

Classic Poetry Series

Countee Cullen
- poems -

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Countee Cullen(30 May 1903 – 9 January 1946)

Countee Cullen was an American poet who was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

Early life

Countee Cullen was possibly born on May 30, although due to conflicting accounts of his early life, a general application of the year of his birth as 1903 is reasonable. He was either born in New York, Baltimore, or Lexington, Kentucky, with his widow being convinced he was born in Lexington. Cullen was possibly abandoned by his mother, and reared by a woman named Mrs. Porter, who was probably his paternal grandmother. Porter brought young Countee to Harlem when he was nine. She died in 1918. No known reliable information exists of his childhood until 1918 when he was taken in, or adopted, by Reverend and Mrs Frederick A. Cullen of Harlem, New York City. The Reverend was the local minister, and founder, of the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church. In addition Countee Cullen was a very important man in the Harlem Renaissance. He was successful writing many poems that we familiarized ourselves with today and for many years to come.

DeWitt Clinton High School

At some point, Cullen entered the DeWitt Clinton High School in Manhattan. He excelled academically at the school while emphasizing his skills at poetry and in oratorical contest. At DeWitt, he was elected into the honor society, editor of the weekly newspaper, and elected vice-president of his graduating class. In January 1922, he graduated with honors in Latin, Greek, Mathematics, and French.

New York University and Harvard University

After graduating high school, he entered New York University (NYU). In 1923, he won second prize in the Witter Bynner undergraduate poetry contest, which was sponsored by the Poetry Society of America, with a poem entitled The Ballad of the Brown Girl. At about this time, some of his poetry was promulgated in the national periodicals Harper's, Crisis, Opportunity, The Bookman, and Poetry. The ensuing year he again placed second in the contest and finally winning it in 1925. Cullen competed in a poetry contest sponsored by Opportunity. and came in second with To One Who Say Me Nay, while losing to Langston Hughes' The Weary Blues. Sometime thereafter, Cullen graduated from NYU as one of

eleven students selected to Phi Beta Kappa.

Cullen entered Harvard in 1925, to pursue a masters in English, about the same time his first collection of poems, *Color*, was published. Written in a careful, traditional style, the work celebrated black beauty and deplored the effects of racism. The book included "Heritage" and "Incident", probably his most famous poems. "Yet Do I Marvel", about racial identity and injustice, showed the influence of the literary expression of [William Wordsworth](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-wordsworth/) and [William Blake](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-blake/), but its subject was far from the world of their Romantic sonnets. The poet accepts that there is God, and "God is good, well-meaning, kind", but he finds a contradiction of his own plight in a racist society: he is black and a poet. Cullen's *Color* was a landmark of the Harlem Renaissance. He graduated with a masters degree in 1926.

Professional Career

This 1920s artistic movement produced the first large body of work in the United States written by African Americans. However, Cullen considered poetry raceless, although his 'The Black Christ' took a racial theme, lynching of a black youth for a crime he did not commit. Countee Cullen was very secretive about his life. His real mother did not contact him until he became famous in the 1920s.

The movement was centered in the cosmopolitan community of Harlem, in New York City. During the 1920s, a fresh generation of writers emerged, although a few were Harlem-born. Other leading figures included Alain Locke (*The New Negro*, 1925), [James Weldon Johnson](http://www.poemhunter.com/james-weldon-johnson/) (*Black Manhattan*, 1930), [Claude McKay](http://www.poemhunter.com/claude-mckay/) (*Home to Harlem*, 1928), Hughes (*The Weary Blues*, 1926), Zora Neale Hurston (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 1934), Wallace Thurman (*Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life*, 1929), [Jean Toomer](http://www.poemhunter.com/jean-toomer/) (*Cane*, 1923) and Arna Bontemps (*Black Thunder*, 1935). The movement was accelerated by grants and scholarships and supported by such white writers as Carl Van Vechten.

He worked as assistant editor for *Opportunity* magazine, where his column, "The Dark Tower", increased his literary reputation. Cullen's poetry collections *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1927) and *Copper Sun* (1927) explored similar themes as *Color*, but they were not so well received. Cullen's Guggenheim Fellowship of 1928 enabled him to study and write abroad. He met Nina Yolande Du Bois,

daughter of W.E.B. DuBois, the leading black intellectual. At that time Yolande was involved romantically with a popular band leader. Between the years 1928 and 1934, Cullen traveled back and forth between France and the United States.

Cullen married Yolande DuBois in April 1928. The marriage was the social event of the decade, but the marriage did not fare well, and he divorced in 1930. It is rumored that Cullen was a homosexual, and his relationship with Harold Jackman was a significant factor in the divorce. Jackman was a teacher whom Van Vechten had used as a model in his novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

By 1929 Cullen had published four volumes of poetry. The title poem of *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929) was criticized for the use of Christian religious imagery - Cullen compared the lynching of a black man to the crucifixion of Jesus.

As well as writing books himself, Cullen promoted the work of other black writers. But by 1930 Cullen's reputation as a poet waned. In 1932 appeared his only novel, *One Way to Heaven*, a social comedy of lower-class blacks and the bourgeoisie in New York City. From 1934 until the end of his life, he taught English, French, and creative writing at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York City. During this period, he also wrote two works for young readers, *The Lost Zoo* (1940), poems about the animals who perished in the Flood, and *My Lives and How I Lost Them*, an autobiography of his cat. In the last years of his life, Cullen wrote mostly for the theatre. He worked with Arna Bontemps to adapt his 1931 novel, *God Sends Sunday* into *St. Louis Woman* (1946, publ. 1971) for the musical stage. Its score was composed by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, both white. The Broadway musical, set in poor black neighborhood in St. Louis, was criticized by black intellectuals for creating a negative image of black Americans. Cullen also translated the Greek tragedy *Medea* by Euripides, which was published in 1935 as *The Medea and Some Poems* with a collection of sonnets and short lyrics.

In 1940, Cullen married Ida Mae Robertson, whom he had known for ten years.

A Brown Girl Dead

With two white roses on her breasts,
White candles at head and feet,
Dark Madonna of the grave she rests;
Lord Death has found her sweet.

Her mother pawned her wedding ring
To lay her out in white;
She'd be so proud she'd dance and sing
to see herself tonight.

Countee Cullen

For A Lady I Know

She even thinks that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores

While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores.

Countee Cullen

For A Poet

I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
And laid them away in a box of gold;
Where long will cling the lips of the moth,
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth;
I hide no hate; I am not even wroth
Who found the earth's breath so keen and cold;
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
And laid them away in a box of gold.

Countee Cullen

From The Dark Tower

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made to eternally weep.
The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.

Countee Cullen

Fruit Of The Flower

My father is a quiet man
With sober, steady ways;
For simile, a folded fan;
His nights are like his days.
My mother's life is puritan,
No hint of cavalier,
A pool so calm you're sure it can
Have little depth to fear.

And yet my father's eyes can boast
How full his life has been;
There haunts them yet the languid ghost
Of some still sacred sin.

And though my mother chants of God,
And of the mystic river,
I've seen a bit of checkered sod
Set all her flesh aquiver.

Why should he deem it pure mischance
A son of his is fain
To do a naked tribal dance
Each time he hears the rain?

Why should she think it devil's art
That all my songs should be
Of love and lovers, broken heart,
And wild sweet agony?

Who plants a seed begets a bud,
Extract of that same root;
Why marvel at the hectic blood
That flushes this wild fruit?

Countee Cullen

Harlem Wine

This is not water running here,
These thick rebellious streams
That hurtle flesh and bone past fear
Down alleyways of dreams

This is a wine that must flow on
Not caring how or where
So it has ways to flow upon
Where song is in the air.

So it can woo an artful flute
With loose elastic lips
Its measurements of joy compute
With blithe, ecstatic hips.

Countee Cullen

Heritage

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who all day long
Want no sound except the song
Sung by wild barbaric birds
Goading massive jungle herds,
Juggernauts of flesh that pass
Trampling tall defiant grass
Where young forest lovers lie,
Plighting troth beneath the sky.
So I lie, who always hear,
Though I cram against my ear
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
Great drums throbbing through the air.
So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood dammed within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
Channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret.

Africa? A book one thumbs
Listlessly, till slumber comes.
Unremembered are her bats
Circling through the night, her cats
Crouching in the river reeds,
Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
By the river brink; no more

Does the bugle-throated roar
Cry that monarch claws have leapt
From the scabbards where they slept.
Silver snakes that once a year
Doff the lovely coats you wear,
Seek no covert in your fear
Lest a mortal eye should see;
What's your nakedness to me?
Here no leprous flowers rear
Fierce corollas in the air;
Here no bodies sleek and wet,
Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
Tread the savage measures of
Jungle boys and girls in love.
What is last year's snow to me,
Last year's anything? The tree
Budding yearly must forget
How its past arose or set­­
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,
Even what shy bird with mute
Wonder at her travail there,
Meekly labored in its hair.
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who find no peace
Night or day, no slight release
From the unremittent beat
Made by cruel padded feet
Walking through my body's street.
Up and down they go, and back,
Treading out a jungle track.
So I lie, who never quite
Safely sleep from rain at night--
I can never rest at all
When the rain begins to fall;
Like a soul gone mad with pain
I must match its weird refrain;
Ever must I twist and squirm,
Writhing like a baited worm,

While its primal measures drip
Through my body, crying, "Strip!
Doff this new exuberance.
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!"
In an old remembered way
Rain works on me night and day.

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
Black men fashion out of rods,
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
In a likeness like their own,
My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of humility;
Heathen gods are naught to me.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Ever at Thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black,
Thinking then it would not lack
Precedent of pain to guide it,
Let who would or might deride it;
Surely then this flesh would know
Yours had borne a kindred woe.
Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features where,
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,
Patience wavers just so much as
Mortal grief compels, while touches
Quick and hot, of anger, rise
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.
Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.

All day long and all night through,

One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood.
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the dryest flax,
Melting like the merest wax,
Lest the grave restore its dead.
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realized
They and I are civilized.

Countee Cullen

I Have A Rendezvous With Life

I have a rendezvous with Life,
In days I hope will come,
Ere youth has sped, and strength of mind,
Ere voices sweet grow dumb.
I have a rendezvous with Life,
When Spring's first heralds hum.
Sure some would cry it's better far
To crown their days with sleep
Than face the road, the wind and rain,
To heed the calling deep.
Though wet nor blow nor space I fear,
Yet fear I deeply, too,
Lest Death should meet and claim me ere
I keep Life's rendezvous.

Countee Cullen

In Memory Of Col. Charles Young

Along the shore the tall thin grass,
That fringes that dark river,
While sinuously soft feet pass
Beings to bleed and quiver.

The great dark voice breaks with a sob
Across the womb of night;
Above your grave, the tom-toms throb
And the hills are weird with light.

The great dark beast is like a well
Drained bitter by the sky,
And all the honeyed lies they tell
Come there to thirst and die.

No lie is strong enough to kill
The roots that work below,
From your rich dust and slaughtered will
A tree with tongues shall grow.

Countee Cullen

Incident

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, 'Nigger.'

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

Countee Cullen

Karengé Ya Marengé

Wherein are words sublime or noble? What
Invests one speech with haloed eminence,
Makes it the sesame for all doors shut,
Yet in its like sees but impertinence?
Is it the hue? Is it the cast of eye,
The curve of lip or Asiatic breath,
Which mark a lesser place for Gandhi's cry
Than "Give me liberty or give me death!"

Is Indian speech so quaint, so weak, so rude,
So like its land enslaved, denied, and crude,
That men who claim they fight for liberty
Can hear this battle-shout impassively,
Yet to their arms with high resolve have sprung
At those same words cried in the English tongue?

Countee Cullen

Lines To My Father

The many sow, but only the chosen reap;
Happy the wretched host if Day be brief,
That with the cool oblivion of sleep
A dawnless Night may soothe the smart of grief.

If from the soil our sweat enriches sprout
One meagre blossom for our hands to cull,
Accustomed indigence provokes a shout
Of praise that life becomes so bountiful.

Now ushered regally into your own,
Look where you will, as far as eye can see,
Your little seeds are to a fullness grown,
And golden fruit is ripe on every tree.

Yours is no fairy gift, no heritage
Without travail, to which weak wills aspire;
This is a merited and grief-earned wage
From One Who holds His servants worth their hire.

So has the shyest of your dreams come true,
Built not of sand, but of the solid rock,
Impregnable to all that may accrue
Of elemental rage: storm, stress, and shock.

Countee Cullen

Saturday's Child

Some are teathed on a silver spoon,
With the stars strung for a rattle;
I cut my teeth as the black racoon--
For implements of battle.
Some are swaddled in silk and down,
And heralded by a star;
They swathed my limbs in a sackcloth gown
On a night that was black as tar.
For some, godfather and goddame
The opulent fairies be;
Dame Poverty gave me my name,
And Pain godfathered me.
For I was born on Saturday--
"Bad time for planting a seed,"
Was all my father had to say,
And, "One mouth more to feed."
Death cut the strings that gave me life,
And handed me to Sorrow,
The only kind of middle wife
My folks could beg or borrow.

Countee Cullen

She Of The Dancing Feet Sings

And what would I do in heaven pray,
Me with my dancing feet?
And limbs like apple boughs that sway
When the gusty rain winds beat.

And how would I thrive in a perfect place
Where dancing would be a sin,
With not a man to love my face,
Nor an arm to hold me in?

The seraphs and the cherubim
Would be too proud to bend,
To sing the faery tunes that brim
My heart from end to end.

The wistful angels down in hell
Will smile to see my face,
And understand, because they fell
From that all-perfect place.

Countee Cullen

Simon The Cyrenian Speaks

He never spoke a word to me,
And yet He called my name;
He never gave a sign to me,
And yet I knew and came.
At first I said, "I will not bear
His cross upon my back;
He only seeks to place it there
Because my skin is black."

But He was dying for a dream,
And He was very meek,
And in His eyes there shone a gleam
Men journey far to seek.

It was Himself my pity bought;
I did for Christ alone
What all of Rome could not have wrought
With bruise of lash or stone.

Countee Cullen

Song In Spite Of Myself

Never love with all your heart,
It only ends in aching;
And bit by bit to the smallest part
That organ will be breaking.

Never love with all your mind,
It only ends in fretting;
In musing on sweet joys behind,
too poignant for forgetting.

Never love with all your soul,
for such there is no ending;
though a mind that frets may find control,
and a shattered heart find mending.

Give but a grain of the heart's rich seed,
Confine some undercover,
And when love goes, bid him God-speed,
and find another lover.

Countee Cullen

Tableau

Locked arm in arm they cross the way
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare
And here the fair folk talk,
Indignant that these two should dare
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word
They pass, and see no wonder
That lightning brilliant as a sword
Should blaze the path of thunder.

Countee Cullen

That Bright Chimeric Beast

That bright chimeric beast
Conceived yet never born,
Save in the poet's breast,
The white-flanked unicorn,
Never may be shaken
From his solitude;
Never may be taken
In any earthly wood.

That bird forever feathered,
Of its new self the sire,
After aeons weathered,
Reincarnate by fire,
Falcon may not nor eagle
Swerve from his eyrie,
Nor any crumb inveigle
Down to an earthly tree.

That fish of the dread regime
Invented to become
The fable and the dream
Of the Lord's aquarium,
Leviathan, the jointed
Harpoon was never wrought
By which the Lord's anointed
Will suffer to be caught.

Bird of the deathless breast,
Fish of the frantic fin,
That bright chimeric beast
Flashing the argent skin,--
If beasts like these you'd harry,
Plumb then the poet's dream;
Make it your aviary,
Make it your wood and stream.

There only shall the swish
Be heard of the regal fish;
There like a golden knife

Dart the feet of the unicorn,
And there, death brought to life,
The dead bird be reborn.

Countee Cullen

The Loss Of Love

All through an empty place I go,
And find her not in any room;
The candles and the lamps I light
Go down before a wind of gloom.
Thick-spraddled lies the dust about,
A fit, sad place to write her name
Or draw her face the way she looked
That legendary night she came.

The old house crumbles bit by bit;
Each day I hear the ominous thud
That says another rent is there
For winds to pierce and storms to flood.

My orchards groan and sag with fruit;
Where, Indian-wise, the bees go round;
I let it rot upon the bough;
I eat what falls upon the ground.

The heavy cows go laboring
In agony with clotted teats;
My hands are slack; my blood is cold;
I marvel that my heart still beats.

I have no will to weep or sing,
No least desire to pray or curse;
The loss of love is a terrible thing;
They lie who say that death is worse.

Countee Cullen

The Shroud Of Color

"Lord, being dark," I said, "I cannot bear
The further touch of earth, the scented air;
Lord, being dark, forewilled to that despair
My color shrouds me in, I am as dirt
Beneath my brother's heel; there is a hurt
In all the simple joys which to a child
Are sweet; they are contaminate, defiled
By truths of wrongs the childish vision fails
To see; too great a cost this birth entails.
I strangle in this yoke drawn tighter than
The worth of bearing it, just to be man.
I am not brave enough to pay the price
In full; I lack the strength to sacrifice
I who have burned my hands upon a star,
And climbed high hills at dawn to view the far
Illimitable wonderments of earth,
For whom all cups have dripped the wine of mirth,
For whom the sea has strained her honeyed throat
Till all the world was sea, and I a boat
Unmoored, on what strange quest I willed to float;
Who wore a many-colored coat of dreams,
Thy gift, O Lord--I whom sun-dabbled streams
Have washed, whose bare brown thighs have held the sun
Incarcerate until his course was run,
I who considered man a high-perfected
Glass where loveliness could lie reflected,
Now that I sway athwart Truth's deep abyss,
Denuding man for what he was and is,
Shall breath and being so inveigle me
That I can damn my dreams to hell, and be
Content, each new-born day, anew to see
The steaming crimson vintage of my youth
Incarnadine the altar-slab of Truth?

Or hast Thou, Lord, somewhere I cannot see,
A lamb imprisoned in a bush for me?
Not so? Then let me render one by one
Thy gifts, while still they shine; some little sun
Yet gilds these thighs; my coat, albeit worn,

Still hold its colors fast; albeit torn.
My heart will laugh a little yet, if I
May win of Thee this grace, Lord: on this high
And sacrificial hill 'twixt earth and sky,
To dream still pure all that I loved, and die.
There is no other way to keep secure
My wild chimeras, grave-locked against the lure
Of Truth, the small hard teeth of worms, yet less
Envenomed than the mouth of Truth, will bless
Them into dust and happy nothingness.
Lord, Thou art God; and I, Lord, what am I
But dust? With dust my , let me die."

Across earth's warm, palpitating crust
I flung my body in embrace; I thrust
My mouth into the grass and sucked the dew,
Then gave it back in tears my anguish drew;
So hard I pressed against the ground, I felt
The smallest sandgrain like a knife, and smelt
The next year's flowering; all this to speed
My body's dissolution, fain to feed
The so I groaned, and spent my strength
Until, all passion spent, I lay full length
And quivered like a flayed and bleeding thing.

So lay till lifted on a great black wing
That had no mate nor flesh-apparent trunk
To hamper it; with me all time had sunk
Into oblivion; when I awoke
The wing hung poised above two cliffs that broke
The bowels of the earth in twain, and cleft
The seas , above, to left,
To right, I saw what no man saw before:
Earth, hell, and heaven; sinew, vein, and core.
All things that swim or walk or creep or fly,
All things that live and hunger, faint and die,
Were made majestic then and magnified
By sight so clearly purged and deified.
The smallest bug that crawls was taller than
A tree, the mustard seed loomed like a man.
The earth that writhes eternally with pain
Of birth, and woe of taking back her slain,

Laid bare her teeming bosom to my sight,
And all was struggle, gasping breath, and fight.
A blind worm here dug tunnels to the light,
And there a seed, racked with heroic pain,
Thrust eager tentacles to sun and rain:
It climbed; it died; the old love conquered me
To weep the blossom it would never be.
But here a bud won light; it burst and flowered
Into a rose whose beauty challenged, "Coward!"
There was no thing alive save only I
That held life in contempt and longed to die.
And still I writhed and moaned, "The curse, the curse,
Than animated death, can death be worse?"

"Dark child of sorrow, mine no less, what art
Of mine can make thee see
and play thy part? The key to all strange things is in thy heart."

What voice was this that coursed like liquid fire
Along my flesh, and turned my hair to wire?

I raised my burning eyes, beheld a field
All multitudinous with carnal yield,
A grim ensanguined mead whereon I saw
Evolve the ancient fundamental law
Of tooth and talon, fist and nail and claw.
There with the force of living, hostile hills
Whose clash the hemmed-in vale with clamor fills,
With greater din contended fierce majestic wills
Of beast with beast, of man with man, in strife
For love of what my heart despised, for life
That unto me at dawn was now a prayer
For night, at night a bloody heart-wrung tear
For day again; for this, these groans
From tangled flesh and interlocked bones.
And no thing died that did not give
A testimony that it longed to live.
Man, strange composite blend of brute and god,
Pushed on, nor backward glanced where last he trod:
He seemed to mount a misty ladder flung
Pendant from a cloud, yet never gained a rung
But at his feet another tugged and clung.
My heart was still a pool of bitterness,

Would yield nought else, nought else confess.
I spoke (although no form was there
To see, I knew an ear was there to hear),
"Well, let them fight; they can whose flesh is fair."

Crisp lightning flashed; a wave of thunder shook
My wing; a pause, and then a speaking, "Look."

I scarce dared trust my ears or eyes for awe
Of what they heard, and dread of what they saw;
For, privileged beyond degree, this flesh
Beheld God and His heaven in the mesh
Of Lucifer's revolt, saw Lucifer
Glow like the sun, and like a dulcimer
I heard his sin-sweet voice break on the yell
Of God's great warriors: Gabriel,
Saint Clair and Michael, Israfel and Raphael.
And strange it was to see God with His back
Against a wall, to see Christ hew and hack
Till Lucifer, pressed by the mighty pair,
And losing inch by inch, clawed at the air
With fevered wings; then, lost beyond repair,
He tricked a mass of stars into his hair;
He filled his hands with stars, crying as he fell,
"A star's a star although it burns in hell."
So God was left to His divinity,
Omnipotent at that most costly fee.

There was a lesson here, but still the clod
In me was sycophant unto the rod,
And cried, "Why mock me thus? Am I a god?"

"One trial more: this failing, then I give You leave to die; no
further need to live."

Now suddenly a strange wild music smote
A chord long impotent in me; a note
Of jungles, primitive and subtle, throbbed
Against my echoing breast, and tom-toms sobbed
In every pulse-beat of my din
A hollow log bound with a python's skin
Can make wrought every nerve to ecstasy,

And I was wind and sky again, and sea,
And all sweet things that flourish, being free.

Till all at once the music changed its key.

And now it was of bitterness and death,
The cry the lash extorts, the broken breath
Of liberty enchained; and yet there ran
Through all a harmony of faith in man,
A knowledge all would end as it began.
All sights and sounds and aspects of my race
Accompanied this melody, kept pace
With it; with music all their hopes and hates
Were charged, not to be downed by all the fates.
And somehow it was borne upon my brain
How being dark, and living through the pain
Of it, is courage more than angels have. I knew
What storms and tumults lashed the tree that grew
This body that I was, this cringing I
That feared to contemplate a changing sky,
This that I grovelled, whining, "Let me die,"
While others struggled in Life's abattoir.
The cries of all dark people near or far
Were billowed over me, a mighty surge
Of suffering in which my puny grief must merge
And lose itself; I had no further claim to urge
For death; in shame I raised my dust-grimed head,
And though my lips moved not, God knew I said,
"Lord, not for what I saw in flesh or bone
Of fairer men; not raised on faith alone;
Lord, I will live persuaded by mine own.
I cannot play the recreant to these;
My spirit has come home, that sailed the doubtful seas."
With the whiz of a sword that severs space,
The wing dropped down at a dizzy pace,
And flung me on my hill flat on my face;
Flat on my face I lay defying pain,
Glad of the blood in my smallest vein,
And in my hands I clutched a loyal dream,
Still spitting fire, bright twist and coil and gleam,
And chiseled like a hound's white tooth.
"Oh, I will match you yet," I cried, "to truth."

Right glad I was to stoop to what I once had spurned.
Glad even unto tears; I laughed aloud; I turned
Upon my back, and though the tears for joy would run,
My sight was clear; I looked and saw the rising sun.

Countee Cullen

The Wise

Dead men are wisest, for they know
How far the roots of flowers go,
How long a seed must rot to grow.

Dead men alone bear frost and rain
On throbless heart and heatless brain,
And feel no stir of joy or pain.

Dead men alone are satiate;
They sleep and dream and have no weight,
To curb their rest, of love or hate.

Strange, men should flee their company,
Or think me strange who long to be
Wrapped in their cool immunity.

Countee Cullen

Thoughts In A Zoo

They in their cruel traps, and we in ours,
Survey each other's rage, and pass the hours
Commiserating each the other's woe,
To mitigate his own pain's fiery glow.
Man could but little proffer in exchange
Save that his cages have a larger range.
That lion with his lordly, untamed heart
Has in some man his human counterpart,
Some lofty soul in dreams and visions wrapped,
But in the stifling flesh securely trapped.
Gaunt eagle whose raw pinions stain the bars
That prison you, so men cry for the stars!
Some delve down like the mole far underground,
(Their nature is to burrow, not to bound),
Some, like the snake, with changeless slothful eye,
Stir not, but sleep and smoulder where they lie.
Who is most wretched, these caged ones, or we,
Caught in a vastness beyond our sight to see?

Countee Cullen

To A Brown Boy

That brown girl's swagger gives a twitch
To beauty like a Queen,
Lad, never damn your body's itch
When loveliness is seen.

For there is ample room for bliss
In pride in clean brown limbs,
And lips know better how to kiss
Than how to raise white hymns.

And when your body's death gives birth
To soil for spring to crown,
Men will not ask if that rare earth
Was white flesh once, or brown.

Countee Cullen

To Certain Critics

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

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

Countee Cullen

To John Keats, Poet, At Spring Time

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

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

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

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

Countee Cullen

Uncle Jim

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

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

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

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

Countee Cullen

Yet Do I Marvel

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

Countee Cullen

Youth Sings A Song Of Rosebuds

Since men grow diffident at last,
And care no whit at all,
If spring be come, or the fall be past,
Or how the cool rains fall,
I come to no flower but I pluck,
I raise no cup but I sip,
For a mouth is the best of sweets to suck;
The oldest wine's on the lip.
If I grow old in a year or two,
And come to the querulous song
Of 'Alack and aday' and 'This was true,
And that, when I was young,'
I must have sweets to remember by,
Some blossom saved from the mire,
Some death-rebellious ember I
Can fan into a fire.

Countee Cullen