Classic Poetry Series

Paul Laurence Dunbar

- poems -

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A Choice

They please me not-- these solemn songs
That hint of sermons covered up.
'T is true the world should heed its wrongs,
But in a poem let me sup,
Not simples brewed to cure or ease
Humanity's confessed disease,
But the spirit-wine of a singing line,
Or a dew-drop in a honey cup!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

A Golden Day

I Found you and I lost you,
All on a gleaming day.
The day was filled with sunshine,
And the land was full of May.

A golden bird was singing
Its melody divine,
I found you and I loved you,
And all the world was mine.

I found you and I lost you,
All on a golden day,
But when I dream of you, dear,
It is always brimming May.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

A Negro Love Song

Seen my lady home las' night,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hel' huh han' an' sque'z it tight,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hyeahd huh sigh a little sigh,
Seen a light gleam f'om huh eye,
An' a smile go flittin' by --
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hyeahd de win' blow thoo de pine,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Mockin'-bird was singin' fine,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
An' my hea't was beatin' so,
When I reached my lady's do',
Dat I could n't ba' to go --
Jump back, honey, jump back.

Put my ahm aroun' huh wais',
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Raised huh lips an' took a tase,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Love me, honey, love me true?
Love me well ez I love you?
An' she answe'd, "'Cose I do"--
Jump back, honey, jump back.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Accountability

FOLKS ain't got no right to censuah othah folks about dey habits;
Him dat giv' de squir'ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu' de rabbits.
Him dat built de gread big mountains hollered out de little valleys,
Him dat made de streets an' driveways wasn't shamed to make de alleys.

We is all constructed diff'ent, d'ain't no two of us de same;
We cain't he'p ouah likes an' dislikes, ef we'se bad we ain't to blame.
Ef we'se good, we need n't show off, case you bet it ain't ouah doin'
We gits into su'ttain channels dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin'.

But we all fits into places dat no othah ones could fill,
An' we does the things we has to, big er little, good er ill.
John cain't tek de place o' Henry, Su an' Sally ain't alike;
Bass ain't nuthin' like a suckah, chub ain't nuthin' like a pike.

When you come to think about it, how it's all planned out it's splendid.
Nuthin's done er evah happens, 'dout hit's somefin' dat's intended;
Don't keer whut you does, you has to, an' hit sholy beats de dickens,--
Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o' mastah's chickens.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

At the Tavern

A lilt and a swing,
And a ditty to sing,
Or ever the night grow old;
The wine is within,
And I'm sure t'were a sin
For a soldier to choose to be cold, my dear,
For a soldier to choose to be cold.
We're right for a spell,
But the fever is -- well,
No thing to be braved, at least;
So bring me the wine;
No low fever in mine,
For a drink more kind than a priest, my dear,
For a drink is more kind than a
priest.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Common Things

I like to hear of wealth and gold,
And El Doradoes in their glory;
I like for silks and satins bold
To sweep and rustle through a story.

The nightingale is sweet of song;
The rare exotic smells divinely;
And knightly men who stride along,
The role heroic carry finely.

But then, upon the other hand,
Our minds have got a way of running
To things that aren't quite so grand,
Which, maybe, we are best in shunning.

For some of us still like to see
The poor man in his dwelling narrow,
The hollyhock, the bumblebee,
The meadow lark, and chirping sparrow.

We like the man who soars and sings
With high and lofty inspiration;
But he who sings of common things
Shall always share our admiration.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Confirmation

He was a poet who wrote clever verses,
And folks said he had a fine poetical taste;
But his father, a practical farmer, accused him
Of letting the strength of his arm go to waste.

He called on his sweetheart each Saturday evening,
As pretty a maiden as ever man faced,
And there he confirmed the old man's accusation
By letting the strength of his arm go to waist.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Distinction

"I am but clay," the sinner plead,
Who fed each vain desire.
"Not only clay," another said,
"But worse, for thou art mire."

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Douglass

Ah, Douglass, we have fall'n on evil days,
Such days as thou, not even thou didst know,
When thee, the eyes of that harsh long ago
Saw, salient, at the cross of devious ways,
And all the country heard thee with amaze.
Not ended then, the passionate ebb and flow,
The awful tide that battled to and fro;
We ride amid a tempest of dispraise.

Now, when the waves of swift dissension swarm,
And Honour, the strong pilot, lieth stark,
Oh, for thy voice high-sounding o'er the storm,
For thy strong arm to guide the shivering bark,
The blast-defying power of thy form,
To give us comfort through the lonely dark.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Encouraged

Because you love me I have much achieved,
Had you despised me then I must have failed,
But since I knew you trusted and believed,
I could not disappoint you and so prevailed.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Encouragement

WHO dat knockin' at de do'?
Why, Ike Johnson, -- yes, fu' sho!
Come in, Ike. I's mighty glad
You come down. I t'ought you's
    mad
At me 'bout de othah night,
An' was stayin' 'way fu' spite.
Say, now, was you mad fu' true
W'en I kin' o' laughed at you?
   Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f.

'T ain't no use a-lookin' sad,
An' a-mekin' out you's mad;
Ef you's gwine to be so glum,
Wondah why you evah come.
I don't lak nobody 'roun'
Dat jes' shet dey mouf an' frown,--
Oh, now, man, don't act a dunce!
Cain't you talk? I tol' you once,
   Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f.

Wha'd you come hyeah fu' to-night?
Body'd t'ink yo' haid ain't right.
I's done all dat I kin do,--
Dressed perticler, jes' fu' you;
Reckon I'd 'a' bettah wo'
My ol' ragged calico.
Aftah all de pains I's took,
Cain't you tell me how I look?
   Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f.

Bless my soul! I 'mos' fu'got
Tellin' you 'bout Tildy Scott.
Don't you know, come Thu'sday
    night,
She gwine ma'y Lucius White?
Miss Lize say I allus wuh
Heap sight laklier 'n huh;
An' she'll git me somep'n new,
Ef I wants to ma'y too.
   Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f.

I could ma'y in a week,
Ef de man I wants 'ud speak.
Tildy's presents'll be fine,
But dey would n't ekal mine.
Him whut gits me fu' a wife
'Ll be proud, you bet yo' life.
I's had offers; some ain't quit;
But I has n't ma'ied yit!
   Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f.

Ike, I loves you,--yes, I does;
You's my choice, and allus was.
Laffin' at you ain't no harm.--
Go 'way, dahky, whaih's yo' arm?
Hug me closer--dah, dat's right!
Was n't you a awful sight,
Havin' me to baig you so?
Now ax whut you want to know,--
  Speak up, Ike, an' 'spress yo'se'f!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Frederick Douglass

A hush is over all the teeming lists,
And there is pause, a breath-space in the strife;
A spirit brave has passed beyond the mists
And vapors that obscure the sun of life.
And Ethiopia, with bosom torn,
Laments the passing of her noblest born.

She weeps for him a mother's burning tears--
She loved him with a mother's deepest love
He was her champion thro' direful years,
And held her weal all other ends above.
When Bondage held her bleeding in the dust,
He raised her up and whispered, 'Hope and Trust.'

For her his voice, a fearless clarion, rung
That broke in warning on the ears of men;
For her the strong bow of his pow'r he strung
And sent his arrows to the very den
Where grim Oppression held his bloody place
And gloated o'er the mis'ries of a race.

And he was no soft-tongued apologist;
He spoke straight-forward, fearlessly uncowed;
The sunlight of his truth dispelled the mist
And set in bold relief each dark-hued cloud;
To sin and crime he gave their proper hue,
And hurled at evil what was evil's due.

Thro' good and ill report he cleaved his way
Right onward, with his face set toward the heights,
Nor feared to face the foeman's dread array--
The lash of scorn, the sting of petty spites.
He dared the lightning in the lightning's track,
And answered thunder with his thunder back.

When men maligned him and their torrent wrath
In furious imprecations o'er him broke,
He kept his counsel as he kept his path;
'Twas for his race, not for himself, he spoke.
He knew the import of his Master's call
And felt himself too mighty to be small.

No miser in the good he held was he--
His kindness followed his horizon's rim.
His heart, his talents and his hands were free
To all who truly needed aught of him.
Where poverty and ignorance were rife,
He gave his bounty as he gave his life.

The place and cause that first aroused his might
Still proved its pow'r until his latest day.
In Freedom's lists and for the aid of Right

Still in the foremost rank he waged the fray;
Wrong lived; His occupation was not gone.
He died in action with his armor on!

We weep for him, but we have touched his hand,
And felt the magic of his presence nigh,
The current that he sent thro' out the land,
The kindling spirit of his battle-cry
O'er all that holds us we shall triumph yet
And place our banner where his hopes were set!

Oh, Douglass, thou hast passed beyond the shore,
But still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale!
Thou 'st taught thy race how high her hopes may soar
And bade her seek the heights, nor faint, nor fail.
She will not fail, she heeds thy stirring cry,
She knows thy guardian spirit will be nigh,
And rising from beneath the chast'ning rod,
She stretches out her bleeding hands to God!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Howdy, Honey, Howdy

DO' a-stan'in' on a jar, fiah a-shinin'
thoo,
Ol' folks drowsin' 'roun' de place,
wide awake is Lou,
W'en I tap, she answah, an' I see
huh 'mence to grin,
"Howdy, honey, howdy, won't you
step right in?"

Paul Laurence Dunbar

If I Could But Forget

If I could but forget
The fullness of those first sweet days,
When you burst sun-like thro' the haze
Of unacquaintance, on my sight,
And made the wet, gray day seem bright
While clouds themselves grew fair to see.
And since, no day is gray or wet
But all the scene comes back to me,
If I could but forget.

If I could but forget
How your dusk eyes look into mine,
And how I thrilled as with strong wine
Beneath your touch; while sped amain
The quickened stream thro' ev'ry vein;
How near my breath fell to a gasp,
When for a space our fingers met
In one electric vibrant clasp,
If I could but forget.

If I could but forget
The months of passion and of pain,
And all that followed in their train--
Rebellious thoughts that would arise,
Rebellious tears that dimmed mine eyes,
The prayers that I might set love's fire
Aflame within your bosom yet--
The death at last of that desire--
If I could but forget.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Life's Tragedy

It may be misery not to sing at all,
And to go silent through the brimming day;
It may be misery never to be loved,
But deeper griefs than these beset the way.

To sing the perfect song,
And by a half-tone lost the key,
There the potent sorrow, there the grief,
The pale, sad staring of Life's Tragedy.

To have come near to the perfect love,
Not the hot passion of untempered youth,
But that which lies aside its vanity,
And gives, for thy trusting worship, truth.

This, this indeed is to be accursed,
For if we mortals love, or if we sing,
We count our joys not by what we have,
But by what kept us from that perfect thing.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Little Brown Baby

Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee.
What you been doin', suh -- makin' san' pies?
Look at dat bib -- you's es du'ty ez me.
Look at dat mouf -- dat's merlasses, I bet;
Come hyeah, Maria, an' wipe off his han's.
Bees gwine to ketch you an' eat you up yit,
Bein' so sticky an sweet -- goodness lan's!
Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Who's pappy's darlin' an' who's pappy's chile?
Who is it all de day nevah once tries
Fu' to be cross, er once loses dat smile?
Whah did you git dem teef? My, you's a scamp!
Whah did dat dimple come f'om in yo' chin?
Pappy do' know you -- I b'lieves you's a tramp;
Mammy, dis hyeah's some ol' straggler got in!

Let's th'ow him outen de do' in de san',
We do' want stragglers a-layin' 'roun' hyeah;
Let's gin him 'way to de big buggah-man;
I know he's hidin' erroun' hyeah right neah.
Buggah-man, buggah-man, come in de do',
Hyeah's a bad boy you kin have fu' to eat.
Mammy an' pappy do' want him no mo',
Swaller him down f'om his haid to his feet!

Dah, now, I t'ought dat you'd hug me up close.
Go back, ol' buggah, you sha'n't have dis boy.
He ain't no tramp, ner no straggler, of co'se;
He's pappy's pa'dner an' play-mate an' joy.
Come to you' pallet now -- go to yo' res';
Wisht you could allus know ease an' cleah skies;
Wisht you could stay jes' a chile on my breas'--
Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Morning

The mist has left the greening plain,
The dew-drops shine like fairy rain,
The coquette rose awakes again
Her lovely self adorning.

The Wind is hiding in the trees,
A sighing, soothing, laughing tease,
Until the rose says "Kiss me, please,"
'Tis morning, 'tis morning.

With staff in hand and careless-free,
The wanderer fares right jauntily,
For towns and houses are, thinks he,
For scorning, for scorning.
My soul is swift upon the wing,
And in its deeps a song I bring;
Come, Love, and we together sing,
"'Tis morning, 'tis morning."

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Old

I have seen peoples come and go
Alike the Ocean'd ebb and flow;
I have seen kingdoms rise and fall
Like springtime shadows on a wall.
I have seen houses rendered great
That grew from life's debased estate,
And all, all, all is change I see,
So, dearest God, take me, take me.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ships that Pass in the Night

Out in the sky the great dark clouds are massing;
I look far out into the pregnant night,
Where I can hear the solemn booming gun
And catch the gleaming of a random light,
That tells me that the ship I seek
is passing, passing.
My tearful eyes my soul's deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,
And but its ghost doth reach that vessel, passing, passing.
O Earth, O Sky, O Ocean, both surpassing,
O heart of mine, O soul that dreads the dark!
Is there no hope for me? Is there no way
That I may sight and check that speeding bark
Which out of sight and sound is passing, passing?

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Signs of the Times

Air a-gittin' cool an' coolah,
Frost a-comin' in de night,
Hicka' nuts an' wa'nuts fallin',
Possum keepin' out o' sight.
Tu'key struttin' in de ba'nya'd,
Nary a step so proud ez his;
Keep on struttin', Mistah Tu'key,
Yo' do' know whut time it is.
Cidah press commence a-squeakin'
Eatin' apples sto'ed away,
Chillun swa'min' 'roun' lak ho'nets,
Huntin' aigs ermung de hay.
Mistah Tu'key keep on gobblin'
At de geese a-flyin' souf,
Oomph! dat bird do' know whut's comin';
Ef he did he'd shet his mouf.
Pumpkin gittin' good an' yallah
Mek me open up my eyes;
Seems lak it's a-lookin' at me
Jes' a-la'in' dah sayin' "Pies."
Tu'key gobbler gwine 'roun' blowin',
Gwine 'roun' gibbin' sass an' slack;
Keep on talkin', Mistah Tu'key,
You ain't seed no almanac.
Fa'mer walkin' th'oo de ba'nya'd
Seein' how things is comin' on,
Sees ef all de fowls is fatt'nin' --
Good times comin' sho's you bo'n.
Hyeahs dat tu'key gobbler braggin',
Den his face break in a smile --
Nebbah min', you sassy rascal,
He's gwine nab you atter while.
Choppin' suet in de kitchen,
Stonin' raisins in de hall,
Beef a-cookin' fu' de mince meat,
Spices groun' -- I smell 'em all.
Look hyeah, Tu'key, stop dat gobblin',
You ain' luned de sense ob feah,
You ol' fool, yo' naik's in dangah,
Do' you know Thanksgibbin's hyeah?

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Song

Wintah, summah, snow er shine,
Hit's all de same to me,
Ef only I kin call you mine,
An' keep you by my knee.
Ha'dship, frolic, grief er caih,
Content by night an' day,
Ef only I kin see you whaih
You wait beside de way.
Livin', dyin', smiles er teahs,
My soul will still be free,
Ef only thoo de comin' yeahs
You walk de worl' wid me.
Bird-song, breeze-wail, chune er moan,
What puny t'ings dey'll be,
Ef w'en I's seemin' all erlone,
I knows yo' hea't's wid me.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Summer in the South

The Oriole sings in the greening grove
As if he were half-way waiting,
The rosebuds peep from their hoods of green,
Timid, and hesitating.
The rain comes down in a torrent sweep
And the nights smell warm and pinety,
The garden thrives, but the tender shoots
Are yellow-green and tiny.
Then a flash of sun on a waiting hill,
Streams laugh that erst were quiet,
The sky smiles down with a dazzling blue
And the woods run mad with riot.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Sympathy

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals--
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting--
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,--
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings--
I know why the caged bird sings!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Barrier

The Midnight wooed the Morning Star,
And prayed her: "Love come nearer;
Your swinging coldly there afar
To me but makes you dearer."

The Morning Star was pale with dole
As said she, low replying:
"Oh, lover mine, soul of my soul,
For you I too am sighing."

"But One ordained when we were born,
In spite of love's insistence,
That night might only view the Morn
Adoring at a distance."

But as she spoke, the jealous Sun
Across the heavens panted;
"Oh, whining fools," he cried, "have done,
Your wishes shall be granted."

He hurled his flaming lances far;
The twain stood unaffrighted,
And Midnight and the Morning Star
Lay down in death united.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Debt

This is the debt I pay
  Just for one riotous day,
  Years of regret and grief,
  Sorrow without relief.
  Pay it I will to the end --
  Until the grave, my friend,
  Gives me a true release --
  Gives me the clasp of peace.
  Slight was the thing I bought,
 Small was the debt I thought,
 Poor was the loan at best --
 God! but the interest!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Haunted Oak

Pray why are you so bare, so bare,
Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
Runs a shudder over me?
My leaves were green as the best, I trow,
And sap ran free in my veins,
But I say in the moonlight dim and weird
A guiltless victim's pains.
They'd charged him with the old, old crime,
And set him fast in jail:
Oh, why does the dog howl all night long,
And why does the night wind wail?
He prayed his prayer and he swore his oath,
And he raised his hand to the sky;
But the beat of hoofs smote on his ear,
And the steady tread drew nigh.
Who is it rides by night, by night,
Over the moonlit road?
And what is the spur that keeps the pace,
What is the galling goad?
And now they beat at the prison door,
"Ho, keeper, do not stay!
We are friends of him whom you hold within,
And we fain would take him away
"From those who ride fast on our heels
With mind to do him wrong;
They have no care for his innocence,
And the rope they bear is long."
They have fooled the jailer with lying words,
They have fooled the man with lies;
The bolts unbar, the locks are drawn,
And the great door open flies.
Now they have taken him from the jail,
And hard and fast they ride,
And the leader laughs low down in his throat,
As they halt my trunk beside.

Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,
And the doctor one of white,
And the minister, with his oldest son,
Was curiously bedight.
Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?
'Tis but a little space,
And the time will come when these shall dread
The mem'ry of your face.
I feel the rope against my bark,
And the weight of him in my grain,
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.
And never more shall leaves come forth
On the bough that bears the ban;
I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,

From the curse of a guiltless man.
And ever the judge rides by, rides by,
And goes to hunt the deer,
And ever another rides his soul
In the guise of a mortal fear.
And ever the man he rides me hard,
And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
On the trunk of a haunted tree.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Lawyers' Ways

I've been list'nin' to them lawyers
In the court house up the street,
An' I've come to the conclusion
That I'm most completely beat.
Fust one feller riz to argy,
An' he boldly waded in
As he dressed the tremblin' pris'ner
In a coat o' deep-dyed sin.
Why, he painted him all over
In a hue o' blackest crime,
An' he smeared his reputation
With the thickest kind o' grime,
Tell I found myself a-wond'rin',
In a misty way and dim,
How the Lord had come to fashion
Sich an awful man as him.
Then the other lawyer started,
An' with brimmin', tearful eyes,
Said his client was a martyr
That was brought to sacrifice.
An' he give to that same pris'ner
Every blessed human grace,
Tell I saw the light o' virtue
Fairly shinin' from his face.
Then I own 'at I was puzzled
How sich things could rightly be;
An' this aggervatin' question
Seems to keep a-puzzlin' me.
So, will some one please inform me,
An' this mystery unroll--
How an angel an' a devil
Can persess the self-same soul?

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Made to Order Smile

When a woman looks up at you with a twist about her eyes,
And her brows are half uplifted in a nicely feigned surprise
As you breathe some pretty sentence, though she hates you all the while,
She is very apt to stun you with a made to order smile.

It's a sublte combination of a sneer and a caress,
With a dash of warmth thrown in to relieve its iciness,
And she greets you when she meets you with that look as if a file
Had been used to fix and fashion out the made to order smile.

I confess that I'm eccentric and am not a woman's man,
For they seem to be constructed on the bunko fakir plan,
And it somehow sets me thinking that her heart is full of guile
When a woman looks up at me with a made to order smile.

Now, all maidens, young and aged, hear the lesson I would teach:
Ye who meet us in the ballroom, ye who meet us at the beach,
Pray consent to try and charm us by some other sort of wile
And relieve us from the burden of that made to order smile.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Old Front Gate

W'en daih's chillun in de house,
Dey keep on a-gittin' tall;
But de folks don' seem to see
Dat dey's growin' up at all,
'Twell dey fin' out some fine day
Dat de gals has 'menced to grow,
W'en dey notice as dey pass
Dat de front gate's saggin' low.
W'en de hinges creak an' cry,
An' de bahs go slantin' down,
You kin reckon dat hit's time
Fu' to cas' yo' eye erroun',
'Cause daih ain't no 'sputin' dis,
Hit's de trues' sign to show
Dat daih's cou'tin goin' on
W'en de ol' front gate sags low.
Oh, you grumble an' complain,
An' you prop dat gate up right;
But you notice right nex' day
Dat hit's in de same ol' plight.
So you fin' dat hit's a rule,
An' daih ain' no use to blow,
W'en de gals is growin' up,
Dat de front gate will sag low.
Den you t'ink o' yo' young days,
W'en you cou'ted Sally Jane,
An' you so't o' feel ashamed
Fu' to grumble an' complain,
'Cause yo' ricerlection says,
An' you know hits wo'ds is so,
Dat huh pappy had a time
Wid his front gate saggin' low.
So you jes' looks on an' smiles
At 'em leanin' on de gate,
Tryin' to t'ink whut he kin say
Fu' to keep him daih so late,
But you lets dat gate erlone,
Fu' yo' 'sperunce goes to show,
'Twell de gals is ma'ied off,
It gwine keep on saggin' low.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Paradox

I am the mother of sorrows,
I am the ender of grief;
I am the bud and the blossom,
I am the late-falling leaf.

I am thy priest and thy poet,
I am thy serf and thy king;
I cure the tears of the heartsick,
When I come near they shall sing.

White are my hands as the snowdrop;
Swart are my fingers as clay;
Dark is my frown as the midnight,
Fair is my brow as the day.

Battle and war are my minions,
Doing my will as divine;
I am the calmer of passions,
Peace is a nursling of mine.

Speak to me gently or curse me,
Seek me or fly from my sight;
I am thy fool in the morning,
Thou art my slave in the night.

Down to the grave I will take thee,
Out from the noise of the strife,
Then shalt thou see me and know me--
Death, then, no longer, but life.

Then shalt thou sing at my coming,
Kiss me with passionate breath,
Clasp me and smile to have thought me
Aught save the foeman of death.

Come to me, brother, when weary,
Come when thy lonely heart swells;
I'll guide thy footsteps and lead thee
Down where the Dream Woman dwells.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Unlucky Apple

'Twas the apple that in Eden
Caused our father's primal fall;
And the Trojan War, remember --
'Twas an apple caused it all.
So for weeks I've hesitated,
You can guess the reason why,
For I want to tell my darling
She's the apple of my eye.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Theology

There is a heaven, for ever, day by day,
The upward longing of my soul doth tell me so.
There is a hell, I'm quite as sure; for pray
If there were not, where would my neighbours go?

Paul Laurence Dunbar

To Dan

STEP me now a bridal measure,
Work give way to love and leisure,
Hearts be free and hearts be gay --
Doctor Dan doth wed to-day.

Diagnosis, cease your squalling --
Check that scalpel's senseless bawling,
Put that ugly knife away --
Doctor Dan doth wed to-day.

'Tis no time for things unsightly,
Life's the day and life goes lightly;
Science lays aside her sway--
Love rules Dr. Dan to-day.

Gather, gentlemen and ladies,
For the nuptial feast now made is,
Swing your garlands, chant your lay
For the pair who wed to-day.

Wish them happy days and many,
Troubles few and griefs not any,
Lift your brimming cups and say
God bless them who wed to-day.

Then a cup to Cupid daring,
Who for conquest ever faring,
With his arrows dares assail
E'en a doctor's coat of mail.

So with blithe and happy hymning
And with harmless goblets brimming,
Dance a step -- musicians play --
Doctor Dan doth wed to-day.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

We Wear the Mask

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

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

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

Paul Laurence Dunbar

When de Co'n Pone's Hot

Dey is times in life when Nature
Seems to slip a cog an' go,
Jes' a-rattlin' down creation,
Lak an ocean's overflow;
When de worl' jes' stahts a-spinnin'
Lak a picaninny's top,
An' yo' cup o' joy is brimmin'
'Twell it seems about to slop,
An' you feel jes' lak a racah,
Dat is trainin' fu' to trot--
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone's hot.

When you set down at de table,
Kin' o' weary lak an' sad,
An' you 'se jes' a little tiahed
An' purhaps a little mad;
How yo' gloom tu'ns into gladness,
How yo' joy drives out de doubt
When de oven do' is opened,
An' de smell comes po'in' out;
Why, de 'lectric light o' Heaven
Seems to settle on de spot,
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone's hot.

When de cabbage pot is steamin'
An' de bacon good an' fat,
When de chittlins is a-sputter'n'
So's to show you whah dey's at;
Tek away yo' sody biscuit,
Tek away yo' cake an' pie,
Fu' de glory time is comin',
An' it's 'proachin' mighty nigh,
An' you want to jump an' hollah,
Dough you know you'd bettah not,
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone's hot.

I have hyeahd a' lots o' sermons,
An' I've hyeahd o' lots o' prayers,
An I've listened to some singin'
Dat has tuck me up de stairs
Of de Glory-Lan' an' set me
Jes' below de Mastah's th'one,
An' have lef' my hea't a-singin'
In a happy aftah tone;
But dem wu'ds so sweetly murmured
Seem to tech de softes' spot,
When my mammy says de blessin',
An' de co'n pone's hot.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

When Malindy Sings

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy--
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?
Ef you practise twell you're gray,
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'
Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to de big woods
When Malindy sings.

You ain't got de nachel o'gans
Fu' to make de soun' come right,
You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's
Fu' to make it sweet an' light.
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,
An' I 'm tellin' you fu' true,
When hit comes to raal right singin',
'T ain't no easy thing to do.

Easy 'nough fu' folks to hollah,
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
When dey ain't no one kin sence it,
An' de chune comes in, in spots;
But fu' real malojous music,
Dat jes' strikes yo' hea't and clings,
Jes' you stan' an' listen wif me
When Malindy sings.

Ain't you nevah hyeahd Malindy?
Blessed soul, tek up de cross!
Look hyeah, ain't you jokin', honey?
Well, you don't know whut you los'.
Y' ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin',
Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an' hides dey face.
When Malindy sings.

Fiddlin' man jes' stop his fiddlin',
Lay his fiddle on de she'f;
Mockin'-bird quit tryin' to whistle,
'Cause he jes' so shamed hisse'f.
Folks a-playin' on de banjo
Draps dey fingahs on de strings--
Bless yo' soul--fu'gits to move 'em,
When Malindy sings.

She jes' spreads huh mouf and hollahs,
"Come to Jesus," twell you hyeah
Sinnahs' tremblin' steps and voices,
Timid-lak a-drawin' neah;
Den she tu'ns to "Rock of Ages,"
Simply to de cross she clings,
An' you fin' yo' teahs a-drappin'

When Malindy sings.

Who dat says dat humble praises
Wif de Master nevah counts?
Heish yo' mouf, I hyeah dat music,
Ez hit rises up an' mounts--
Floatin' by de hills an' valleys,
Way above dis buryin' sod,
Ez hit makes its way in glory
To de very gates of God!

Oh, hit's sweetah dan de music
Of an edicated band;
An' hit's dearah dan de battle's
Song o' triumph in de lan'.
It seems holier dan evenin'
When de solemn chu'ch bell rings,
Ez I sit an' ca'mly listen
While Malindy sings.

Towsah, stop dat ba'kin', hyeah me!
Mandy, mek dat chile keep still;
Don't you hyeah de echoes callin'
F'om de valley to de hill?
Let me listen, I can hyeah it,
Th'oo de bresh of angel's wings,
Sof' an' sweet, "Swing Low,
 Sweet Chariot,"
Ez Malindy sings.

Paul Laurence Dunbar