Classic Poetry Series

Claude McKay

- poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Claude McKay (15 September 1889 – 22 May 1948)

Claude McKay was a Jamaican-American writer and poet. He was a seminal figure in the Harlem Renaissance and wrote three novels: Home to Harlem (1928), a best-seller which won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature, Banjo (1929), and Banana Bottom (1933). McKay also authored a collection of short stories, Gingertown (1932), and two autobiographical books, A Long Way from Home (1937) and Harlem: Negro Metropolis (1940). His book of poetry, Harlem Shadows (1922) was among the first books published during the Harlem Renaissance. His book of collected poems, Selected Poems (1953), was published posthumously.

McKay was attracted to communism in his early life, but he was never a member of the Communist Party.

Early life

Claude McKay was born Festus Claudius McKay in Nairne Castle near James Hill,[2] Clarendon, Jamaica. He was the youngest child of Thomas Francis McKay and Hannah Ann Elizabeth Edwards, well-to-do peasant farmers who had enough property to qualify to vote. Thomas McKay's father was of Ashanti descent, and Claude recounted that his father would share stories of Ashanti customs with him. Claude's mother was of Malagasy ancestry.

At four years old, McKay started basic school at the church that he attended. At age seven, he was sent to live with his oldest brother, a school teacher, to be given the best education available. While living with his oldest brother, Uriah Theodore, McKay became an avid reader of classical and British literature, as well as philosophy, science and theology. He started writing poetry at the age of 10.

In 1906, McKay became an apprentice to a carriage and cabinet maker known as Old Brenga. He stayed in his apprenticeship for about two years. During that time, in 1907, McKay met a man named Walter Jekyll who became a mentor and an inspiration for him. He encouraged McKay to concentrate on his writing. Jekyll convinced McKay to write in his native dialect and even later set some of McKay's verses to music. Jekyll helped McKay publish his first book of poems, Songs of Jamaica, in 1912. These were the first poems published in Jamaican Patois (dialect of mainly English words and African structure). McKay's next volume, Constab Ballads, came out in the same year and was based on his experience as a police officer in Jamaica.

Career in the United States

McKay left for the U.S. in 1912 to attend Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, but did not become an American citizen until 1940. McKay was shocked by the intense racism he encountered when he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, where many public facilities were segregated, which inspired him to write more poetry. At Tuskegee, he disliked the "semi-military, machinelike existence there" and quickly left to study at Kansas State University. At Kansas State, he read W. E. B. Du Bois' Souls of Black Folk, which had a major impact on him and stirred his political involvement. But despite superior academic performance, in 1914 McKay decided he did not want to be an agronomist and moved to New York, where he married his childhood sweetheart Eulalie Lewars.

McKay published two poems in 1917 in Seven Arts under the Alias Eli Edwards while working as a waiter on the railways. In 1919 he met Crystal and Max Eastman, who produced The Liberator (where McKay would serve as Co-Executive Editor until 1922). It was here that he published one of his most famous poems, "If We Must Die", during the "Red Summer", a period of intense racial violence against black people in Anglo-American societies. This was among a page of his poetry which signaled the commencement of his life as a professional writer.

McKay became involved with a group of black radicals who were unhappy both with Marcus Garvey's nationalism and the middle class reformist NAACP. These included other Caribbean writers such as Cyril Briggs, Richard B. Moore and Wilfrid Domingo. They fought for black self-determination within the context of socialist revolution. Together they founded the semi-secret revolutionary organization, the African Blood Brotherhood. Hubert Harrison had asked McKay to write for Garvey's Negro World, but only a few copies of the paper have survived from this period, none of which contain any articles by McKay. McKay soon left for London, England.

McKay in London

McKay arrived in London in autumn 1919.He used to frequent a soldier's club in Drury Lane and the International Socialist Club in Shoreditch. A militant atheist, he also joined the Rationalist Press Association. It was during this period that McKay's commitment to socialism deepened and he read Marx assiduously. At the International Socialist Club, McKay met Shapurji Saklatvala, A. J. Cook, Guy Aldred, Jack Tanner, Arthur McManus, William Gallacher, Sylvia Pankhurst and George Lansbury. He was soon invited to write for the Workers' Dreadnought.

In 1920, the Daily Herald, a socialist paper published by George Lansbury, included a racist article written by E. D. Morel. Entitled "Black Scourge in Europe: Sexual Horror Let Loose by France on the Rhine", it insinuated gross hypersexuality on black people in general, but Lansbury refused to print McKay's response. This response then appeared in Workers' Dreadnought. This started his regular involvement with Workers' Dreadnought and the Workers' Socialist Federation, a Council Communist group active in the East End and which had a majority of women involved in it at all levels of the organization. He became a paid journalist for the paper; some people claim he was the first black journalist in Britain. He attended the Communist Unity Conference which established the Communist Party of Great Britain. At this time he also had some of his poetry published in the Cambridge Magazine, edited by C. K. Ogden.

When Sylvia Pankhurst was arrested under the Defence of the Realm Act for publishing articles "calculated and likely to cause sedition amongst His Majesty's forces, in the Navy, and among the civilian population," McKay had his rooms searched. He is likely to have been the author of "The Yellow peril and the Dockers" attributed to Leon Lopez, which was one of the articles cited by the government in its case against the Workers' Dreadnought.

From November 1922 to June 1923, he visited the Soviet Union and attended the fourth congress of the Communist International in Moscow. There, he met many leading Bolsheviks including Leon Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek. He wrote the manuscripts for a book of essays called Negroes in

America and three stories published as Lynching in America, both of which appeared first in Russian and were re-translated into English. McKay's original English manuscripts have been lost.

Home to Harlem and Other Works

In 1928, McKay published his most famous novel, Home to Harlem, which won the Harmon Gold Award for Literature. The novel, which depicted street life in Harlem, would have a major impact on black intellectuals in the Caribbean, West Africa, and Europe.

McKay's novel gained a substantial readership, especially with people who wanted to know more about the intense, and sometimes shocking, details of Harlem nightlife. His novel was an attempt to capture the energetic and intense spirit of the "uprooted black vagabonds." Home to Harlem was a work in which McKay looked among the common people for a distinctive black identity.

Despite this, the book drew fire from one of McKay's heroes, W. E. B. Du Bois. To Du Bois, the novel's frank depictions of sexuality and the nightlife in Harlem only appealed to the "prurient demand[s]" of white readers and publishers looking for portrayals of black "licentiousness." As Du Bois said, "Home to Harlem ... for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath." Modern critics now dismiss this criticism from Du Bois, who was more concerned with using art as propaganda in the struggle for African American political liberation than in the value of art to showcase the truth about the lives of black people.

McKay's other novels were Banjo (1930), and Banana Bottom (1933). Banjo was noted in part for its portrayal of how the French treated people from its sub-Saharan African colonies, as the novel centers on black seamen in Marseilles. Césaire stated that in Banjo, blacks were described truthfully and without "inhibition or prejudice". Banana Bottom was McKay's third novel. The book is said to follow a principal theme of a black individual in search of establishing a cultural identity in a white society. The book discusses underlying racial and cultural tensions.

McKay also authored a collection of short stories, Gingertown (1932), and two autobiographical books, A Long Way from Home (1937) and Harlem: Negro Metropolis (1940). His book of collected poems, Selected Poems (1953), and his second autobiography, My Green Hills of Jamaica (1979), were published posthumously.

Becoming disillusioned with communism, McKay embraced the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, to which he converted in 1944. He died from a heart attack in Chicago at the age of 59.

Legacy

In 2002, scholar Molefi Kete Asante listed Claude McKay on his list of 100 Greatest African Americans. He is regarded as the "foremost left-wing black intellectual of his age" and workheavily influenced a generation of black authors including James Baldwin and Richard Wright.

Awards

Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences, gold medal, 1912, for two volumes of poetry, Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads;

Harmon Foundation Award for distinguished literary achievement, NAACP, 1929, for Harlem Shadows and Home to Harlem;

James Weldon Johnson Literary Guild Award, 1937.

Eserleri:

Songs of Jamaica (1912)

Harlem Shadows (1922)
Trial by Lynching: Stories About Negro Life in America (1925)
Home to Harlem (1928)
Banjo (1928)
Gingertown (1932)
Banana Bottom (1933)
A Long Way From Home (1937)
Harlem: Negro Metropolis (1940)

A Memory of June

When June comes dancing o'er the death of May,
With scarlet roses tinting her green breast,
And mating thrushes ushering in her day,
And Earth on tiptoe for her golden guest,

I always see the evening when we met--
The first of June baptized in tender rain--
And walked home through the wide streets, gleaming wet,
Arms locked, our warm flesh pulsing with love's pain.

I always see the cheerful little room,
And in the corner, fresh and white, the bed,
Sweet scented with a delicate perfume,
Wherein for one night only we were wed;

Where in the starlit stillness we lay mute,
And heard the whispering showers all night long,
And your brown burning body was a lute
Whereon my passion played his fevered song.

When June comes dancing o'er the death of May,
With scarlet roses staining her fair feet,
My soul takes leave of me to sing all day
A love so fugitive and so complete.

Claude McKay

A Prayer

'Mid the discordant noises of the day I hear thee calling;
I stumble as I fare along Earth's way; keep me from falling.

Mine eyes are open but they cannot see for gloom of night:
I can no more than lift my heart to thee for inward light.

The wild and fiery passion of my youth consumes my soul;
In agony I turn to thee for truth and self-control.

For Passion and all the pleasures it can give will die the death;
But this of me eternally must live, thy borrowed breath.

'Mid the discordant noises of the day I hear thee calling;
I stumble as I fare along Earth's way; keep me from falling.

Claude McKay

A Red Flower

Your lips are like a southern lily red,
Wet with the soft rain-kisses of the night,
In which the brown bee buries deep its head,
When still the dawn's a silver sea of light.

Your lips betray the secret of your soul,
The dark delicious essence that is you,
A mystery of life, the flaming goal
I seek through mazy pathways strange and new.

Your lips are the red symbol of a dream,
What visions of warm lilies they impart,
That line the green bank of a fair blue stream,
With butterflies and bees close to each heart!

Brown bees that murmur sounds of music rare,
That softly fall upon the langourous breeze,
Wafting them gently on the quiet air
Among untended avenues of trees.

O were I hovering, a bee, to probe
Deep down within your scented heart, fair flower,
Enfolded by your soft vermilion robe,
Amorous of sweets, for but one perfect hour!

Claude McKay

Absence

Your words dropped into my heart like pebbles into a pool,
Rippling around my breast and leaving it melting cool.

Your kisses fell sharp on my flesh like dawn-dews from the limb,
Of a fruit-filled lemon tree when the day is young and dim.

But a silence vasty-deep, oh deeper than all these ties
Now, through the menacing miles, brooding between us lies.

And more than the songs I sing, I await your written word,
To stir my fluent blood as never your presence stirred.

Claude McKay

Adolescence

There was a time when in late afternoon
The four-o'clocks would fold up at day's close
Pink-white in prayer, and 'neath the floating moon
I lay with them in calm and sweet repose.

And in the open spaces I could sleep,
Half-naked to the shining worlds above;
Peace came with sleep and sleep was long and deep,
Gained without effort, sweet like early love.

But now no balm--nor drug nor weed nor wine--
Can bring true rest to cool my body's fever,
Nor sweeten in my mouth the acid brine,
That salts my choicest drink and will forever.

Claude McKay

Africa

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

Claude McKay

After the Winter

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves
And against the morning's white
The shivering birds beneath the eaves
Have sheltered for the night,
We'll turn our faces southward, love,
Toward the summer isle
Where bamboos spire to shafted grove
And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

And we will seek the quiet hill
Where towers the cotton tree,
And leaps the laughing crystal rill,
And works the droning bee.
And we will build a cottage there
Beside an open glade,
With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near,
And ferns that never fade.

Claude McKay

Alfonso, Dressing to Wait at Table

Alfonso is a handsome bronze-hued lad
Of subtly-changing and surprising parts;
His moods are storms that frighten and make glad,
His eyes were made to capture women's hearts.

Down in the glory-hole Alfonso sings
An olden song of wine and clinking glasses
And riotous rakes; magnificently flings
Gay kisses to imaginary lasses.

Alfonso's voice of mellow music thrills
Our swaying forms and steals our hearts with joy;
And when he soars, his fine falsetto trills
Are rarest notes of gold without alloy.

But, O Alfonso! wherefore do you sing
Dream-songs of carefree men and ancient places?
Soon we shall be beset by clamouring
Of hungry and importunate palefaces.

Claude McKay

America

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

Claude McKay

Baptism

Into the furnace let me go alone;
Stay you without in terror of the heat.
I will go naked in--for thus ''tis sweet--
Into the weird depths of the hottest zone.
I will not quiver in the frailest bone,
You will not note a flicker of defeat;
My heart shall tremble not its fate to meet,
My mouth give utterance to any moan.
The yawning oven spits forth fiery spears;
Red aspish tongues shout wordlessly my name.
Desire destroys, consumes my mortal fears,
Transforming me into a shape of flame.
I will come out, back to your world of tears,
A stronger soul within a finer frame.

Claude McKay

Birds of Prey

Their shadow dims the sunshine of our day,
As they go lumbering across the sky,
Squawking in joy of feeling safe on high,
Beating their heavy wings of owlish gray.
They scare the singing birds of earth away
As, greed-impelled, they circle threateningly,
Watching the toilers with malignant eye,
From their exclusive haven--birds of prey.
They swoop down for the spoil in certain might,
And fasten in our bleeding flesh their claws.
They beat us to surrender weak with fright,
And tugging and tearing without let or pause,
They flap their hideous wings in grim delight,
And stuff our gory hearts into their maws.

Claude McKay

Commemoration

When first your glory shone upon my face
My body kindled to a mighty flame,
And burnt you yielding in my hot embrace
Until you swooned to love, breathing my name.

And wonder came and filled our night of sleep,
Like a new comet crimsoning the sky;
And stillness like the stillness of the deep
Suspended lay as an unuttered sigh.

I never again shall feel your warm heart flushed,
Panting with passion, naked unto mine,
Until the throbbing world around is hushed
To quiet worship at our scented shrine.

Nor will your glory seek my swarthy face,
To kindle and to change my jaded frame
Into a miracle of godlike grace,
Transfigured, bathed in your immortal flame.

Claude McKay

Courage

O lonely heart so timid of approach,
Like the shy tropic flower that shuts its lips
To the faint touch of tender finger tips:
What is your word? What question would you broach?

Your lustrous-warm eyes are too sadly kind
To mask the meaning of your dreamy tale,
Your guarded life too exquisitely frail
Against the daggers of my warring mind.

There is no part of the unyielding earth,
Even bare rocks where the eagles build their nest,
Will give us undisturbed and friendly rest.
No dewfall softens this vast belt of dearth.

But in the socket-chiseled teeth of strife,
That gleam in serried files in all the lands,
We may join hungry, understanding hands,
And drink our share of ardent love and life.

Claude McKay

Dawn in New York

The Dawn! The Dawn! The crimson-tinted, comes
Out of the low still skies, over the hills,
Manhattan's roofs and spires and cheerless domes!
The Dawn! My spirit to its spirit thrills.
Almost the mighty city is asleep,
No pushing crowd, no tramping, tramping feet.
But here and there a few cars groaning creep
Along, above, and underneath the street,
Bearing their strangely-ghostly burdens by,
The women and the men of garish nights,
Their eyes wine-weakened and their clothes awry,
Grotesques beneath the strong electric lights.
The shadows wane. The Dawn comes to New York.
And I go darkly-rebel to my work.

Claude McKay

December, 1919

Last night I heard your voice, mother,
The words you sang to me
When I, a little barefoot boy,
Knelt down against your knee.

And tears gushed from my heart, mother,
And passed beyond its wall,
But though the fountain reached my throat
The drops refused to fall.

'Tis ten years since you died, mother,
Just ten dark years of pain,
And oh, I only wish that I
Could weep just once again.

Claude McKay

Enslaved

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place
In the great life line of the Christian West;
And in the Black Land disinherited,
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,
For this my race that has no home on earth.
Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry
To the avenging angel to consume
The white man's world of wonders utterly:
Let it be swallowed up in earth's vast womb,
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke
To liberate my people from its yoke!

Claude McKay

Exhortation: Summer 1919

Through the pregnant universe rumbles life's terrific thunder,
And Earth's bowels quake with terror; strange and terrible storms break,
Lightning-torches flame the heavens, kindling souls of men, thereunder:
Africa! long ages sleeping, O my motherland, awake!

In the East the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn that is breaking,
And its golden glory fills the western skies.
O my brothers and my sisters, wake! arise!
For the new birth rends the old earth and the very dead are waking,
Ghosts are turned flesh, throwing off the grave's disguise,
And the foolish, even children, are made wise;
For the big earth groans in travail for the strong, new world in making--
O my brothers, dreaming for dim centuries,
Wake from sleeping; to the East turn, turn your eyes!

Oh the night is sweet for sleeping, but the shining day's for working;
Sons of the seductive night, for your children's children's sake,
From the deep primeval forests where the crouching leopard's lurking,
Lift your heavy-lidded eyes, Ethiopia! awake!

In the East the clouds glow crimson with the new dawn that is breaking,
And its golden glory fills the western skies.
O my brothers and my sisters, wake! arise!
For the new birth rends the old earth and the very dead are waking,
Ghosts have turned flesh, throwing off the grave's disguise,
And the foolish, even children, are made wise;
For the big earth groans in travail for the strong, new world in making--
O my brothers, dreaming for long centuries,
Wake from sleeping; to the East turn, turn your eyes!

Claude McKay

Flame-Heart

So much have I forgotten in ten years,
So much in ten brief years! I have forgot
What time the purple apples come to juice,
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.
I have forgot the special, startling season
Of the pimento's flowering and fruiting;
What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.
I have forgotten much, but still remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.
I still recall the honey-fever grass,
But cannot recollect the high days when
We rooted them out of the ping-wing path
To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.
I often try to think in what sweet month
The languid painted ladies used to dapple
The yellow by-road mazing from the main,
Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple.
I have forgotten--strange--but quite remember
The poinsettia's red, blood-red in warm December.

What weeks, what months, what time of the mild year
We cheated school to have our fling at tops?
What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with joy
Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?
Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days,
Even the sacred moments when we played,
All innocent of passion, uncorrupt,
At noon and evening in the flame-heart's shade.
We were so happy, happy, I remember,
Beneath the poinsettia's red in warm December.

Claude McKay

Flirtation

UPON thy purple mat thy body bare
Is fine and limber like a tender tree.
The motion of thy supple form is rare,
Like a lithe panther lolling languidly,
Toying and turning slowly in her lair.
Oh, I would never ask for more of thee,
Thou art so clean in passion and so fair.
Enough! if thou wilt ask no more of me!

Claude McKay

Flower of Love

The perfume of your body dulls my sense.
I want nor wine nor weed; your breath alone
Suffices. In this moment rare and tense
I worship at your breast. The flower is blown,
The saffron petals tempt my amorous mouth,
The yellow heart is radiant now with dew
Soft-scented, redolent of my loved South;
O flower of love! I give myself to you.
Uncovered on your couch of figured green,
Here let us linger indivisible.
The portals of your sanctuary unseen
Receive my offering, yielding unto me.
Oh, with our love the night is warm and deep!
The air is sweet, my flower, and sweet the flute
Whose music lulls our burning brain to sleep,
While we lie loving, passionate and mute.

Claude McKay

French Leave

No servile little fear shall daunt my will
This morning. I have courage steeled to say
I will be lazy, conqueringly still,
I will not lose the hours in toil this day.

The roaring world without, careless of souls,
Shall leave me to my placid dream of rest,
My four walls shield me from its shouting ghouls,
And all its hates have fled my quiet breast.

And I will loll here resting, wide awake,
Dead to the world of work, the world of love,
I laze contented just for dreaming's sake
With not the slightest urge to think or move.

How tired unto death, how tired I was!
Now for a day I put my burdens by,
And like a child amidst the meadow grass
Under the southern sun, I languid lie

And feel the bed about me kindly deep,
My strength ooze gently from my hollow bones,
My worried brain drift aimlessly to sleep,
Like softening to a song of tuneful tones.

Claude McKay

Futility

Oh, I have tried to laugh the pain away,
Let new flames brush my love-springs like a feather.
But the old fever seizes me to-day,
As sickness grips a soul in wretched weather.
I have given up myself to every urge,
With not a care of precious powers spent,
Have bared my body to the strangest scourge,
To soothe and deaden my heart's unhealing rent.
But you have torn a nerve out of my frame,
A gut that no physician can replace,
And reft my life of happiness and aim.
Oh what new purpose shall I now embrace?
What substance hold, what lovely form pursue,
When my thought burns through everything to you?

Claude McKay

Harlem Shadows

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass
To bend and barter at desire's call.
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

Claude McKay

Heritage

Now the dead past seems vividly alive,
And in this shining moment I can trace,
Down through the vista of the vanished years,
Your faun-like form, your fond elusive face.
And suddenly some secret spring's released,
And unawares a riddle is revealed,
And I can read like large, black-lettered print,
What seemed before a thing forever sealed.

I know the magic word, the graceful thought,
The song that fills me in my lucid hours,
The spirit's wine that thrills my body through,
And makes me music-drunk, are yours, all yours.

I cannot praise, for you have passed from praise,
I have no tinted thoughts to paint you true;
But I can feel and I can write the word;
The best of me is but the least of you.

Claude McKay

Home Thoughts

Oh something just now must be happening there!
That suddenly and quiveringly here,
Amid the city's noises, I must think
Of mangoes leaning o'er the river's brink,
And dexterous Davie climbing high above,
The gold fruits ebon-speckled to remove,
And toss them quickly in the tangled mass
Of wis-wis twisted round the guinea grass;
And Cyril coming through the bramble-track
A prize bunch of bananas on his back;
And Georgie--none could ever dive like him--
Throwing his scanty clothes off for a swim;
And schoolboys, from Bridge-tunnel going home,
Watching the waters downward dash and foam.
This is no daytime dream, there's something in it,
Oh something's happening there this very minute!

Claude McKay

Homing Swallows

Swift swallows sailing from the Spanish main,
O rain-birds racing merrily away
From hill-tops parched with heat and sultry plain
Of wilting plants and fainting flowers, say--

When at the noon-hour from the chapel school
The children dash and scamper down the dale,
Scornful of teacher's rod and binding rule
Forever broken and without avail,

Do they still stop beneath the giant tree
To gather locusts in their childish greed,
And chuckle when they break the pods to see
The golden powder clustered round the seed?

Claude McKay

I Know My Soul

I plucked my soul out of its secret place,
And held it to the mirror of my eye,
To see it like a star against the sky,
A twitching body quivering in space,
A spark of passion shining on my face.
And I explored it to determine why
This awful key to my infinity
Conspires to rob me of sweet joy and grace.
And if the sign may not be fully read,
If I can comprehend but not control,
I need not gloom my days with futile dread,
Because I see a part and not the whole.
Contemplating the strange, I'm comforted
By this narcotic thought: I know my soul.

Claude McKay

I Shall Return

I shall return again; I shall return
To laugh and love and watch with wonder-eyes
At golden noon the forest fires burn,
Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.
I shall return to loiter by the streams
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,
And realize once more my thousand dreams
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.
I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes
That stir the hidden depths of native life,
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes.
I shall return, I shall return again,
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.

Claude McKay

If We Must Die

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

Claude McKay

In Bondage

I would be wandering in distant fields
Where man, and bird, and beast, lives leisurely,
And the old earth is kind, and ever yields
Her goodly gifts to all her children free;
Where life is fairer, lighter, less demanding,
And boys and girls have time and space for play
Before they come to years of understanding--
Somewhere I would be singing, far away.
For life is greater than the thousand wars
Men wage for it in their insatiate lust,
And will remain like the eternal stars,
When all that shines to-day is drift and dust
But I am bound with you in your mean graves,
O black men, simple slaves of ruthless slaves.

Claude McKay

Jasmines

Your scent is in the room.
Swiftly it overwhelms and conquers me!
Jasmines, night jasmines, perfect of perfume,
Heavy with dew before the dawn of day!
Your face was in the mirror. I could see
You smile and vanish suddenly away,
Leaving behind the vestige of a tear.
Sad suffering face, from parting grown so dear!
Night jasmines cannot bloom in this cold place;
Without the street is wet and weird with snow;
The cold nude trees are tossing to and fro;
Too stormy is the night for your fond face;
For your low voice too loud the wind's mad roar.
But, oh, your scent is here--jasmines that grow
Luxuriant, clustered round your cottage door!

Claude McKay

Joy in the Woods

There is joy in the woods just now,
The leaves are whispers of song,
And the birds make mirth on the bough
And music the whole day long,
And God! to dwell in the town
In these springlike summer days,
On my brow an unfading frown
And hate in my heart always—

A machine out of gear, aye, tired,
Yet forced to go on—for I'm hired.

Just forced to go on through fear,
For every day I must eat
And find ugly clothes to wear,
And bad shoes to hurt my feet
And a shelter for work-drugged sleep!
A mere drudge! but what can one do?
A man that's a man cannot weep!
Suicide? A quitter? Oh, no!

But a slave should never grow tired,
Whom the masters have kindly hired.

But oh! for the woods, the flowers
Of natural, sweet perfume,
The heartening, summer showers
And the smiling shrubs in bloom,
Dust-free, dew-tinted at morn,
The fresh and life-giving air,
The billowing waves of corn
And the birds' notes rich and clear:—

For a man-machine toil-tired
May crave beauty too—though he's hired

Claude McKay

La Paloma in London

About Soho we went before the light;
We went, unresting six, craving new fun,
New scenes, new raptures, for the fevered night
Of rollicking laughter, drink and song, was done.
The vault was void, but for the dawn's great star
That shed upon our path its silver flame,
When La Paloma on a low guitar
Abruptly from a darkened casement came--
Harlem! All else shut out, I saw the hall,
And you in your red shoulder sash come dancing
With Val against me languid by the wall,
Your burning coffee-colored eyes keen glancing
Aslant at mine, proud in your golden glory!
I loved you, Cuban girl, fond sweet Diory.

Claude McKay

Memorial

Your body was a sacred cell always,
A jewel that grew dull in garish light,
An opal which beneath my wondering gaze
Gleamed rarely, softly throbbing in the night.

I touched your flesh with reverential hands,
For you were sweet and timid like a flower
That blossoms out of barren tropic sands,
Shedding its perfume in one golden hour.

You yielded to my touch with gentle grace,
And though my passion was a mighty wave
That buried you beneath its strong embrace,
You were yet happy in the moment's grave.

Still more than passion consummate to me,
More than the nuptials immemorial sung,
Was the warm thrill that melted me to see
Your clean brown body, beautiful and young;

The joy in your maturity at length,
The peace that filled my soul like cooling wine,
When you responded to my tender strength,
And pressed your heart exulting into mine.

How shall I with such memories of you
In coarser forms of love fruition find?
No, I would rather like a ghost pursue
The fairy phantoms of my lonely mind.

Claude McKay

Morning Joy

At night the wide and level stretch of wold,
Which at high noon had basked in quiet gold,
Far as the eye could see was ghostly white;
Dark was the night save for the snow's weird light.

I drew the shades far down, crept into bed;
Hearing the cold wind moaning overhead
Through the sad pines, my soul, catching its pain,
Went sorrowing with it across the plain.

At dawn, behold! the pall of night was gone,
Save where a few shrubs melancholy, lone,
Detained a fragile shadow. Golden-lipped
The laughing grasses heaven's sweet wine sipped.

The sun rose smiling o'er the river's breast,
And my soul, by his happy spirit blest,
Soared like a bird to greet him in the sky,
And drew out of his heart Eternity.

Claude McKay

My Mother

I

Reg wished me to go with him to the field,
I paused because I did not want to go;
But in her quiet way she made me yield
Reluctantly, for she was breathing low.
Her hand she slowly lifted from her lap
And, smiling sadly in the old sweet way,
She pointed to the nail where hung my cap.
Her eyes said: I shall last another day.
But scarcely had we reached the distant place,
When o'er the hills we heard a faint bell ringing;
A boy came running up with frightened face;
We knew the fatal news that he was bringing.
I heard him listlessly, without a moan,
Although the only one I loved was gone.

II

The dawn departs, the morning is begun,
The trades come whispering from off the seas,
The fields of corn are golden in the sun,
The dark-brown tassels fluttering in the breeze;
The bell is sounding and the children pass,
Frog-leaping, skipping, shouting, laughing shrill,
Down the red road, over the pasture-grass,
Up to the school-house crumbling on the hill.
The older folk are at their peaceful toil,
Some pulling up the weeds, some plucking corn,
And others breaking up the sun-baked soil.
Float, faintly-scented breeze, at early morn
Over the earth where mortals sow and reap--
Beneath its breast my mother lies asleep.

Claude McKay

North and South

O sweet are tropic lands for waking dreams!
There time and life move lazily along.
There by the banks of blue-and-silver streams
Grass-sheltered crickets chirp incessant song,
Gay-colored lizards loll all through the day,
Their tongues outstretched for careless little flies,
And swarthy children in the fields at play,
Look upward laughing at the smiling skies.
A breath of idleness is in the air
That casts a subtle spell upon all things,
And love and mating-time are everywhere,
And wonder to life's commonplaces clings.
The fluttering humming-bid darts through the trees
And dips his long beak in the big bell-flowers,
The leisured buzzard floats upon the breeze,
Riding a crescent cloud for endless hours,
The sea beats softly on the emerald strands--
O sweet for quiet dreams are tropic lands!

Claude McKay

O Word I Love to Sing

O word I love to sing! thou art too tender
For all the passions agitating me;
For all my bitterness thou art too tender,
I cannot pour my red soul into thee.

O haunting melody! thou art too slender,
Too fragile like a globe of crystal glass;
For all my stormy thoughts thou art too slender,
The burden from my bosom will not pass.

O tender word! O melody so slender!
O tears of passion saturate with brine,
O words, unwilling words, ye can not render
My hatred for the foe of me and mine.

Claude McKay

On a Primitive Canoe

Here, passing lonely down this quiet lane,
Before a mud-splashed window long I pause
To gaze and gaze, while through my active brain
Still thoughts are stirred to wakefulness; because
Long, long ago in a dim unknown land,
A massive forest-tree, ax-felled, adze-hewn,
Was deftly done by cunning mortal hand
Into a symbol of the tender moon.
Why does it thrill more than the handsome boat
That bore me o'er the wild Atlantic ways,
And fill me with rare sense of things remote
From this harsh land of fretful nights and days?
I cannot answer but, whate'er it be,
An old wine has intoxicated me.

Claude McKay

On Broadway

About me young careless feet
Linger along the garish street;
Above, a hundred shouting signs
Shed down their bright fantastic glow
Upon the merry crowd and lines
Of moving carriages below.
Oh wonderful is Broadway -- only
My heart, my heart is lonely.

Desire naked, linked with Passion,
Goes trutting by in brazen fashion;
From playhouse, cabaret and inn
The rainbow lights of Broadway blaze
All gay without, all glad within;
As in a dream I stand and gaze
At Broadway, shining Broadway -- only
My heart, my heart is lonely.

Claude McKay

On the Road

Roar of the rushing train fearfully rocking,
Impatient people jammed in line for food,
The rasping noise of cars together knocking,
And worried waiters, some in ugly mood,
Crowding into the choking pantry hole
To call out dishes for each angry glutton
Exasperated grown beyond control,
From waiting for his soup or fish or mutton.
At last the station's reached, the engine stops;
For bags and wraps the red-caps circle round;
From off the step the passenger lightly hops,
And seeks his cab or tram-car homeward bound;
The waiters pass out weary, listless, glum,
To spend their tips on harlots, cards and rum.

Claude McKay

One Year After

I

Not once in all our days of poignant love,
Did I a single instant give to thee
My undivided being wholly free.
Not all thy potent passion could remove
The barrier that loomed between to prove
The full supreme surrendering of me.
Oh, I was beaten, helpless utterly
Against the shadow-fact with which I strove.
For when a cruel power forced me to face
The truth which poisoned our illicit wine,
That even I was faithless to my race
Bleeding beneath the iron hand of thine,
Our union seemed a monstrous thing and base!
I was an outcast from thy world and mine.

II

Adventure-seasoned and storm-buffeted,
I shun all signs of anchorage, because
The zest of life exceeds the bound of laws.
New gales of tropic fury round my head
Break lashing me through hours of soulful dread;
But when the terror thins and, spent, withdraws,
Leaving me wondering awhile, I pause--
But soon again the risky ways I tread!
No rigid road for me, no peace, no rest,
While molten elements run through my blood;
And beauty-burning bodies manifest
Their warm, heart-melting motions to be wooed;
And passion boldly rising in my breast,
Like rivers of the Spring, lets loose its flood.

Claude McKay

Outcast

For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.
I would go back to darkness and to peace,
But the great western world holds me in fee,
And I may never hope for full release
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.
Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,
And I must walk the way of life a ghost
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart;
For I was born, far from my native clime,
Under the white man's menace, out of time.

Claude McKay

Poetry

Sometimes I tremble like a storm-swept flower,
And seek to hide my tortured soul from thee.
Bowing my head in deep humility
Before the silent thunder of thy power.
Sometimes I flee before thy blazing light,
As from the specter of pursuing death;
Intimidated lest thy mighty breath,
Windways, will sweep me into utter night.
For oh, I fear they will be swallowed up--
The loves which are to me of vital worth,
My passion and my pleasure in the earth--
And lost forever in thy magic cup!
I fear, I fear my truly human heart
Will perish on the altar-stone of art!

Claude McKay

Polarity

Nay, why reproach each other, be unkind,
For there's no plane on which we two may meet?
Let's both forgive, forget, for both were blind,
And life is of a day, and time is fleet.

And I am fire, swift to flame and burn,
Melting with elements high overhead,
While you are water in an earthly urn,
All pure, but heavy, and of hue like lead.

Claude McKay

Rest in Peace

No more for you the city's thorny ways,
The ugly corners of the Negro belt;
The miseries and pains of these harsh days
By you will never, never again be felt.

No more, if still you wander, will you meet
With nights of unabating bitterness;
They cannot reach you in your safe retreat,
The city's hate, the city's prejudice!

'Twas sudden--but your menial task is done,
The dawn now breaks on you, the dark is over,
The sea is crossed, the longed-for port is won;
Farewell, oh, fare you well! my friend and lover.

Claude McKay

Romance

To clasp you now and feel your head close-pressed,
Scented and warm against my beating breast;

To whisper soft and quivering your name,
And drink the passion burning in your frame;

To lie at full length, taut, with cheek to cheek,
And tease your mouth with kisses till you speak

Love words, mad words, dream words, sweet senseless words,
Melodious like notes of mating birds;

To hear you ask if I shall love always,
And myself answer: Till the end of days;

To feel your easeful sigh of happiness
When on your trembling lips I murmur: Yes;

It is so sweet. We know it is not true.
What matters it? The night must shed her dew.

We know it is not true, but it is sweet --
The poem with this music is complete.

Claude McKay

Russian Cathedral

Bow down my soul in worship very low
And in the holy silences be lost.
Bow down before the marble man of woe,
Bow down before the singing angel host.
What jewelled glory fills my spirit's eye,
What golden grandeur moves the depths of me!
The soaring arches lift me up on high
Taking my breath with their rare symmetry.

Bow down my soul and let the wondrous light
Of beauty bathe thee from her lofty throne,
Bow down before the wonder of man's might.
Bow down in worship, humble and alone;
Bow lowly down before the sacred sight
Of man's divinity alive in stone.

Claude McKay

Song of the Moon

The moonlight breaks upon the city's domes,
And falls along cemented steel and stone,
Upon the grayness of a million homes,
Lugubrious in unchanging monotone.
Upon the clothes behind the tenement,
That hang like ghosts suspended from the lines,
Linking each flat to each indifferent,
Incongruous and strange the moonlight shines.

There is no magic from your presence here,
Ho, moon, sad moon, tuck up your trailing robe,
Whose silver seems antique and so severe
Against the glow of one electric globe.

Go spill your beauty on the laughing faces
Of happy flowers that bloom a thousand hues,
Waiting on tiptoe in the wilding spaces,
To drink your wine mixed with sweet drafts of dews.

Claude McKay

Spring in New Hampshire

Too green the springing April grass,
Too blue the silver-speckled sky,
For me to linger here, alas,
While happy winds go laughing by,
Wasting the golden hours indoors,
Washing windows and scrubbing floors.

Too wonderful the April night,
Too faintly sweet the first May flowers,
The stars too gloriously bright,
For me to spend the evening hours,
When fields are fresh and streams are leaping,
Wearied, exhausted, dully sleeping.

Claude McKay

Subway Wind

Far down, down through the city's great, gaunt gut,
The gray train rushing bears the weary wind;
In the packed cars the fans the crowd's breath cut,
Leaving the sick and heavy air behind.
And pale-cheeked children seek the upper door
To give their summer jackets to the breeze;
Their laugh is swallowed in the deafening roar
Of captive wind that moans for fields and seas;
Seas cooling warm where native schooners drift
Through sleepy waters, while gulls wheel and sweep,
Waiting for windy waves the keels to lift
Lightly among the islands of the deep;
Islands of lofty palm trees blooming white
That lend their perfume to the tropic sea,
Where fields lie idle in the dew drenched night,
And the Trades float above them fresh and free.

Claude McKay

Summer Morn in New Hampshire

All yesterday it poured, and all night long
I could not sleep; the rain unceasing beat
Upon the shingled roof like a weird song,
Upon the grass like running children's feet.
And down the mountains by the dark cloud kissed,
Like a strange shape in filmy veiling dressed,
Slid slowly, silently, the wraith-like mist,
And nestled soft against the earth's wet breast.

But lo, there was a miracle at dawn!
The still air stirred at touch of the faint breeze,
The sun a sheet of gold bequeathed the lawn,
The songsters twittered in the rustling trees.
And all things were transfigured in the day,
But me whom radiant beauty could not move;
For you, more wonderful, were far away,
And I was blind with hunger for your love.

Claude McKay

The Barrier

I must not gaze at them although
Your eyes are dawning day;
I must not watch you as you go
Your sun-illumined way;

I hear but I must never heed
The fascinating note,
Which, fluting like a river reed,
Comes from your trembing throat;

I must not see upon your face
Love's softly glowing spark;
For there's the barrier of race,
You're fair and I am dark.

Claude McKay

The Castaways

The vivid grass with visible delight
Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth,
The butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
Chirping and dancing for the season's birth,
The dandelions and rare daffodils
That touch the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold,
The thrushes sending forth their joyous trills,--
Not these, not these did I at first behold!
But seated on the benches daubed with green,
The castaways of life, a few asleep,
Some withered women desolate and mean,
And over all, life's shadows dark and deep.
Moaning I turned away, for misery
I have the strength to bear but not to see.

Claude McKay

The City's Love

For one brief golden moment rare like wine,
The gracious city swept across the line;
Oblivious of the color of my skin,
Forgetting that I was an alien guest,
She bent to me, my hostile heart to win,
Caught me in passion to her pillowy breast;
The great, proud city, seized with a strange love,
Bowed down for one flame hour my pride to prove.

Claude McKay

The Easter Flower

Far from this foreign Easter damp and chilly
My soul steals to a pear-shaped plot of ground,
Where gleamed the lilac-tinted Easter lily
Soft-scented in the air for yards around;

Alone, without a hint of guardian leaf!
Just like a fragile bell of silver rime,
It burst the tomb for freedom sweet and brief
In the young pregnant year at Eastertime;

And many thought it was a sacred sign,
And some called it the resurrection flower;
And I, a pagan, worshiped at its shrine,
Yielding my heart unto its perfumed power.

Claude McKay

The Harlem Dancer

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

Claude McKay

The Lynching

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

Claude McKay

The Night-Fire

No engines shrieking rescue storm the night,
And hose and hydrant cannot here avail;
The flames laugh high and fling their challenging light,
And clouds turn gray and black from silver-pale.
The fire leaps out and licks the ancient walls,
And the big building bends and twists and groans.
A bar drops from its place; a rafter falls
Burning the flowers. The wind in frenzy moans.
The watchers gaze, held wondering by the fire,
The dwellers cry their sorrow to the crowd,
The flames beyond themselves rise higher, higher,
To lose their glory in the frowning cloud,
Yielding at length the last reluctant breath.
And where life lay asleep broods darkly death.

Claude McKay

The Plateau

It was the silver, heart-enveloping view
Of the mysterious sea-line far away,
Seen only on a gleaming gold-white day,
That made it dear and beautiful to you.

And Laura loved it for the little hill,
Where the quartz sparkled fire, barren and dun,
Whence in the shadow of the dying sun,
She contemplated Hallow's wooden mill.

While Danny liked the sheltering high grass,
In which he lay upon a clear dry night,
To hear and see, screened skilfully from sight,
The happy lovers of the valley pass.

But oh! I loved it for the big round moon
That swung out of the clouds and swooned aloft,
Burning with passion, gloriously soft,
Lighting the purple flowers of fragrant June.

Claude McKay

The Snow Fairy

I

Throughout the afternoon I watched them there,
Snow-fairies falling, falling from the sky,
Whirling fantastic in the misty air,
Contending fierce for space supremacy.
And they flew down a mightier force at night,
As though in heaven there was revolt and riot,
And they, frail things had taken panic flight
Down to the calm earth seeking peace and quiet.
I went to bed and rose at early dawn
To see them huddled together in a heap,
Each merged into the other upon the lawn,
Worn out by the sharp struggle, fast asleep.
The sun shone brightly on them half the day,
By night they stealthily had stol'n away.

II

And suddenly my thoughts then turned to you
Who came to me upon a winter's night,
When snow-sprites round my attic window flew,
Your hair disheveled, eyes aglow with light.
My heart was like the weather when you came,
The wanton winds were blowing loud and long;
But you, with joy and passion all aflame,
You danced and sang a lilting summer song.
I made room for you in my little bed,
Took covers from the closet fresh and warm,
A downful pillow for your scented head,
And lay down with you resting in my arm.
You went with Dawn. You left me ere the day,
The lonely actor of a dreamy play.

Claude McKay

The Spanish Needle

Lovely dainty Spanish needle
With your yellow flower and white,
Dew bedecked and softly sleeping,
Do you think of me to-night?

Shadowed by the spreading mango,
Nodding o'er the rippling stream,
Tell me, dear plant of my childhood,
Do you of the exile dream?

Do you see me by the brook's side
Catching crayfish 'neath the stone,
As you did the day you whispered:
Leave the harmless dears alone?

Do you see me in the meadow
Coming from the woodland spring
With a bamboo on my shoulder
And a pail slung from a string?

Do you see me all expectant
Lying in an orange grove,
While the swee-swees sing above me,
Waiting for my elf-eyed love?

Lovely dainty Spanish needle,
Source to me of sweet delight,
In your far-off sunny southland
Do you dream of me to-night?

Claude McKay

The Tired Worker

O whisper, O my soul! The afternoon
Is waning into evening, whisper soft!
Peace, O my rebel heart! for soon the moon
From out its misty veil will swing aloft!
Be patient, weary body, soon the night
Will wrap thee gently in her sable sheet,
And with a leaden sigh thou wilt invite
To rest thy tired hands and aching feet.
The wretched day was theirs, the night is mine;
Come tender sleep, and fold me to thy breast.
But what steals out the gray clouds like red wine?
O dawn! O dreaded dawn! O let me rest
Weary my veins, my brain, my life! Have pity!
No! Once again the harsh, the ugly city.

Claude McKay

The Tropics in New York

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

Claude McKay

The White City

I will not toy with it nor bend an inch.
Deep in the secret chambers of my heart
I muse my life-long hate, and without flinch
I bear it nobly as I live my part.
My being would be a skeleton, a shell,
If this dark Passion that fills my every mood,
And makes my heaven in the white world's hell,
Did not forever feed me vital blood.
I see the mighty city through a mist--
The strident trains that speed the goaded mass,
The poles and spires and towers vapor-kissed,
The fortressed port through which the great ships pass,
The tides, the wharves, the dens I contemplate,
Are sweet like wanton loves because I hate.

Claude McKay

The White House

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
A chafing savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
Against the potent poison of your hate.

Claude McKay

The Wild Goat

O you would clothe me in silken frocks
And house me from the cold,
And bind with bright bands my glossy locks,
And buy me chains of gold;

And give me--meekly to do my will--
The hapless sons of men:--
But the wild goat bounding on the barren hill
Droops in the grassy pen.

Claude McKay

Thirst

My spirit wails for water, water now!
My tongue is aching dry, my throat is hot
For water, fresh rain shaken from a bough,
Or dawn dews heavy in some leafy spot.
My hungry body's burning for a swim
In sunlit water where the air is cool,
As in Trout Valley where upon a limb
The golden finch sings sweetly to the pool.
Oh water, water, when the night is done,
When day steals gray-white through the windowpane,
Clear silver water when I wake, alone,
All impotent of parts, of fevered brain;
Pure water from a forest fountain first,
To wash me, cleanse me, and to quench my thirst!

Claude McKay

Through Agony

I

All night, through the eternity of night,
Pain was my potion though I could not feel.
Deep in my humbled heart you ground your heel,
Till I was reft of even my inner light,
Till reason from my mind had taken flight,
And all my world went whirling in a reel.
And all my swarthy strength turned cold like steel,
A passive mass beneath your puny might.
Last night I gave you triumph over me,
So I should be myself as once before,
I marveled at your shallow mystery,
And haunted hungrily your temple door.
I gave you sum and substance to be free,
Oh, you shall never triumph any more!

II

I do not fear to face the fact and say,
How darkly-dull my living hours have grown,
My wounded heart sinks heavier than stone,
Because I loved you longer than a day!
I do not shame to turn myself away
From beckoning flowers beautifully blown,
To mourn your vivid memory alone
In mountain fastnesses austerely gray.
The mists will shroud me on the utter height,
The salty, brimming waters of my breast
Will mingle with the fresh dews of the night
To bathe my spirit hankering to rest.
But after sleep I'll wake with greater might,
Once more to venture on the eternal quest.

Claude McKay

To a Poet

There is a lovely noise about your name,
Above the shoutings of the city clear,
More than a moment's merriment, whose claim
Will greater grow with every mellowed year.

The people will not bear you down the street,
Dancing to the strong rhythm of your words,
The modern kings will throttle you to greet
The piping voice of artificial birds.

But the rare lonely spirits, even mine,
Who love the immortal music of all days,
Will see the glory of your trailing line,
The bedded beauty of your haunting lays.

Claude McKay

To O.E.A.

Your voice is the color of a robin's breast,
And there's a sweet sob in it like rain--still rain in the night.
Among the leaves of the trumpet-tree, close to his nest,
The pea-dove sings, and each note thrills me with strange delight
Like the words, wet with music, that well from your trembling throat.
I'm afraid of your eyes, they're so bold,
Searching me through, reading my thoughts, shining like gold.
But sometimes they are gentle and soft like the dew on the lips of the eucharis
Before the sun comes warm with his lover's kiss.
You are sea-foam, pure with the star's loveliness,
Not mortal, a flower, a fairy, too fair for the beauty-shorn earth.
All wonderful things, all beautiful things, gave of their wealth to your birth.
Oh I love you so much, not recking of passion, that I feel it is wrong!
But men will love you, flower, fairy, non-mortal spirit burdened with flesh,
Forever, life-long.

Claude McKay

To One Coming North

At first you'll joy to see the playful snow,
Like white moths trembling on the tropic air,
Or waters of the hills that softly flow
Gracefully falling down a shining stair.

And when the fields and streets are covered white
And the wind-worried void is chilly, raw,
Or underneath a spell of heat and light
The cheerless frozen spots begin to thaw,

Like me you'll long for home, where birds' glad song
Means flowering lanes and leas and spaces dry,
And tender thoughts and feelings fine and strong,
Beneath a vivid silver-flecked blue sky.

But oh! more than the changeless southern isles,
When Spring has shed upon the earth her charm,
You'll love the Northland wreathed in golden smiles
By the miraculous sun turned glad and warm.

Claude McKay

To Winter

Stay, season of calm love and soulful snows!
There is a subtle sweetness in the sun,
The ripples on the stream's breast gaily run,
The wind more boisterously by me blows,
And each succeeding day now longer grows.
The birds a gladder music have begun,
The squirrel, full of mischief and of fun,
From maples' topmost branch the brown twig throws.
I read these pregnant signs, know what they mean:
I know that thou art making ready to go.
Oh stay! I fled a land where fields are green
Always, and palms wave gently to and fro,
And winds are balmy, blue brooks ever sheen,
To ease my heart of its impassioned woe.

Claude McKay

Tormented

I will not reason, wrestle here with you,
Though you pursue and worry me about;
As well put forth my swarthy arm to stop
The wild wind howling, darkly mad without.

The night is yours for revels; day will light.
I will not fight you, bold and tigerish,
For I am weak, while you are gaining strength;
Peace! cease tormenting me to have your wish.

But when you're filled and sated with the flesh,
I shall go swiftly to the silver stream,
To cleanse my body for the spirit's sake,
And sun my limbs, and close my eyes to dream.

Claude McKay

Two-An'-Six

Merry voices chatterin',
Nimble feet dem patterin',
Big an' little, faces gay,
Happy day dis market day.

Sateday, de marnin' break,
Soon, soon market-people wake;
An' de light shine from de moon
While dem boy, wid pantaloon
Roll up ober dem knee-pan,
'Tep across de buccra lan'
To de pastur whe' de harse
Feed along wid de jackass,
An' de mule cant' in de track
Wid him tail up in him back,
All de ketchin' to defy,
No ca' how dem boy might try.

In de early marnin'-tide,
When de cocks crow on de hill
An' de stars are shinin' still,
Mirrie by de fireside
Hots de coffee for de lads
Comin' ridin' on de pads
T'rown across dem animul--
Donkey, harse too, an' de mule,
Which at last had come do'n cool.
On de bit dem hol' dem full:
Racin' ober pastur' lan',
See dem comin' ebery man,
Comin' fe de steamin' tea
Ober hilly track an' lea.

Hard-wuk'd donkey on de road
Trottin' wid him ushal load,
Hamper pack' wi' yam an' grain,
Sour-sop, and Gub'nor cane.

Cous' Sun sits in hired dray,
Drivin' 'long de market way;
Whole week grindin' sugar cane
T'rough de boilin' sun an' rain,
Now, a'ter de toilin' hard,
He goes seekin' his reward,
While he's thinkin' in him min'
Of de dear ones lef behin',
Of de loved though ailin' wife,
Darlin' treasure of his life,
An' de picknies, six in all,
Whose 'nuff burdens 'pon him fall:
Seben lovin' ones in need,
Seben hungry mouths fe feed;

On deir wants he thinks alone,
Neber dreamin' of his own,
But gwin' on wid joyful face
Till him re'ch de market-place.

Sugar bears no price to-day,
Though it is de mont' o' May,
When de time is hellish hot,
An' de water cocoanut
An' de cane bebridge is nice,
Mix' up wid a lilly ice.
Big an' little, great an' small,
Afou yam is all de call;
Sugar tup an' gill a quart,
Yet de people hab de heart
Wantin' brater top o' i',
Want de sweatin' higgler fe
Ram de pan an' pile i' up,
Yet sell i' fe so-so tup.

Cousin Sun is lookin' sad,
As de market is so bad;
'Pon him han' him res' him chin,
Quietly sit do'n thinkin'
Of de loved wife sick in bed,
An' de children to be fed--
What de laborers would say
When dem know him couldn' pay;
Also what about de mill
Whe' him hire from ole Bill;
So him think, an' think on so,
Till him t'oughts no more could go.

Then he got up an' began
Pickin' up him sugar-pan:
In his ears rang t'rough de din
'Only two-an'-six a tin'.'
What a tale he'd got to tell,
How bad, bad de sugar sell!
Tekin' out de lee amount,
Him set do'n an' begin count
All de time him min' deh doubt
How expenses would pay out;
Ah, it gnawed him like de ticks,
Sugar sell fe two-an'-six!

So he journeys on de way,
Feelinl sad dis market day;
No e'en buy a little cake
To gi'e baby when she wake,--
Passin' 'long de candy-shop
'Douten eben mek a stop

To buy drops fe las'y son,
For de lilly cash nea' done.
So him re'ch him own a groun',
An' de children scamper roun',
Each one stretchin' out him han',
Lookin' to de poor sad man.

Oh, how much he felt de blow,
As he watched dem face fall low,
When dem wait an' nuttin' came
An' drew back deir han's wid shame!
But de sick wife kissed his brow:
'Sun, don't get down-hearted now;
Ef we only pay expense
We mus' wuk we common-sense,
Cut an' carve, an' carve an' cut,
Mek gill sarbe fe quattiewut;
We mus' try mek two ends meet
Neber mind how hard be it.
We won't mind de haul an' pull,
While dem pickny belly full.'

An' de shadow lef' him face,
An' him felt an inward peace,
As he blessed his better part
For her sweet an' gentle heart:
'Dear one o' my heart, my breat',
Won't I lub you to de deat'?
When my heart is weak an' sad,
Who but you can mek it glad?'

So dey kissed an' kissed again,
An' deir t'oughts were not on pain,
But was 'way down in de sout'
Where dey'd wedded in deir yout',
In de marnin' of deir life
Free from all de grief an' strife,
Happy in de marnin' light,
Never thinkin' of de night.

So dey k'lated eberyt'ing;
An' de profit it could bring,
A'ter all de business fix',
Was a princely two-an'-six.

Claude McKay

When Dawn Comes to the City

The tired cars go grumbling by,
The moaning, groaning cars,
And the old milk carts go rumbling by
Under the same dull stars.
Out of the tenements, cold as stone,
Dark figures start for work;
I watch them sadly shuffle on,
'Tis dawn, dawn in New York.

But I would be on the island of the sea,
In the heart of the island of the sea,
Where the cocks are crowing, crowing, crowing,
And the hens are cackling in the rose-apple tree,
Where the old draft-horse is neighing, neighing, neighing,
Out on the brown dew-silvered lawn,
And the tethered cow is lowing, lowing, lowing,
And dear old Ned is braying, braying, braying,
And the shaggy Nannie goat is calling, calling, calling
From her little trampled corner of the long wide lea
That stretches to the waters of the hill-stream falling
Sheer upon the flat rocks joyously!
There, oh, there! on the island of the sea,
There would I be at dawn.

The tired cars go grumbling by,
The crazy, lazy cars,
And the same milk carts go rumbling by
Under the dying stars.
A lonely newsboy hurries by,
Humming a recent ditty;
Red streaks strike through the gray of the sky,
The dawn comes to the city.

But I would be on the island of the sea,
In the heart of the island of the sea,
Where the cocks are crowing, crowing, crowing,
And the hens are cackling in the rose-apple tree,
Where the old draft-horse is neighing, neighing, neighing
Out on the brown dew-silvered lawn,
And the tethered cow is lowing, lowing, lowing,
And dear old Ned is braying, braying, braying,
And the shaggy Nannie goat is calling, calling, calling,
From her little trampled corner of the long wide lea
That stretches to the waters of the hill-stream falling
Sheer upon the flat rocks joyously!
There, oh, there! on the island of the sea,
There I would be at dawn.

Claude McKay

When I Have Passed Away

When I have passed away and am forgotten,
And no one living can recall my face,
When under alien sod my bones lie rotten
With not a tree or stone to mark the place;

Perchance a pensive youth, with passion burning,
For olden verse that smacks of love and wine,
The musty pages of old volumes turning,
May light upon a little song of mine,

And he may softly hum the tune and wonder
Who wrote the verses in the long ago;
Or he may sit him down awhile to ponder
Upon the simple words that touch him so.

Claude McKay

White Houses

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
A chafing savage, down the decent street;
And passion rends my vitals as I pass,
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart inviolate
Against the potent poison of your hate.

Claude McKay

Wild May

Aleta mentions in her tender letters,
Among a chain of quaint and touching things,
That you are feeble, weighted down with fetters,
And given to strange deeds and mutterings.
No longer without trace or thought of fear,
Do you leap to and ride the rebel roan;
But have become the victim of grim care,
With three brown beauties to support alone.
But none the less will you be in my mind,
Wild May that cantered by the risky ways,
With showy head-cloth flirting in the wind,
From market in the glad December days;
Wild May of whom even other girls could rave
Before sex tamed your spirit, made you slave.

Claude McKay

Winter in the Country

Sweet life! how lovely to be here
And feel the soft sea-laden breeze
Strike my flushed face, the spruce's fair
Free limbs to see, the lesser trees'

Bare hands to touch, the sparrow's cheep
To heed, and watch his nimble flight
Above the short brown grass asleep.
Love glorious in his friendly might,

Music that every heart could bless,
And thoughts of life serene, divine,
Beyond my power to express,
Crowd round this lifted heart of mine!

But oh! to leave this paradise
For the city's dirty basement room,
Where, beauty hidden from the eyes,
A table, bed, bureau, and broom

In corner set, two crippled chairs
All covered up with dust and grim
With hideousness and scars of years,
And gaslight burning weird and dim,

Will welcome me . . . And yet, and yet
This very wind, the winter birds
The glory of the soft sunset,
Come there to me in words.

Claude McKay