with sleep,
Than face the road, the wind and rain
To heed the calling deep.
Tho' wet nor blow nor space I fear,
Yet fear I deeply too,
Lest Death should greet and claim me ere
I keep Life's rendezvous.

1925

Four Epitaphs

From Caroling Dusk

For My Grandmother 1

This lovely flower fell to seed;
Work gently sun and rain;
She held it as her dying creed
That she would grow again.

For John Keats, Apostle of Beauty 2

Not writ in water nor in mist,
Sweet lyric throat, thy name.
Thy singing lips that cold death kissed
Have seared his own with flame.

For Paul Laurence Dunbar 3

Born of the sorrowful of heart
Mirth was a crown upon his head;
Pride kept his twisted lips apart
In jest, to hide a heart that bled.

For a Lady I Know 4

She even thinks that up in heaven
  Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
  To do celestial chores.

1927

Millennial

(To John Haynes Holmes)[1]

From Copper Sun

Once in a thousand years a call may ring
Divested so of every cumbering lie,
A man espousing it may fight and sing,
And count it but a little thing to die;
Once in a thousand years a star may come,
Six-pointed, tipped with such an astral flow,
Its singing sisters must bow hushed in dumb,
Half-mutinous, yet half-adoring show.

Once in as many years a man may rise
So cosmopolitan of thought and speech,
Humanity reflected in his eyes,
His heart a haven every race can reach,
That doubters shall receive a mortal thrust,
And own, "This man proves flesh exalts its dust."

At the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem

From Copper Sun

Of all the grandeur that was Solomon's
High testament of Israel's far pride,
Shedding its lustre like a sun of suns,
This feeble flicker only has not died.
This wall alone reminds a vanquished race,
This brief remembrance still retained in stone,
That sure foundations guard their given place
To rehabilitate the overthrown.

So in the battered temple of the heart,
That grief is harder on than time on stone,
Though three sides crumble, one will stand apart,
Where thought may mourn its past, remembrance groan,
And hands now bare that once were rich with rings
Rebuild upon the ancient site of things.

From the Dark Tower

(To Charles S. Johnson)[1]

From Copper Sun

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made eternally to weep.

The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;

So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

Uncle Jim

From Copper Sun

"White folks is white," says uncle Jim;
"A platitude," I sneer;
And then I tell him so is milk,
And the froth upon his beer.

His heart walled up with bitterness,
He smokes his pungent pipe,
And nods at me as if to say,
"Young fool, you'll soon be ripe!"

I have a friend who eats his heart
Always with grief of mine,
Who drinks my joy as tipplers drain
Deep goblets filled with wine.

I wonder why here at his side,
Face-in-the-grass with him,
My mind should stray the Grecian urn
To muse on uncle Jim.

1927

To Certain Critics

From The Black Christ and Other Poems

Then call me traitor if you must,
Shout treason and default!
Say I betray a sacred trust
Aching beyond this vault.
I'll bear your censure as your praise,
For never shall the clan
Confine my singing to its ways
Beyond the ways of man.

No racial option narrows grief,
Pain is no patriot,
And sorrow plaits her dismal leaf
For all as lief as not.
With blind sheep groping every hill,
Searching an oriflamme,[1]
How shall the shepherd heart then thrill
To only the darker lamb?

1929

Countée Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel," "Tableau," "Incident," "Heritage," "To John Keats, Poet. At Springtime," and "I Have a Rendezvous with Life," from *My Soul's High Song*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Copyrights held by Amistad Research Center, Tulane University. Administered by Thompson and Thompson, Brooklyn, NY 11202. Used by permission. Countée Cullen, "Four Epitaphs: "'For My Grandmother,' 'For John Keats, Apostle of Beauty,' 'For Paul Laurence Dunbar,' and 'For a Lady I Know,'" from *My Soul's High Song*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Copyrights held by Amistad Research Center, Tulane University. Administered by

Notes

Yet Do I Marvel

[1] *Tantalus* a figure in Greek mythology eternally deprived of food and water in Tartarus, an underworld abyss for sinners.

[2] *Sisyphus* a king in Greek mythology punished for deceitfulness, forced to roll a boulder uphill in perpetuity.

Tableau

[1] Donald Duff was Cullen's good friend, if not his lover, in the early 1920s; he died in 1942.

Incident

[1] Eric Walrond (1898–1966), British Guiana-born writer and journalist of the New Negro Renaissance.

Heritage

[1] Harold Jackman (1901–1961), African American actor, writer, and model during the New Negro Renaissance; also Cullen's best friend, if not his lover.

[2] *corollas* collective petals of a flower.

[*] Spring 1924.

To John Keats, Poet. At Spring Time

[1] Carl Van Vechten (1880–1964), American photographer, writer, and patron of the New Negro Renaissance.

[2] *tocsin* alarm bell.

Millennial

[1] John Haynes Holmes (1879–1964), American Unitarian minister and one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

From the Dark Tower

[1] Charles Johnson (1893–1956), African American sociologist and academic administrator.

To Certain Critics

[1] *oriflamme* a banner or symbol used to inspire a rally.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

"The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," the landmark essay Langston Hughes published in the June 23, 1926, issue of *The Nation*, decries the tendency of some African Americans (in particular, Countée Cullen, rumor has it) to "pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible." Written as a rejoinder to George S. Schuyler's iconoclastic essay "The Negro-Art Hokum," which appeared in *The Nation* exactly one week earlier, Hughes argues that passionate commitment to one's own racial world is needed: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame ... We know we are beautiful. And ugly too." Hughes's entire oeuvre, spanning the New Negro Renaissance in the 1920s to the dawn of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s, served this dictum. Poet and playwright, activist and cosmopolitan, scholar of not just literature but music as well, Hughes produced an immense and varied body of work, and credibly laid claim to being one of the great poet laureates of his time.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. His parents, James Nathaniel Hughes and Caroline Mercer Langston, separated shortly afterward. His father moved to Mexico, and Langston grew up in poverty with his mother in Lawrence, Kansas, and Lincoln, Illinois. Beyond his parents, the boy descended from proud stock. He carried the name of his great-uncle, John Mercer Langston, a Virginia congressman and founding Dean of the Law School of Howard University. His grandmother, Mary Langston, had lost her first husband in John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and her second husband had been a prominent figure in Reconstruction-era Kansas politics before racial hysteria forced him out.

Despite this remarkable ancestry, Hughes was a lonely child contending with his current surroundings. Books provided a refuge. After attending high school in Cleveland, Ohio, where his mother had remarried, he spent a year living with his father in Mexico. Hughes beseeched his father to help fund his tuition to attend Columbia University. Ultimately his father agreed, but levied the condition that he study engineering. In 1921 he matriculated at Columbia, but left after a year. He found Harlem and poetry far more compelling, as evidenced in the publication of his first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," in the June 1921 issue of *The Crisis*. Jessie Fauset, the magazine's editor, quickly recognized Hughes's extraordinary talent. While he continued to publish in *The Crisis* throughout the early 1920s, Hughes's literary career gained steam when "The Weary Blues" won first prize in the *Opportunity* magazine poetry contest in 1925. With the assistance of Carl Van Vechten, Hughes published his first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, with Knopf the following year.

In the meantime, Hughes had worked a variety of odd jobs, and started to develop a cosmopolitan streak. He

sailed to Africa in 1923 working aboard a merchant steamer, and went to Europe the same way the following year. Jumping ship, he spent several months in Paris, working in a nightclub kitchen. After *The Weary Blues* came out, Hughes returned to school, enrolling at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and graduating in 1929. He also released his second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), which was widely deprecated for its earthiness and eroticism. The book met with much the same response that greeted one of its poetic antecedents and influences, Walt Whitman's 1855 book *Leaves of Grass*. Hughes acknowledged the influence of Whitman and Carl Sandberg, the latter of whom he regarded as "my guiding star." He also much admired Claude McKay for his cosmopolitan confidence and racial pride, and both McKay and Paul Laurence Dunbar inspired Hughes's use of traditional and dialectically inflected forms. What Hughes did more than any of his predecessors, however, was marry traditional poetic forms to African American music, such as jazz and the blues.

Alain Locke precipitated a major event in Hughes's career when he introduced him to Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy philanthropist, in 1927. Taking Hughes under her wing, she showered him with gifts and advice. She also supervised his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Drawing on Hughes's childhood, the novel depicts the development of Sandy, an African American boy in a small Kansas community. Not long after its release, Hughes fell out with "Godmother" Mason (and also with Zora Neale Hurston, another of her protégés). Devastated, Hughes spent several weeks recuperating in Haiti in 1931.

Hence began a new period of leftist activism and international travel. Hughes published pieces in the Communist *New Masses*, toured the South giving poetry readings, and, in 1932, embarked on a trip to the Soviet Union to participate in a film about American race relations. Although the film was never made, he was able to travel extensively throughout the Soviet Union and also China and Japan. As he would recount in *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956), these travels were a time of both great growth and ambivalence. Returning to the States in 1933, Hughes spent a year in Carmel, California, and wrote his first collection of stories, the sardonic *The Ways of White Folks* (1934). He traveled again to Europe in 1937, spending several months in the besieged city of Madrid; most of his energies in the late 1930s were focused on the theater, however. In 1935, his play *Mulatto* was produced on Broadway, and would set the mark for the longest-running play by an African American until Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which debuted on Broadway in 1959 and, coincidentally, whose title she derived from "Harlem," a poem in Hughes's 1951 book *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

In the decades during and shortly after World War II, Hughes, like some fellow African American writers, began to move toward the political center and, in their writings, downplay any official participation in socialist or Communist organizations. He published his first autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), which recounted his early life and his days during the New Negro Renaissance, and wrote a weekly column for *The Chicago Defender*. A recurring character in that column was Jesse B. Semple, or Simple, a colorful

Harlemite who would speak his mind on race-related matters to a bland narrator in the neighborhood bar. An immensely popular creation, Simple starred in five collections that Hughes would publish, starting with *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950). Considering the scope and influence of his projects, Hughes ironically achieved some measure of financial security in 1947 from writing the lyrics for a Broadway musical, *Street Scene*. He purchased a house in Harlem, where he would live for the rest of his life.

Well into the 1960s, Hughes continued to be prolific and artistically vigorous, even as other poets of the New Negro Renaissance, such as Countée Cullen and Claude McKay, saw their careers wane. *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, which applied bebop and the iconography of montage, attested to Hughes's rare gift of staying relevant even in changing times. Taking pride in his versatility, Hughes took on a stunning array of projects – children's books on jazz, Africa, and the West Indies; plays, musicals, libretti; scholarly works about Harlem and the history of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; collections of stories and columns; anthologies and autobiography.

The final two decades of Hughes's life were nothing less than eventful. In 1953, Senator Joseph McCarthy subpoenaed Hughes before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, inquiring into his alleged affiliations with the Communist Party. Like fellow African American writers with possible former associations, Hughes's humiliation marked the height of US anxieties during the Cold War. Three years later, in *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes would respond with a measured and quite graceful account of those days of congressional scrutiny. Moreover, in 1962 he published a book-length poem, *Ask Your Mama*. Four years later, the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, lauded Hughes as a literary titan. Soon his health took a turn for the worse. The following year, in 1967, living in New York City, he died of complications from prostate cancer.

Further reading

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The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain[1]

One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America – this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But let us look at the immediate background of this young poet. His family is of what I suppose one would call the Negro middle class: people who are by no means rich yet never uncomfortable nor hungry – smug, contented, respectable folk, members of the Baptist church. The father goes to work every morning. He is a chief steward at a large white club. The mother sometimes does fancy sewing or supervises parties for the rich families of the town. The children go to a

mixed school. In the home they read white papers and magazines. And the mother often says "Don't be like niggers" when the children are bad. A frequent phrase from the father is, "Look how well a white man does things." And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money. The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds. This young poet's home is, I believe, a fairly typical home of the colored middle class. One sees immediately how difficult it would be for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns.

For racial culture the home of a self-styled "high-class" Negro has nothing better to offer. Instead there will perhaps be more aping of things white than in a less cultured or less wealthy home. The father is perhaps a doctor, lawyer, landowner, or politician. The mother may be a social worker, or a teacher, or she may do nothing and have a maid. Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attend a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line. In the North they go to white theatres and white movies. And in the South they have at least two cars and a house "like white folks." Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven. A very high mountain indeed for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people.

But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority – may the Lord be praised! The people who have their hip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him – if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

Certainly there is, for the American Negro artist who can escape the restrictions the more advanced among his own group would put upon him, a great field of unused material ready for his art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch

on the relations between Negroes and whites in this country with their innumerable overtones and undertones surely, and especially for literature and the drama, there is an inexhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears. But let us look again at the mountain.

A prominent Negro clubwoman in Philadelphia paid eleven dollars to hear Raquel Meller[2] sing Andalusian popular songs. But she told me a few weeks before she would not think of going to hear "that woman," Clara Smith,[3] a great black artist, sing Negro folksongs. And many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks' hymnbooks are much to be preferred. "We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don't believe in 'shouting.' Let's be dull like the Nordics," they say, in effect.

The road for the serious black artist, then, who would produce a racial art is most certainly rocky and the mountain is high. Until recently he received almost no encouragement for his work from either white or colored people. The fine novels of Chesnutt go out of print with neither race noticing their passing. The quaint charm and humor of Dunbar's dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a sideshow freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!).

The present vogue in things Negro, although it may do as much harm as good for the budding colored artist, has at least done this: it has brought him forcibly to the attention of his own people among whom for so long, unless the other race had noticed him beforehand, he was a prophet with little honor. I understand that Charles Gilpin acted for years in Negro theatres without any special acclaim from his own, but when Broadway gave him eight curtain calls, Negroes, too, began to beat a tin pan in his honor. I know a young colored writer, a manual worker by day, who had been writing well for the colored magazines for some years, but it was not until he recently broke into the white publications and his first book was accepted by a prominent New York publisher that the "best" Negroes in his city took the trouble to discover that he lived there. Then almost immediately they decided to give a grand dinner for him. But the society ladies were careful to whisper to his mother that perhaps she'd better not come. They were not sure she would have an evening gown.

The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. "Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are," say the Negroes. "Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you," say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*. The colored people did not praise it. The white people did not buy it. Most of the colored people who did read *Cane* hate it. They are afraid of it. Although the critics gave it good reviews the public remained indifferent. Yet (excepting the work of Du Bois) *Cane* contains the

finest prose written by a Negro in America. And like the singing of Robeson, it is truly racial.

But in spite of the Nordicized Negro intelligentsia and the desires of some white editors we have an honest American Negro literature already with us. Now I await the rise of the Negro theatre. Our folk music, having achieved world-wide fame, offers itself to the genius of the great individual American composer who is to come. And within the next decade I expect to see the work of a growing school of colored artists who paint and model the beauty of dark faces and create with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world. And the Negro dancers who will dance like flame and the singers who will continue to carry our songs to all who listen – they will be with us in even greater numbers tomorrow.

Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know. In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems and yet after every reading I answer questions like these from my own people: Do you think Negroes should always write about Negroes? I wish you wouldn't read some of your poems to white folks. How do you find anything interesting in a place like a cabaret? Why do you write about black people? You aren't black. What makes you do so many jazz poems?

But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul – the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile. Yet the Philadelphia club-woman is ashamed to say that her race created it and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations – likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss[4] portraits of Negroes because they are "too Negro." She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody. She wants the artist to flatter her, to make the white world believe that all Negroes are as smug and as near white in soul as she wants to be. But, to my mind, it is the duty of the younger Negro artist, if he accepts any duties at all from outsiders, to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white," hidden in the aspirations of his people, to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro – and beautiful!"

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet," as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features. An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose.

Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectual until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of

Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas[5] drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

1926

The Weary Blues

From 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.

Jazzonia

From The Weary Blues

Oh, silver tree!

Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve's eyes
In the first garden
Just a bit too bold?
Was Cleopatra gorgeous
In a gown of gold?

Oh, shining tree!
Oh, silver rivers of the soul!

In a whirling cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.

Harlem Night Club

From The Weary Blues

Sleek black boys in a cabaret.
Jazz-band, jazz-band –
Play, plAY, PLAY!
Tomorrow. ... who knows?
Dance today!

White girls' eyes
Call gay black boys.

Black boys' lips
Grin jungle joys.

Dark brown girls
In blond men's arms.
Jazz-band, jazz-band –
Sing Eve's charms!

White ones, brown ones,
What do you know
About tomorrow
Where all paths go?

Jazz-boys, jazz-boys –
Play, plAY, PLAY!
Tomorrow. ... is darkness.
Joy today!

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(To W.E.B. Du Bois)

From The Weary Blues

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.

Danse Africaine

From The Weary Blues

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
    Low ... slow
    Slow ... low –
    Stirs your blood.
        Dance!
A night-veiled girl
    Whirls softly into a
    Circle of light.
    Whirls softly ... slowly,
Like a wisp of smoke around the fire –
    And the tom-toms beat,
    And the tom-toms beat,
And the low beating of the tom-toms
    Stirs your blood.

Epilogue

From The Weary Blues

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 sit 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.

1926

Dream Boogie

From Montage of a Dream Deferred

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a –

You think
It's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a –

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!

Y-e-a-h!

Juke Box Love Song

From Montage of a Dream Deferred

I could take the Harlem night
and wrap around you,
Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down.
Take Harlem's heartbeat,
Make a drumbeat,
Put it on a record, let it whirl,
And while we listen to it play,
Dance with you till day –
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.

Ballad of the Landlord

From Montage of a Dream Deferred

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you

Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on – till you get through.

1951

Notes

[1] First published in *The Nation* (June 1926).

[2] *Raquel Meller* born Francisca Marqués López (1888–1962), a Spanish vaudeville singer of international renown.

[3] Clara Smith (1894–1935), an American blues singer.

[4] Winold Reiss (1886–1953), German American artist, graphic designer, and illustrator.

[5] Aaron Douglas (1898–1979), African American artist and painter.