

CLAUDE MCKAY

1889–1948

One of his biographers aptly calls Claude McKay, a lifelong wanderer, a “sojourner” in the Harlem Renaissance. A Jamaican by birth, he did not become an American citizen until 1940; he left Harlem just when the Renaissance was getting started; he criticized leading black intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke (who, in turn, criticized him). Nevertheless, *Harlem: Shadows*, his 1922 book of poetry, is generally considered the book that initiated the Harlem Renaissance; his *Home to Harlem* (1928) was the only best-selling African American novel of the decade. Whether the Harlem Renaissance was a unified movement or a resonant label encompassing artists with diverse aims, whether McKay was an American Harlemiter or a man of the world, he was unquestionably one of the most important black writers of the 1920s. As well as influencing African American literature, he has had a major impact on writing by West Indians and Africans.

Claude McKay (Festus Claudius McKay) was born in Sunny Ville, a rural village in central Jamaica. This village, with its setting of spectacular natural beauty, became in later years his symbol of a lost golden age. McKay's grandfather, a West African Ashanti, had been brought to the island as a slave, and McKay's father passed on to his son what he remembered of Ashanti values and rituals. Economic necessity led the young McKay to Kingston (Jamaica's principal city) in 1909, where he was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker and wheelwright. Combining his emerging literary ambitions with an interest in Jamaican folkways, McKay published two books of dialect poetry—*Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*—in 1912. Prize money from these books took him to the United States to study agriculture, but his literary ambitions drew him to New York City after two years in school (first at the Tuskegee Institute, then at Kansas State College). He married his Jamaican sweetheart, Eulalie Imelda Lewars, in 1914; the couple had a daughter, but the marriage did not last. Supporting himself in jobs like restaurant kitchen helper and Pullman railroad waiter, he began to publish in avant-garde journals; by 1917 he was appearing in *The Seven Arts*, *Pearson's*, and the prominent left-wing *Liberator*, edited by Max Eastman. *The Liberator* published his famous poem *If We Must Die* in 1919. His poetry, much of it written in strict sonnet form, braided racial subject matter, radical politics, and poetic technique into compelling statements that were also good poetry according to traditional standards.

McKay's radical politics, already formed in Jamaica, rose from his belief that racism was inseparable from capitalism, which he saw as a structure designed to perpetuate economic inequality. To him, attacking capitalism was attacking racial injustice. Before the publication of *Harlem: Shadows*, McKay had spent 1919–21 in England; in 1923 he went to Moscow, where he was welcomed as a celebrity. He stayed in Europe until 1934, living mainly in France but also in Spain and Morocco. *Home to Harlem* (1928), written mostly in France, was a rollicking, episodic guide to Harlem's artistic, popular, and intellectual life. Later events turned it into one of the movement's last statements; retrenchment in the publishing industry following the stock market crash of 1929, the emergence of younger African American writers with different values, and dissension among Harlem artists themselves combined to bring an end to the Harlem Renaissance and altered the character of life in Harlem itself.

When McKay returned to the United States in 1934, the nation was deep in the Great Depression. With general unemployment at over 25 percent, paid literary work was extremely hard to come by. In 1935 he joined the New York City branch of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal organization giving work to unemployed writers. Except for his important autobiography, *A Long Way from Home* (1937), he did little creative work, and his health failed. Through his friendship with Ellen Tarry, a young African American writer who was a Catholic, he received medical care from

Friendship House, a Catholic lay organization in Harlem. He began to work at Friendship House and, after moving to Chicago, worked for the Catholic Youth Organization. He converted to Catholicism in 1944 and died in Chicago four years later.

The text of *Moscow* is from *Selected Poems* (1953); all other texts are from *Harlem Shadows* (1922).

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, 5
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; 10
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, 15
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! 20
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 long centuries, 25
Wake from sleeping; to the East turn, turn your eyes!

1920, 1922

Outcast

For the dim regions whence my fathers came
My spirit, bonded 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, 5
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.

1922

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.

1921, 1922

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.

1917, 1922

The Lynching

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
 His father, by the cruellest 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.

1919, 1922

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.

1918, 1922

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.

1921, 1922

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 deathblow!
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!

1919, 1922

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.

1922

Moscow

Moscow for many loving her was dead . . .
And yet I saw a bright Byzantine¹ fair,

1. Relating to the Byzantine Empire, centered in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul), a city built on the site of the ancient Byzantium. The empire dominated much of eastern Europe, including

Russia, from the 3rd to the 15th century. Byzantine art and architecture are characterized by spires, domes, gilding, and mosaics.

Of jewelled buildings, pillars, domes and spires
Of hues prismatic dazzling to the sight;
A glory painted on the Eastern air,
Of amorous sounding tones like passionate lyres;
All colors laughing richly their delight
And reigning over all the color red.²

My memory bears engraved the high-walled Kremlin,³
Of halls symbolic of the tiger will,⁴
Of Czarist⁴ instruments of mindless law . . .
And often now my nerves throb with the thrill
When, in that gilded place, I felt and saw
The presence and the simple voice of Lenin.⁵

1953

2. A reference to the red flags of the Communist government.

3. Walled area containing government buildings, churches, and museums in central Moscow, capital of Russia.

4. A reference to the absolute rulers of Russia

overthrown in the revolution of 1917.

5. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870-1924), a major force in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the first leader of the new Bolshevik (later Communist) government. McKay met Lenin on his visit to Moscow.

KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

1890-1980

Over a long writing life Katherine Anne Porter produced only four books of stories and one novel, *Ship of Fools*, which did not appear until she was over seventy. Her reputation as a prose writer did not depend on quantity; each story was technically skilled, emotionally powerful, combining traditional narration with new symbolic techniques and contemporary subject matter.

Callie Porter—she changed the name to Katherine Anne when she became a writer—was born in the small settlement of Indian Creek, Texas; her mother died soon after giving birth to her fourth child, when Porter was not quite two years old. Her father moved them all to his mother's home in Kyle, Texas, where the maternal grandmother raised the family in extreme poverty. The father gave up all attempts to support them either financially or emotionally; the security provided by the strong, loving, but pious and stern grandmother ended with her death when Porter was eleven. Porter married to leave home immediately after her sixteenth birthday, only to find that rooted domesticity was not for her. Long before her divorce in 1915, she had separated from her first husband and begun a life of travel, activity, and changes of jobs.

She started writing in 1916 as a reporter for a Dallas newspaper. In 1917 she moved to Denver; the next year to New York City's Greenwich Village. Between 1918 and 1924 she lived mainly in Mexico, freelancing, meeting artists and intellectuals, and becoming involved in revolutionary politics. In Mexico she found the resources of journalism inadequate to her ambitions; using an anecdote she had heard from an archaeologist as a kernel, she wrote her first story, *Maria Conception*, which was published in the prestigious *Century* magazine in 1922. Like all her stories, it dealt with powerful emotions and had a strong sense of locale. Critics praised her as a major talent.

Although she considered herself a serious writer from this time on, Porter was

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

1891–1960

Zora Neale Hurston is considered to be the most important African American woman who wrote before World War II. She was born in 1891 in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town. Her father, a Baptist preacher of considerable eloquence, was not a family man and made life difficult for his wife and eight children. The tie between mother and daughter was strong; Lucy Hurston was a driving force and strong support for all her children. But her death when Zora Hurston was about eleven left the child with little home life. Hitherto, the town of Eatonville had been like an extended family to her, and her early childhood was protected from racism because she encountered no white people. With her mother's death, Hurston's wanderings and her initiation into a racist society began. The early security had given her the core of self-confidence she needed to survive. She moved from one relative's home to another until she was old enough to support herself, and with her earnings she began slowly to pursue an education. She was so highly motivated that although she had never finished grade school in Eatonville she was able to enter and complete college. At Howard University in Washington, D.C. (the nation's leading African American university at that time), in the early 1920s, she studied with the great black educator Alain Locke, who was to make history with his anthology *The New Negro* in 1925. After a short story, *Drenched in Light*, appeared in the New York African American magazine *Opportunity*, she decided to move to Harlem and pursue a literary career there.

As her biographer, Robert Hemenway, writes, "Zora Hurston was an extraordinarily witty woman, and she acquired an instant reputation in New York for her high spirits and side-splitting tales of Eatonville life. She could walk into a room of strangers . . . and almost immediately gather people, charm, amuse, and impress them." Generous, outspoken, high spirited, an interesting conversationalist, she worked as a personal secretary for the politically liberal novelist Fannie Hurst and entered Barnard College. Her career took two simultaneous directions: at Barnard she studied with the famous anthropologist Franz Boas and developed an interest in black folk traditions, and in Harlem she became well known as a storyteller, an informal performing artist. Thus she was doubly committed to the oral narrative, and her work excels in its representation of people talking.

When she graduated from Barnard in 1927, she received a fellowship to return to Florida and study the oral traditions of Eatonville. From then on, she strove to achieve a balance between focusing on the folk and her origins and focusing on herself as an individual. After the fellowship money ran out, Hurston was supported by Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, an elderly white patron of the arts. Mason had firm ideas about what she wanted her protégés to produce; she required them all to get her permission before publishing any of the work that she had supported. In this relationship, Hurston experienced a difficulty that all the black artists of the Harlem Renaissance had to face—the fact that well-off white people were the sponsors of, and often the chief audience for, their work.

Hurston's work was not entirely popular with the male intellectual leaders of the Harlem community. She quarreled especially with Langston Hughes, refusing to align her work with anybody's ideologies; she rejected the idea that a black writer's chief concern should be how blacks were being portrayed to the white reader. She did not write to "uplift her race," either; because in her view it was already uplifted, she was not embarrassed to present her characters as mixtures of good and bad, strong and weak. Some of the other Harlem writers thought her either naive or egotistical in ignoring appearances and in insisting on going her own way. But Hurston felt that freedom could only mean freedom from all coercion, no matter what the

source.

The Great Depression brought an end to the structure that had undergirded Hurston's fieldwork, and she turned fully to writing. Her most important work appeared in the mid-1930s when there was little interest in it, or in African American writing in general. She published *Jonah's Gourd Vine* in 1934 (a novel whose main character is based on her father); *Mules and Men* in 1935 (based on material from her field trips in Florida—this was her best-selling book, but it earned a total of only \$943.75); and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in 1937. This novel about an African American woman's quest for selfhood has become a popular favorite. The main character in the novel is Janie Starks, who begins to tell her story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson. The tale is taken up by the voice of the narrator, returned to Janie only at the conclusion. It tells of Janie's young girlhood as she is brought up by her grandmother, who is obsessed with Janie's finding a good husband; her first marriage to an old farmer, Logan Killicks; her second to an entrepreneur and politician, Joe Starks; and a third relationship with a young migrant worker, Tea Cake. Through these three men Janie experiments with roles for black women via relations to black men. Killicks and Starks are solid, stable citizens but their narrow goals and their inability to see Janie as a separate person stifle her. The footloose and imaginative Tea Cake, unsuitable as a life partner, sets her free, but only temporarily. At the end, though Janie is alone, she is content, having "been tuh de horizon and back."

Their Eyes Were Watching God is, as well as a woman's story, a description and critique of southern African American folk society, showing its divisions and diversity. Technically, it is a loosely organized, highly metaphorical novel, with passages of broad folk humor and of extreme artistic compression. Other books followed in 1938 and 1939, and she wrote an autobiography—*Dust Tracks on a Road*—which appeared in 1942, with its occasional expression of antiwhite sentiments removed by her editors. At this point, however, Hurston simply had no audience. For the last decade of her life she lived in Florida, working from time to time as a maid.

The Eatonville Anthology¹

I. The Pleading Woman

Mrs. Tony Roberts is the pleading woman. She just loves to ask for things. Her husband gives her all he can take and scrape, which is considerably more than most wives get for their housekeeping, but she goes from door to door begging for things.

She starts at the store. "Mist' Clarke," she sing-songs in a high keening voice, "gimme lil' piece uh meat tuh boil a pot uh greens wid. Lawd knows me an' mah chillen is so hongry! Hits uh SHAME! Tony, don't fee-ee-eee-ed me!"

Mr. Clarke knows that she has money and that her larder is well stocked, for Tony Roberts is the best provider on his list. But her keening annoys him and he rises heavily. The pleader at his elbow shows all the joy of a starving man being seated at a feast.

"Thass right Mist' Clarke, De Lawd loveth de cheerful giver. Gimme jes' a lil' piece 'bout dis big (indicating the width of her hand) an' de Lawd'll bless yuh."

1. The text is that of *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive* (1979), edited by Alice Walker. Eatonville was Hurston's hometown; here she

brings together many of the stories about its residents that she told at parties in Harlem. The stories are cast in the forms of oral African American tales.

She follows this angel-on-earth to his meat tub and superintends the cutting, crying out in pain when he refuses to move the knife over just a teeny bit mo'.

Finally, meat in hand, she departs, remarking on the meanness of some people who give a piece of salt meat only two-fingers wide when they were plainly asked for a hand-wide piece. Clarke puts it down to Tony's account and resumes his reading.

With the slab of salt pork as a foundation, she visits various homes until she has collected all she wants for the day. At the Piersons for instance: "Sister Pierson, plee-ee-ease gimme uh han'full uh collard greens fuh me an' mah po' chillen! 'Deed, me an' mah chillen is so hongry. Tony doan' fee-ee-eeed me!"

Mrs. Pierson picks a bunch of greens for her, but she springs away from them as if they were poison. "Lawd a mussy, Mis' Pierson, you ain't gonna gimme dat lil' eye-full uh greens fuh me an' mah chillen, is you? Don't be so graspin'; Gawd won't bless yuh. Gimme uh han'full mo'. Lawd, some folks is got everything, an' theys jes' as gripin' an stingy!"

Mrs. Pierson raises the ante, and the pleading woman moves on to the next place, and on and on. The next day, it commences all over.

II. Turpentine Love

Jim Merchant is always in good humor—even with his wife. He says he fell in love with her at first sight. That was some years ago. She has had all her teeth pulled out, but they still get along splendidly.

He says the first time he called on her he found out that she was subject to fits. This didn't cool his love, however. She had several in his presence.

One Sunday, while he was there, she had one, and her mother tried to give her a dose of turpentine to stop it. Accidentally, she spilled it in her eye and it cured her. She never had another fit, so they got married and have kept each other in good humor ever since.

III.

Becky Moore has eleven children of assorted colors and sizes. She has never been married, but that is not her fault. She has never stopped any of the fathers of her children from proposing, so if she has no father for her children it's not her fault. The men round about are entirely to blame.

The other mothers of the town are afraid that it is catching. They won't let their children play with hers.

IV. Tippy

Sykes Jones' family all shoot craps. The most interesting member of the family—also fond of bones, but another kind—is Tippy, the Jones' dog.

He is so thin, that it amazes one that he lives at all. He sneaks into village kitchens if the housewives are careless about the doors and steals meats, even off the stoves. He also sucks eggs.

For these offenses he has been sentenced to death dozens of times, and the sentences executed upon him, only they didn't work. He has been fed

bluestone, strychnine, nux vomica, even an entire Peruna² bottle beaten up. It didn't fatten him, but it didn't kill him. So Eatonville has resigned itself to the plague of Tippy, reflecting that it has erred in certain matters and is being chastened.

In spite of all the attempts upon his life, Tippy is still willing to be friendly with anyone who will let him.

V. The Way of a Man with a Train

Old Man Anderson lived seven or eight miles out in the country from Eatonville. Over by Lake Apopka. He raised feed-corn and cassava and went to market with it two or three times a year. He bought all of his victuals wholesale so he wouldn't have to come to town for several months more.

He was different from citybred folks. He had never seen a train. Everybody laughed at him for even the smallest child in Eatonville had either been to Maitland or Orlando and watched a train go by. On Sunday afternoons all of the young people of the village would go over to Maitland, a mile away, to see Number 35 whizz southward on its way to Tampa and wave at the passengers. So we looked down on him a little. Even we children felt superior in the presence of a person so lacking in worldly knowledge.

The grown-ups kept telling him he ought to go see a train. He always said he didn't have time to wait so long. Only two trains a day passed through Maitland. But patronage and ridicule finally had its effect and Old Man Anderson drove in one morning early. Number 78 went north to Jacksonville at 10:20. He drove his light wagon over in the woods beside the railroad below Maitland, and sat down to wait. He began to fear that his horse would get frightened and run away with the wagon. So he took him out and led him deeper into the grove and tied him securely. Then he returned to his wagon and waited some more. Then he remembered that some of the train-wise villagers had said the engine belched fire and smoke. He had better move his wagon out of danger. It might catch fire. He climbed down from the seat and placed himself between the shafts to draw it away. Just then 78 came thundering over the trestle spouting smoke, and suddeply began blowing for Maitland. Old Man Anderson became so frightened he ran away with the wagon through the woods and tore it up worse then the horse ever could have done. He doesn't know yet what a train looks like, and says he doesn't care.

VI. Coon Taylor

Coon Taylor never did any real stealing. Of course, if he saw a chicken or a watermelon he'd take it. The people used to get mad but they never could catch him. He took so many melons from Joe Clarke that he set up in the melon patch one night with his shotgun loaded with rock-salt. He was going to fix Coon. But he was tired. It is hard work being a mayor, postmaster, storekeeper and everything. He dropped asleep sitting on a stump in the middle of the patch. So he didn't see Coon when he came. Coon didn't see him either, that is, not at first. He knew the stump was there, however. He had opened many of Clarke's juicy Florida Favorite on it. He selected his

2. A patent medicine cure-all.

fruit, walked over to the stump and burst the melon on it. This is, he thought it was the stump until it fell over with a yell. Then he knew it was no stump and departed hastily from those parts. He had cleared the fence when Clarke came to, as it were. So the charge of rock-salt was wasted on the desert air.

During the sugar-cane season, he found he couldn't resist Clarke's soft green cane, but Clarke did not go to sleep this time. So after he had cut six or eight stalks by the moonlight, Clarke rose up out of the cane strippings with his shotgun and made Coon sit right down and chew up the last one of them on the spot. And the next day he made Coon leave his town for three months.

VII. Village Fiction

Joe Lindsay is said by Lum Boger to be the largest manufacturer of pervarications in Eatonville; Brazze (late owner of the world's leanest and meanest mule) contends that his business is the largest in the state and his wife holds that he is the biggest liar in the world.

Exhibit A—He claims that while he was in Orlando one day he saw a doctor cut open a woman, remove everything—liver, lights and heart included—clean each of them separately; the doctor then washed out the empty woman, dried her out neatly with a towel and replaced the organs so expertly that she was up and about her work in a couple of weeks.

VIII.

Sewell is a man who lives all to himself. He moves a great deal. So often, that 'Lige Moseley says his chickens are so used to moving that every time he comes out into his backyard the chickens lie down and cross their legs, ready to be tied up again.

He is baldheaded; but he says he doesn't mind that, because he wants as little as possible between him and God.

IX.

Mrs. Clarke is Joe Clarke's wife. She is a soft-looking, middle-aged woman, whose bust and stomach are always holding a get-together.

She waits on the store sometimes and cries every time he yells at her which he does every time she makes a mistake, which is quite often. She calls her husband "Jody." They say he used to beat her in the store when he was a young man, but he is not so impatient now. He can wait until he goes home.

She shouts in Church every Sunday and shakes the hand of fellowship with everybody in the Church with her eyes closed, but somehow always misses her husband.

X.

Mrs. McDuffy goes to Church every Sunday and always shouts and tells her "determination." Her husband always sits in the back row and beats her

as soon as they get home. He says there's no sense in her shouting, as big a devil as she is. She just does it to slur him. Elijah Moseley asked her why she didn't stop shouting, seeing she always got a beating about it. She says she can't "squinch the sperrit." Then Elijah asked Mr. McDuffy to stop beating her, seeing that she was going to shout anyway. He answered that she just did it for spite and that his fist was just as hard as her head. He could last just as long as she. So the village let the matter rest.

XI. Double- Shuffle

Back in the good old days before the World War, things were very simple in Eatonville. People didn't fox-trot. When the town wanted to put on its Sunday clothes and wash behind the ears, it put on a "breakdown." The daring younger set would two-step and waltz, but the good church members and the elders stuck to the grand march. By rural canons dancing is wicked, but one is not held to have danced until the feet have been crossed. Feet don't get crossed when one grand marches.

At elaborate affairs the organ from the Methodist church was moved up to the hall and Lizzimore, the blind man, presided. When informal gatherings were held, he merely played his guitar, assisted by any volunteer with mouth organs or accordions.

Among white people the march is as mild as if it had been passed on by Volstead.³ But it still has a kick in Eatonville. Everybody happy, shining eyes, gleaming teeth. Feet dragged 'shhlap, shhlap! to beat out the time. No orchestra needed. Round and round! Back again, parse-me-la! shlap! shlap! Strut! Strut! Seaboard! Shlap! Shlap! Tiddy bumm! Mr. Clarke in the lead with Mrs. Moseley.

It's too much for some of the young folks. Double shuffling commences. Buck and wing. Lizzimore about to break his guitar. Accordion doing contortions. People fall back against the walls, and let the soloist have it, shouting as they clap the old, old double-shuffle songs.

'Me an' mah honey got two mo' days
Two mo' days tuh do de buck'

Sweating bodies, laughing mouths, grotesque faces, feet drumming fiercely. Deacons clapping as hard as the rest.

"Great big nigger, black as tar
Trying tuh git tuh hebben' on uh 'lectric car."

"Some love cabbage, some love kale
But I love a gal wid a short skirt tail."

Long tall angel—steppin' down,
Long white robe an' starry crown.

'Ah would not marry uh black gal (bumm, bumm!).
Tell yuh de reason why
Every time she comb her hair
She make de goo-goo eye.

3. Andrew J. Volstead (1860-1947), congressman who introduced the Prohibition Amendment.

Would not marry a yaller gal (bumm bumm!)
 Tell yuh de reason why
 Her neck so long an' stringy!
 Ahm 'fraid she'd never die.

Would not marry uh preacher
 Tell yuh de reason why
 Every time he comes tuh town
 He makes de chicken fly.

When the buck dance⁴ was over, the boys would give the floor to the girls and they would parse-me-la with a sly eye out of the corner to see if anybody was looking who might "have them up in church" on conference night.⁵ Then there would be more dancing. Then Mr. Clarke would call for everybody's best attention and announce that *'freshments was served! Every gent'-man would please take his lady by the arm and scorch⁶ her right up to de table fur a treat!*

Then the men would stick their arms out with a flourish and ask their ladies: "You lak chicken? Well, then, take a wing." And the ladies would take the proffered "wings" and parade up to the long table and be served. Of course most of them had brought baskets in which were heaps of jointed and fried chicken, two or three kinds of pies, cakes, potato pone and chicken purlo.⁷ The hall would separate into happy groups about the baskets until time for more dancing.

But the boys and girls got scattered about during the war, and now they dance the fox-trot by a brand new piano. They do waltz and two-step still, but no one now considers it good form to look his chin over his partner's shoulder and stick out behind. One night just for fun and to humor the old folks, they danced, that is, they grand marched, but everyone picked up their feet. *Bah!*

XII. The Head of the Nail

Daisy Taylor was the town vamp. Not that she was pretty. But sirens were all but non-existent in the town. Perhaps she was forced to it by circumstances. She was quite dark, with little bushy patches of hair squatting over her head. These were held down by shingle-nails often. No one knows whether she did this for artistic effect or for lack of hairpins, but there they were shining in the little patches of hair when she got all dressed for the afternoon and came up to Clarke's store to see if there was any mail for her.

It was seldom that anyone wrote to Daisy, but she knew that the men the town would be assembled there by five o'clock, and some one could usually be induced to buy her some soda water or peanuts.

Daisy flirted with married men. There were only two single men in town. Lum Boger, who was engaged to the assistant school-teacher, and Hiram Lester, who had been off to school at Tuskegee and wouldn't look at a person like Daisy. In addition to other drawbacks, she was pigeon-toed and her

4. All-male dance.

5. A formal meeting of church officials. The girls are afraid they might be accused of loose behavior.

6. Escort (dialect).

7. Chicken pilaf, a stew of rice, vegetables, and chicken.

petticoat was always showing so perhaps he was justified. There was nothing else to do except flirt with married men.

This went on for a long time. First one wife and then another complained of her, or drove her from the preserves by threat.

But the affair with Crooms was the most prolonged and serious. He was even known to have bought her a pair of shoes.

Mrs. Laura Crooms was a meek little woman who took all of her troubles crying, and talked a great deal of leaving things in the hands of God.

The affair came to a head one night in orange picking time. Crooms was over at Oneido picking oranges. Many fruit pickers move from one town to the other during the season.

The town was collected at the store-postoffice as is customary on Saturday nights. The town has had its bath and with its week's pay in pocket fares forth to be merry. The men tell stories and treat the ladies to soda water, peanuts and peppermint candy.

Daisy was trying to get treats, but the porch was cold to her that night.

"Ah don't keer if you don't treat me. What's a dirty lil nickel?" She flung this at Walter Thomas. "The everloving Mister Crooms will gimme anything atall Ah wants."

"You better shet up yo' mouf talking 'bout Albert Crooms. Heah his wife comes right now."

Daisy went akimbo. "Who? Me! Ah don't keer whut Laura Crooms think. If she ain't a heavy hip-ted Mama enough to keep him, she don't need to come crying to me."

She stood making goo-goo eyes as Mrs. Crooms walked upon the porch. Daisy laughed loud, made several references to Albert Crooms, and when she saw the mail-bag come in from Maitland she said, "Ah better go in an' see if Ah ain't got a letter from Oneido."

The more Daisy played the game of getting Mrs. Crooms' goat, the better she liked it. She ran in and out of the store laughing until she could scarcely stand. Some of the people present began to talk to Mrs. Crooms—to egg her on to halt Daisy's boasting, but she was for leaving it all in the hands of God. Walter Thomas kept on after Mrs. Crooms until she stiffened and resolved to fight. Daisy was inside when she came to this resolve and never dreamed anything of the kind could happen. She had gotten hold of an envelope and came laughing and shouting, "Oh, Ah can't stand to see Oneido lose!"

There was a box of ax-handles on display on the porch, propped up against the door jamb. As Daisy stepped upon the porch, Mrs. Crooms leaned the heavy end of one of those handles heavily upon her head. She staggered from the porch to the ground and the timid Laura, fearful of a counter-attack, struck again and Daisy toppled into the town ditch. There was not enough water in there to do more than muss her up. Every time she tried to rise, down would come that ax-handle again. Laura was fighting a scared fight. With Daisy thoroughly licked, she retired to the store porch and left her fallen enemy in the ditch. But Elijah Moseley, who was some distance down the street when the trouble began, arrived as the victor was withdrawing. He rushed up and picked Daisy out of the mud and began feeling her head.

"Is she hurt much?" Joe Clarke asked from the doorway.

"I don't know," Elijah answered. "I was just looking to see if Laura had been lucky enough to hit one of those nails on the head and drive it in."

Before a week was up, Daisy moved to Orlando. There in a wider sphere, perhaps, her talents as a vamp were appreciated.

XIII. *Pants and Cal'line*

Sister Cal'line Potts was a silent woman. Did all of her laughing down inside, but did the thing that kept the town in an uproar of laughter. It was the general opinion of the village that Cal'line would do anything she had a mind to. And she had a mind to do several things.

Mitchell Potts, her husband, had a weakness for women. No one ever believed that she was jealous. She did things to the women, surely. But most any townsman would have said that she did them because she liked the novel situation and the queer things she could bring out of it.

Once he took up with Delphine—called Mis' Pheeny by the town. She lived on the outskirts on the edge of the piney woods. The town winked and talked. People don't make secrets of such things in villages. Cal'line went about her business with her thin black lips pursed tight as ever, and her shiny black eyes unchanged.

"Dat devil of a Cal'line's got somethin' up her sleeve!" The town smiled in anticipation.

"Delphine is too big a cigar for her to smoke. She ain't crazy," said some as the weeks went on and nothing happened. Even Pheeny herself would give an extra flirt to her over-starched petticoats as she rustled into church past her of Sundays.

Mitch Potts said furthermore, that he was tired of Cal'line's foolishness. She had to stay where he put her. His African soup-bone (arm) was too strong to let a woman run over him. Nough was nough. And he did some fancy cussing, and he was the fanciest cusser in the county.

So the town waited and the longer it waited, the odds changed slowly from the wife to the husband.

One Saturday, Mitch knocked off work at two o'clock and went over to Maitland. He came back with a rectangular box under his arm and kept straight on out to the barn to put it away. He ducked around the corner of the house quickly, but even so, his wife glimpsed the package. Very much like a shoe box. Sol

He put on the kettle and took a bath. She stood in her bare feet at the ironing board and kept on ironing. He dressed. It was about five o'clock but still very light. He fiddled around outside. She kept on with her ironing. As soon as the sun got red, he sauntered out to the barn, got the parcel and walked away down the road, past the store and out into the piney woods. As soon as he left the house, Cal'line slipped on her shoes without taking time to don stockings, put on one of her husband's old Stetsons, worn and floppy, slung the axe over her shoulder and followed in his wake. He was hailed cheerily as he passed the sitters on the store porch and answered smiling sheepishly and passed on. Two minutes later passed his wife, silently, unsmilingly, and set the porch to giggling and betting.

An hour passed perhaps. It was dark. Clarke had long ago lighted the swinging kerosene lamp inside.

XIV.

Once 'way back yonder before the stars fell all the animals used to talk just like people. In them days dogs and rabbits was the best of friends—even tho both of them was stuck on the same gal—which was Miss Nancy Coon. She had the sweetest smile and the prettiest striped and bushy tail to be found anywhere.

They both run their legs nigh off trying to win her for themselves—fetching nice ripe persimmons and such. But she never give one or the other no satisfaction.

Finally one night Mr. Dog popped the question right out. "Miss Coon," he says, "Ma'am, also Ma'am which would you ruther be—a lark flyin' or a dove a settin'?"

Course Miss Nancy she blushed and laughed a little and hid her face behind her bushy tail for a spell. Then she said sorter shy like, "I does love yo' sweet voice, brother dawg—but—I ain't jes' exactly set my mind yit."

Her and Mr. Dog set on a spell, when up comes hopping Mr. Rabbit wid his tail fresh washed and his whiskers shining. He got right down to business and asked Miss Coon to marry him, too.

"Oh, Miss Nancy," he says, "Ma'am, also Ma'am, if you'd see me settin' straddle of a mud-cat⁸ leadin' a minnow, what would you think? Ma'am also Ma'am?" Which is a out and out proposal as everybody knows.

"Youse awful nice, Brother Rabbit and a beautiful dancer, but you cannot sing like Brother Dog. Both you uns come back next week to gimme time for to decide."

They both left arm-in-arm. Finally Mr. Rabbit says to Mr. Dog. "Taint no use in me going back—she ain't gwinter have me. So I mought as well give up. She loves singing, and I ain't got nothing but a squeak."

"Oh, don't talk that a way," says Mr. Dog, tho' he is glad Mr. Rabbit can't sing none.

"Thass all right, Brer Dog. But if I had a sweet voice like you got, I'd have it worked on and make it sweeter."

"How! How! How!" Mr. Dog cried, jumping up and down.

"Lemme fix it for you, like I do for Sister Lark and Sister Mockingbird."

"When? Where?" asked Mr. Dog, all excited. He was figuring that if he could sing just a little better Miss Coon would be bound to have him.

"Just you meet me t'morrer in de huckleberry patch," says the rabbit and off they both goes to bed.

The dog is there on time next day and after a while the rabbit comes loping up.

"Mawnin', Brer Dawg," he says kinder chippy like. "Ready to git yo' voice sweetened?"

"Sholy, sholy, Brer Rabbit. Let's we all hurry about it. I wants tuh serenade Miss Nancy from the piney woods tuh night."

"Well, den, open yo' mouf and poke out yo' tongue," says the rabbit.

No sooner did Mr. Dog poke out his tongue than Mr. Rabbit split it with a knife and ran for all he was worth to a hollow stump and hid hisself.

The dog has been mad at the rabbit ever since.

Anybody who don't believe it happened, just look at the dog's tongue and he can see for himself where the rabbit slit it right up the middle.
Stepped on a tin, mah story ends.

1927

How It Feels to Be Colored Me¹

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind the curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box² for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin'?" Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pièces" and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody's Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more.

1. The text is that of *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive* (1979), edited by Alice

Walker.

2. Box at the front of the auditorium, closest to the stage.

It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more; I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think—to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira.³ I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard. "Besides the waters of the Hudson" I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept; but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret⁴ with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows ram-bunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive

3. Forced march of Muhammad from Mecca to Medina in A.D. 622; hence any forced flight or

journey for safety.

4. Popular Harlem nightclub in the 1920s.

fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai⁵ above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat smoking calmly.

"Good music they have here," he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt! He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.

At certain times I have no race, I am *me*. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich⁶ with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How *can* any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It's beyond me.

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held—so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place—who knows?

1928

5. A slender spear used by some South African peoples.
6. Boulevard St. Michel, a street on the Left Bank of Paris running near the Sorbonne University

and through the Latin Quarter. It is lined with cafés that were—and still are—much frequented by Americans in Paris. "Joyce": a socialite and heiress, much photographed.

The Gilded Six-Bits¹

It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of the G and G Fertilizer works for its support.

But there was something happy about the place. The front yard was parted in the middle by a sidewalk from gate to door-step, a sidewalk edged on either side by quart bottles driven neck down into the ground on a slant. A mess of homey flowers planted without a plan but blooming cheerily from their helter-skelter places. The fence and house were whitewashed. The porch and steps scrubbed white.

The front door stood open to the sunshine so that the floor of the front room could finish drying after its weekly scouring. It was Saturday. Everything clean from the front gate to the privy house. Yard raked so that the strokes of the rake would make a pattern. Fresh newspaper cut in fancy edge on the kitchen shelves.

Missie May was bathing herself in the galvanized washtub in the bedroom. Her dark-brown skin glistened under the soapsuds that skittered down from her wash rag. Her stiff young breasts thrust forward aggressively like broad-based cones with the tips lacquered in black.

She heard men's voices in the distance and glanced at the dollar clock on the dresser.

"Humph! Ah'm way behind time t'day! Joe gointer be heah 'fore Ah git mah clothes on if Ah don't make haste."

She grabbed the clean meal sack at hand and dried herself hurriedly and began to dress. But before she could tie her slippers, there came the ring of singing metal on wood. Nine times.

Missie May grinned with delight. She had not seen the big tall man come stealing in the gate and creep up the walk grinning happily at the joyful mischief he was about to commit. But she knew that it was her husband throwing silver dollars in the door for her to pick up and pile beside her plate at dinner. It was this way every Saturday afternoon. The nine dollars hurled into the open door, he scurried to a hiding place behind the cape jasmine bush and waited.

Missie May promptly appeared at the door in mock alarm.

"Who dat chunkin' money in mah do'way?" She demanded. No answer from the yard. She leaped off the porch and began to search the shrubbery. She peeped under the porch and hung over the gate to look up and down the road. While she did this, the man behind the jasmine darted to the chinaberry tree. She spied him and gave chase.

"Nobody ain't gointer be chuckin' money at me and Ah not do 'em nothin'" she shouted in mock anger. He ran around the house with Missie May at his heels. She overtook him at the kitchen door. He ran inside but could not close it after him before she crowded in and locked with him in a rough and tumble. For several minutes the two were a furious mass of male and female energy. Shouting, laughing, twisting, turning, tussling, tickling each other in the ribs; Missie May clutching onto Joe and Joe trying, but not too hard, to get away.

1. The text is from the printing in *Story* magazine (1933). "Gilded": lightly plated with gold or gold-colored foil. "Six-bits": seventy-five cents (two bits are a quarter).

if every friend became his foe
he'd laugh and build a world with snow.

My father moved through theys of we,
singing each new leaf out of each tree
(and every child was sure that spring
danced when she heard my father sing).

then let men kill which cannot share,
let blood and flesh be mud and mire,
scheming imagine, passion willed,
freedom a drug that's bought and sold.

giving to steal and cruel kind,
a heart to fear, to doubt a mind,
to differ a disease of same,
conform the pinnacle of am.

though dull were all we taste as bright,
bitter all utterly things sweet,
maggoty minus and dumb death
all we inherit, all bequeath.

and nothing quite so least as truth
—i say though hate were why men breathe—
because my father lived his soul.
love is the whole and more than all.

pity this busy monster, manunkind

pity this busy monster, manunkind,

not. Progress is a comfortable disease:
your victim (death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness
—electrons deify one razorblade
into a mountain range; lenses extend

unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish
returns on its unself.

A world of made
is not a world of born—pity poor flesh

and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this
fine specimen of hypermagical

ultraomnipotence. We doctors know

50

55

60

65

1940

5

10

a hopeless case if—listen: there's a hell
of a good universe next door; let's go

1944

what if a much of a which of a wind

what if a much of a which of a wind
gives the truth to summer's lie;
bloodies with dizzying leaves the sun
and yanks immortal stars awry?

Blow king to beggar and queen to seem
(blow friend to fiend; blow space to time)
—when skies are hanged and oceans drowned,
the single secret will still be man

what if a keen of a lean wind flays
screaming hills with sleet and snow;
strangles valleys by ropes of thing
and stifles forests in white ago?
Blow hope to terror; blow seeing to blind
(blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
—whose hearts are mountains, roots are trees,
it's they shall cry hello to the spring

what if a dawn of a doom of a dream
bites this universe in two,
peels forever out of his grave
and sprinkles nowhere with me and you?
Blow soon to never and never to twice
(blow life to isn't; blow death to was)
—all nothing's only our hugest home;
the most who die, the more we live

1944

JEAN TOOMER

1894–1967

In 1915, the section of New York City called Harlem had a black population of about fifty thousand; by 1929 it had more than three times that number and constituted the largest black urban area in the nation. Among newcomers to this "city within a city" were many talented men and women who made Harlem an intellectual and artistic center. For Jean Toomer, this Harlem Renaissance spurred the writing of one acclaimed book, *Cane* (1923), whose strength lies in the interplay between a presentation of the image of the simple, rural black and the urban black sensibility that analyzes the image.

Toomer was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up with his mother and his grandfather, who had been an important Louisiana politician during the Reconstruction era. Toomer never knew his father. He graduated from high school and attended several colleges—including the University of Wisconsin, the Massachusetts College of Agriculture, the American College of Physical Training in Chicago, the University of Chicago, and City College of New York—without earning a degree. He also held, briefly, a variety of jobs in different parts of the country.

Toomer began writing when he was in his middle twenties. He published poems and stories in several avant-garde little magazines, among them *Broom*, the *Little Review*, and *Prairie*, as well as such African American publications as the *Liberator*, *Crisis*, and *Opportunity*. In 1921 he worked for four months as superintendent of a small black school in Sparta, Georgia, and there—his only sustained encounter with rural black people—absorbed the material from which *Cane* was distilled.

Cane is a three-part work, incorporating short stories, sketches, poems, and a play; it has a general thematic unity in its representation of an alienated, questing black man who tries to find himself through connection with the black folk heritage. Part I, set in rural Georgia, depicts the difficult yet noble life of the rural black population. Part II shows black urban life in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, where it has been corrupted by white materialism. Part III, the most autobiographical, shows an African American intellectual teaching in the South, trying to establish roots in a style of life that he has never known before but that is nevertheless supposed to be "his." Although the circumstances are specifically black, the theme of returning to one's roots, or trying to and failing or even inventing the roots one never had, is persistent in modern fiction; we meet it in Katherine Anne Porter, Thomas Wolfe, and Ernest Hemingway, among others. *Cane* is also distinguished by its poetic, imagistic, evocative prose, its linguistic innovativeness, and its method of assembling pieces of writing like a mosaic. Toomer was attuned to modern literary method and greatly concerned with being literary in a recognizable sense—in contrast to Countee Cullen, who used traditional forms, and to Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, who tried to create a specifically African American poetics.

Toomer continued to write after the appearance of *Cane* but had increasing difficulty in getting his work published. At his death he left unpublished short stories, novels, plays, and an autobiography. He spent much of the last forty years of his life looking for a spiritual community; for a while he was a disciple of the Russian mystic George I. Gurdjieff, and in the 1940s he became a committed Quaker. The text is that of the first edition (1923), as corrected in 1975.

From *Cane*¹

Georgia Dusk

The sky, lazily disdainful to pursue
The setting sun, too indolent to hold
A lengthened tournament for flashing gold,
Passively darkens for night's barbecue,

A feast of moon and men and barking hounds,
An orgy for some genius of the South

1. Of the book's three sections, the first and the last are Georgia scenes; Fern appears in the first section, preceded immediately by the poem *Georgia Dusk*. The poem *Portrait in Georgia* appears in the first section immediately preceding a story of

the lynching of a black woman's black lover by her white lover and his white cohorts. *Seventh Street* is the first sketch in the center section devoted to Washington, D.C., and Chicago.

With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth,
Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds.

The sawmill blows its whistle, buzz-saws stop,
And silence breaks the bud of knoll and hill,
Soft settling pollen where plowed lands fulfill
Their early promise of a bumper crop.

Smoke from the pyramidal sawdust pile
Curls up, blue ghosts of trees, tarrying low
Where only chips and stumps are left to show
The solid proof of former domicile.

Meanwhile, the men, with vestiges of pomp,
Race memories of king and caravan,
High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man,²
Go singing through the footpaths of the swamp.

Their voices rise . . . the pine trees are guitars,
Strumming, pine-needles fall like sheets of rain . . .
Their voices rise . . . the chorus of the cane
Is caroling a vesper to the stars . . .

O singers, resinous and soft your songs
Above the sacred whisper of the pines,
Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,
Bring dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs.

Fern

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples, in such a way that wherever your glance may momentarily have rested, it immediately thereafter wavered in the direction of her eyes. The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird's wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. Why, after noticing it, you sought her eyes, I cannot tell you. Her nose was aquiline, Semitic. If you have heard a Jewish cantor³ sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. They were strange eyes. In this, that they sought nothing—that is, nothing that was obvious and tangible and that one could see, and they gave the impression that nothing was to be denied. When a woman seeks, you will have observed, her eyes deny. Fern's eyes desired nothing that you could give her; there was no reason why they should withhold. Men saw her eyes and fooled themselves. Fern's eyes said to them that she was easy. When she was young, a few men took her, but got no joy from it. And then, once done, as though it would take them a lifetime to fulfill an obligation which they could find no name for. They became attached to her, and hungered after

2. West African tribesman who controls the magical fetish or charm, or juju.

3. Male singer in religious services.

finding the barest trace of what she might desire. As she grew up, new men who came to town felt as almost everyone did who ever saw her: that they would not be denied. Men were everlastingly bringing her their bodies. Something inside of her got tired of them, I guess, for I am certain that for the life of her she could not tell why or how she began to turn them off. A man in fever is no trifling thing to send away. They began to leave her, baffled and ashamed, yet vowing to themselves that some day they would do some fine thing for her: send her candy every week and not let her know whom it came from, watch out for her wedding-day and give her a magnificent something with no name on it, buy a house and deed it to her, rescue her from some unworthy fellow who had tricked her into marrying him. As you know, men are apt to idolize or fear that which they cannot understand, especially if it be a woman. She did not deny them, yet the fact was that they were denied. A sort of superstition crept into their consciousness of her being somehow above them. Being above them meant that she was not to be approached by anyone. She became a virgin. Now a virgin in a small southern town is by no means the usual thing, if you will believe me. That the sexes were made to mate is the practice of the South. Particularly, black folks were made to mate. And it is black folks whom I have been talking about thus far. What white men thought of Fern I can arrive at only by analogy. They let her alone.

Anyone, of course, could see her, could see her eyes. If you walked up the Dixie Pike most any time of day, you'd be most like to see her resting listless-like on the railing of her porch, back propped against a post, head tilted a little forward because there was a nail in the porch post just where her head came which for some reason or other she never took the trouble to pull out. Her eyes, if it were sunset, rested idly where the sun, molten and glorious, was pouring down between the fringe of pines. Or maybe they gazed at the gray cabin on the knoll from which an evening folk-song was coming. Perhaps they followed a cow that had been turned loose to roam and feed on cotton-stalks and corn leaves. Like as not they'd settle on some vague spot above the horizon, though hardly a trace of wistfulness would come to them. If it were dusk, then they'd wait for the search-light of the evening train which you could see miles up the track before it flared across the Dixie Pike, close to her home. Wherever they looked, you'd follow them and then waver back. Like her face, the whole countryside seemed to flow into her eyes. Flowed into them with the soft listless cadence of Georgia's South. A young Negro, once, was looking at her, spellbound, from the road. A white man passing in a buggy had to flick him with his whip if he was to get by without running him over. I first saw her on her porch. I was passing with a fellow whose crusty numbness (I was from the North and suspected of being prejudiced and stuck-up) was melting as he found me warm. I asked him who she was. "That's Fern," was all that I could get from him. Some folks already thought that I was given to nosing around; I let it go at that, so far as questions were concerned. But at first sight of her I felt as if I heard a Jewish cantor sing. As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song. And I felt bound to her. I too had my dreams: something I would do for her. I have knocked about from town to town too much not to know the futility of mere change of place. Besides, picture if you can, this cream-colored solitary girl sitting at a tenement window looking down on the indifferent

throngs of Harlem. Better that she listen to folk-songs at dusk in Georgia, you would say, and so would I. Or, suppose she came up North and married. Even a doctor or a lawyer, say, one who would be sure to get along—that is, make money. You and I know, who have had experience in such things, that love is not a thing like prejudice which can be bettered by changes of town. Could men in Washington, Chicago, or New York, more than the men of Georgia, bring her something left vacant by the bestowal of their bodies? You and I who know men in these cities will have to say, they could not. See her out and out a prostitute along State Street in Chicago. See her move into a southern town where white men are more aggressive. See her become a white man's concubine. . . . Something I must do for her. There was myself. What could I do for her? Talk, of course. Push back the fringe of pines upon new horizons. To what purpose? and what for? Her? Myself? Men in her case seem to lose their selfishness. I lost mine before I touched her. I ask you, friend (it makes no difference if you sit in the Pullman or the Jim Crow⁴ as the train crosses her road), what thoughts would come to you—that is, after you'd finished with the thoughts that leap into men's minds at the sight of a pretty woman who will not deny them; what thoughts would come to you, had you seen her in a quick flash, keen and intuitively, as she sat there on her porch when your train thundered by? Would you have got off at the next station and come back for her to take her where? Would you have completely forgotten her as soon as you reached Macon, Atlanta, Augusta, Pasadena, Madison, Chicago, Boston, or New Orleans? Would you tell your wife or sweetheart about a girl you saw? Your thoughts can help me, and I would like to know. Something I would do for her. . . .

One evening I walked up the Pike on purpose, and stopped to say hello. Some of her family were about, but they moved away to make room for me. Damn if I knew how to begin. Would you? Mr. and Miss So-and-So, people, the weather, the crops, the new preacher, the frolic, the church benefit, rabbit and possum hunting, the new soft drink they had at old Pap's store, the schedule of the trains, what kind of town Macon was, Negro's migration north, bollweevils, syrup, the Bible—to all these things she gave a yassur or nassur, without further comment. I began to wonder if perhaps my own emotional sensibility had played one of its tricks on me. "Lets take a walk," I at last ventured. The suggestion, coming after so long an isolation, was novel enough, I guess, to surprise. But it wasn't that. Something told me that men before me had said just that as a prelude to the offering of their bodies. I tried to tell her with my eyes. I think she understood. The thing from her that made my throat catch, vanished. Its passing left her visible in a way I'd thought, but never seen. We walked down the Pike with people on all the porches gaping at us. "Doesnt it make you mad?" She meant the row of petty gossiping people. She meant the world. Through a canebrake that was ripe for cutting, the branch was reached. Under a sweet-gum tree, and where reddish leaves had dammed the creek a little, we sat down. Dusk, suggesting the almost imperceptible procession of giant trees, settled with a purple haze about the cane. I felt strange, as I always do in Georgia, particularly at dusk. I felt that things unseen to men were tangibly immediate. It would not have surprised me had I had vision. People have them in Georgia

4. In the segregated South, black persons were required to sit in the "Jim Crow" section of railway cars and were not allowed as passengers in the first-class "Pullman" lounges, or sleeping cars.

more often than you would suppose. A black woman once saw the mother of Christ and drew her in charcoal on the courthouse wall . . . When one is on the soil of one's ancestors, most anything can come to one . . . From force of habit, I suppose, I held Fern in my arms—that is, without at first noticing it. Then my mind came back to her. Her eyes, unusually weird and open, held me. Held God. He flowed in as I've seen the countryside flow in: Seen men. I must have done something—what, I don't know, in the confusion of my emotion. She sprang up. Rushed some distance from me. Fell to her knees, and began swaying, swaying. Her body was tortured with something it could not let out. Like boiling sap it flooded arms and fingers till she shook them as if they burned her. It found her throat, and splattered inarticulately in plaintive, convulsive sounds, mingled with calls to Christ Jesus. And then she sang, brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. A child's voice, uncertain, or an old man's. Dusk hid her; I could hear only her song. It seemed to me as though she were pounding her head in anguish upon the ground. I rushed at her. She fainted in my arms.

There was talk about her fainting with me in the canefield. And I got one or two ugly looks from town men who'd set themselves up to protect her. In fact, there was talk of making me leave town. But they never did. They kept a watch-out for me, though. Shortly after, I came back North. From the train window I saw her as I crossed her road. Saw her on her porch, head tilted a little forward where the nail was, eyes vaguely focused on the sunset. Saw her face flow into them, the countryside and something that I call God, flowing into them . . . Nothing ever really happened. Nothing ever came to Fern, not even I. Something I would do for her. Some fine unnamed thing . . . And, friend, you? She is still living, I have reason to know. Her name, against the chance that you might happen down that way, is Fernie May Rosen.

* * *

Portrait in Georgia

Hair—braided chestnut,
coiled like a lyncher's rope,
Eyes—fagots,
Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,
Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,
And her slim body, white as the ash
of black flesh after flame.

* * *

Seventh Street

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,
Bootleggers in silken shirts,
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks.

Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War.⁵ A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love,

5. War I.

thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington. Stale soggy wood of Washington. Wedges rust in soggy wood . . . Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . . the sun. Wedges are brilliant in the sun; ribbons of wet wood dry and blow away. Black reddish blood. Pouring for crude-boned soft-skinned life, who set you flowing? Blood suckers of the War would spin in a frenzy of dizziness if they drank your blood. Prohibition would put a stop to it. Who set you flowing? White and whitewash disappear in blood. Who set you flowing? Flowing down the smooth asphalt of Seventh Street, in shanties, brick office buildings, theaters, drug stores, restaurants, and cabarets? Eddying on the corners? Swirling like a blood-red smoke up where the buzzards fly in heaven? God would not dare to suck black red blood. A Nigger God! He would duck his head in shame and call for the Judgment Day. Who set you flowing?

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,
Bootleggers in silken shirts,
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks.

1923

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD
1896–1940

In the 1920s and 1930s F. Scott Fitzgerald was equally famous as a writer and as a celebrity author whose lifestyle seemed to symbolize the two decades; in the 1920s he stood for all-night partying, drinking, and the pursuit of pleasure while in the 1930s he stood for the gloomy aftermath of excess. His private life seemed in many ways to symbolize the eras before and after the stock market crash of 1929. *Babylon Revisited*, written immediately after the crash, is simultaneously a personal and a national story.

Fitzgerald was born and raised in a middle-class neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota, descended on his mother's side from southern colonial landowners and legislators, on his father's from Irish immigrants. The family was not prosperous and it took an aunt's support to send him to a Catholic boarding school in New Jersey in 1911. Two years later he entered Princeton University, where he participated in extracurricular literary and dramatic activities, forming friendships with campus intellectuals like the prominent critic Edmund Wilson who were to help him in later years. But he failed to make the football team and felt the disappointment for years. After three years of college Fitzgerald quit to join the army, but the war ended before he saw active service. Stationed in Montgomery, Alabama, he met and courted Zelda Zayre, a local belle who rejected him. In 1919 he went to New York City, determined to make a fortune and win Zelda. Amazingly, he succeeded. A novel he had begun in college, revised, and published in 1920 as *This Side of Paradise* became an immediate best-seller, making its author rich and famous at the age of twenty-four. As one of the earliest examples of a novel about college life, *This Side of Paradise* was accepted as the voice of the younger generation in a society increasingly oriented toward youth. He combined the traditional narrative and rhetorical gifts of a fiction writer, it appeared, with a thoroughly modern sensibility. A week after the novel

Bitter Fruit of the Tree

They said to my grandmother: "Please do not be bitter,"
 When they sold her first-born and let the second die,
 When they drove her husband till he took to the swamplands,
 And brought him home bloody and beaten at last.
 They told her, "It is better you should not be bitter,
 Some must work and suffer so that we, who must, can live,
 Forgiving is noble, you must not be heathen bitter;
 These are your orders: you *are* not to be bitter."
 And they left her shack for their porticoed house.

They said to my father: "Please do not be bitter,"
 When he ploughed and planted a crop not his,
 When he weatherstripped a house that he could not enter,
 And stored away a harvest he could not enjoy.
 They answered his questions: "It does not concern you,
 It is not for you to know, it is past your understanding,
 All you need know is: you must not be bitter."

1939, 1980

LANGSTON HUGHES

1902–1967

Langston Hughes was the most popular and versatile of the many talented black writers connected with the Harlem Renaissance. Along with Zora Neale Hurston, and in contrast to Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen (who wanted to work with purely literary patterns, whether traditional or experimental), he wanted to capture the dominant oral and improvisatory traditions of black culture in written form.

Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, and in childhood, since his parents were separated, he lived mainly with his maternal grandmother. He did, however, reside intermittently both with his mother in Detroit and Cleveland, where he finished high school and began to write poetry, and with his father, who, disgusted with American racism, had gone to Mexico. Like other poets in this era—T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Edgar Lee Masters, and Robert Frost—Hughes had a mother sympathetic to his poetic ambitions and a businesslike father with whom he was in deep, scarring conflict.

Hughes entered Columbia University in 1920 but left after a year to travel and drift for several more: he shipped out as a merchant seaman, worked at a nightclub in Paris (France) and as a busboy in Washington, D.C. All this time, however, he was writing and publishing poetry, chiefly in the two important African American periodicals *Opportunity* and the *Crisis*. Eleven of Hughes's poems were published in Alain Locke's pioneering anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), and he was also well represented in Countee Cullen's 1927 anthology, *Caroling Dusk*. Carl Van Vechten, one of the white patrons of African American writing, helped get *The Weary Blues*, Hughes's first volume of poems, published in 1926. It was in this year, too, that his important essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* appeared in the *Nation*;

in this essay Hughes described the immense difficulties in store for the serious black artist "who would produce a racial art" but insisted on the need for courageous artists to make the attempt. Other patrons appeared: Amy Spingarn financed his college education at Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) and Charlotte Mason subsidized him in New York City between 1928 and 1930. The publication of his novel *Not without Laughter* in 1930 solidified his reputation and sales, enabling him to support himself. By the 1930s he was being called "the bard of Harlem."

The Great Depression brought an abrupt end to much African American literary activity, but Hughes was already a public figure. In the activist 1930s he was much absorbed in radical politics. Hughes and other blacks were drawn by the American Communist party, which made racial justice an important plank in its platform, promoting an image of working-class solidarity that nullified racial boundaries. He visited the Soviet Union in 1932 and produced a significant amount of radical writing up to the eve of World War II. He covered the Spanish Civil War for the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1937. By the end of the decade he had also been involved in drama and screenplay writing and had begun an autobiography, all the while publishing poetry. In 1943 he invented the folksy, street-wise character Jesse B. Semple, whose common-sense prose monologues on race were eventually collected in four volumes; in 1949 he created Alberta K. Johnson, Semple's female equivalent.

In the 1950s and 1960s Hughes published a variety of anthologies for children and adults, including *First Book of Negroes* (1952), *The First Book of Jazz* (1955), and *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958). In 1953 he was called to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy's committee on subversive activities (HUAC) in connection with his 1930s radicalism. The FBI listed him as a security risk until 1959, and during these years, when he could not travel outside the United States, Hughes worked to rehabilitate his reputation as a good American by producing more-patriotic poetry. From 1960 to the end of his life he was again on the international circuit.

Like all the Harlem Renaissance writers (many of whom were not Harlemites), Hughes faced many difficulties in writing a self-proclaimed "Negro" poetry. Could or should any individual speak for an entire "race"? If he or she tried to, wouldn't that speech tend to homogenize and stereotype a diverse people? Harlem poets, aware that the audience for their poetry was almost all white, had to consider whether a particular image of black people would help or harm the cause. To the extent that they felt compelled to idealize black folk, their work risked lapsing into racist primitivism. African American writers questioned, too, whether their work should emphasize their similarities to or differences from whites. Hughes's response to these problems was to turn his focus from the rural black population toward the city folk. The shift to the contemporary urban context freed Hughes from the concerns over primitivism; he could be a realist and modernist. He could use stanza forms deriving from blues music and adapt the vocabulary of everyday black speech to poetry without affirming stereotypes. And he could insist that whatever the differences between black and white Americans, all Americans were equally entitled to liberty, justice, and opportunity.

The source of the poems printed here is *Collected Poems* (1994).

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:
 I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
 flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
 I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
 I looked upon the Nile¹ and raised the pyramids above it.
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
 went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
 bosom turn all golden in the sunset

I've known rivers:
 Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

1921, 1926

Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:
 Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
 It's had tacks in it,
 And splinters,
 And boards torn up,
 And places with no carpet on the floor—
 Bare.
 But all the time
 I've been a-climbin' on,
 And reachin' landin's,
 And turnin' corners,
 And sometimes goin' in the dark
 Where there ain't been no light.
 So boy, don't you turn back.
 Don't you set down on the steps
 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
 Don't you fall now—
 For I've still goin', honey,
 I've still climbin',
 And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

1922, 1926

The Weary Blues

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway. . . .

1. The Nile River, site of ancient Egyptian civilization, empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The Congo River, cradle of ancient Babylonian

civilization, flows from Turkey through Syria and Iraq. The Congo flows from the Republic of the Congo in central Africa into the Atlantic Ocean.

He did a lazy sway. . . .
 To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
 With his ebony hands on each ivory key.
 He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!
 Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
 Sweet Blues!
 Coming from a black man's soul.
 O Blues!
 In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
 I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
 "Ain't got nobody in all this world,
 Ain't got nobody but ma self.
 I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
 And put ma troubles on de shelf."
 Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
 He played a few chords then he sang some more—
 "I got de Weary Blues
 And I can't be satisfied.
 Got de Weary Blues
 And can't be satisfied—
 I ain't happy no mo'
 And I wish that I had died."
 And far into the night he crooned that tune.
 The stars went out and so did the moon.
 The singer stopped playing and went to bed.
 While the Weary Blues echoes through his head
 He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

1932

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well,
 And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
 I'll sit at the table
 When company comes.
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

15

1932

Mulatto

I am your son, white man!

Georgia dusk
And the turpentine woods.
One of the pillars of the temple fell.

*You are my son!
Like hell!*

5

The moon over the turpentine woods.
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

10

What's a body but a toy?
Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
Blue black

Against black fences.
O, you little bastard boy,
What's a body but a toy?

15

The scent of pine wood stings the soft night air.
What's the body of your mother?
Silver moonlight everywhere.

20

What's the body of your mother?
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.

25

*Naw, you ain't my brother.
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.*

Niggers ain't my brother.
The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

30

O, sweet as earth,
Dusk dark bodies
Give sweet birth
To little yellow bastard boys.

35

*Git on back there in the night,
You ain't white.*

The bright stars scatter everywhere.
Pine wood scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy.

40

I am your son, white man!

A little yellow
Bastard boy.

45

1927

Song for a Dark Girl

Way Down South in Dixie¹
(Break the heart of me)
They hung my black young lover
To a cross roads tree.

Way Down South in Dixie
(Bruised body high in air)
I asked the white Lord Jesus
What was the use of prayer.

5

Way Down South in Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
Love is a naked shadow
On a gnarled and naked tree.

10

1927

Vagabonds

We are the desperate
Who do not care,
The hungry
Who have nowhere
To eat,
No place to sleep,
The tearless
Who cannot
Weep.

5

1947

1. This ironic refrain is the last line of *Dixie*, the popular minstrel song, probably composed by Daniel D. Emmett (1815–1904), which became

the rallying cry of southern patriotism during and after the Civil War.

Genius Child

This is a song for the genius child.
Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
Sing it softly as ever you can—
Lest the song get out of hand.

Nobody loves a genius child.

Can you love an eagle,
Tame or wild?
Can you love an eagle,
Wild or tame?
Can you love a monster
Of frightening name?

Nobody loves a genius child.

Kill him—and let his soul run wild!

1947

Refugee in America

There are words like *Freedom*
Sweet and wonderful to say.
On my heart-strings freedom sings
All day everyday.

There are words like *Liberty*
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I knew
You would know why.

1947

Madam and Her Madam

I worked for a woman,
She wasn't mean—
But she had a twelve-room
House to clean.

Had to get breakfast,
Dinner, and supper, too—
Then take care of her children
When I got through.

Wash, iron, and scrub,
Walk the dog around—

10

It was too much,
Nearly broke me down.

I said, Madam,
Can it be
You trying to make a
Pack-horse out of me?

15

She opened her mouth.
She cried, Oh, no!
You know, Alberta,
I love you so!

20

I said, Madam,
That may be true—
But I'll be dogged
If I love you!

1949

Madam's Calling Cards

I had some cards printed
The other day.
They cost me more
Than I wanted to pay.

I told the man
I wasn't no mint,
But I hankered to see
My name in print.

5

MADAM JOHNSON,
ALBERTA K.
He said, Your name looks good
Madam'd that way.

10

Shall I use Old English
Or a Roman letter?
I said, Use American.
American's better.

15

There's nothing foreign
To my pedigree:
Alberta K. Johnson—
American that's me.

20

1949

Silhouette

Southern gentle lady,
Do not swoon.
They've just hung a black man
In the dark of the moon.

They've hung a black man 5
To a roadside tree
In the dark of the moon
For the world to see
How Dixie protects
Its white womanhood. 10

Southern gentle lady,
Be good!
Be good!
1949

Visitors to the Black Belt

You can talk about
Across the railroad tracks—
To me it's *here*
On this side of the tracks.

You can talk about 5
Up in Harlem—
To me it's *here*
In Harlem.

You can say
Jazz on the South Side— 10
To me it's hell
On the South Side:

Kitchenettes
With no heat
And garbage 15
In the halls.

Who're you, outsider?

Ask me who am I.
1949

Note on Commercial Theatre

You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em on Broadway
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies
And you fixed 'em 5
So they don't sound like me.
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone.
You put me in *Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones*
And all kinds of *Swing Mikados* 10
And in everything but what's about me—
But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me—
Black and beautiful— 15
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!

I reckon it'll be
Me myself!
Yes, it'll be me. 20
1949

Democracy

Democracy will not come
Today, this year
Nor ever
Through compromise and fear.

I have as much right 5
As the other fellow has
To stand
On my two feet
And own the land.

I tire so of hearing people say, 10
Let things take their course.
Tomorrow is another day.
I do not need my freedom when I'm dead.
I cannot live on tomorrow's bread.

Freedom 15
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.

I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you.

20

1949

JOHN STEINBECK

1902–1968

Most of John Steinbeck's fiction concerns his native California and the Great Depression. Among influential novels from the period between the wars, his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about "Okies" (Oklahoma sharecroppers who were forced off their land by droughts beginning in 1934), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), was one of the most important. It combined naturalist and symbolist techniques to depict his characters' plights and expressed compassion, outrage, and admiration in response to their sufferings.

He was born and raised not far from San Francisco in the Salinas Valley region of wine and artichokes. His father was county treasurer, his mother a former school-teacher. In the family library he found and read such standard authors as Milton, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy. In high school he was a good student, president of his graduating class, and active in athletics and on the school newspaper. He began college at Stanford University as an English major but left school in 1925 and spent the next five years traveling, reading, and writing.

In 1930 he married (the first of three times) and moved to Pacific Grove, California, where his father provided a house and small allowance to support him. He achieved success in 1935 with *Tortilla Flat*, his third novel. It was an episodic, warmly humorous treatment of the lives of Salinas Valley *paisanos*—ethnically mixed Mexican-Indian-Caucasians—whose earthy, uninhibited lives provided a colorful contrast (in Steinbeck's view) to the valley's "respectable society." The subject of his second successful novel, *In Dubious Battle* (1936), was a fruit pickers' strike. The decency of the exploited workers is played off, on one side, against the cynical landowners and their vigilantes and, on the other, against the equally cynical Communist organizers who try to use the workers' grievances for their own purposes. His sympathy for the underdog was shown again in *Of Mice and Men* (1937), about two itinerant ranch hands, and in *The Grapes of Wrath*, about the Joad family, who, after losing their land, migrated westward to California on U.S. Highway 66 looking for, but not finding, a better life.

After World War II Steinbeck's work became more sentimental and more heavily symbolic. Postwar prosperity led to suburbia, television, and the explosion of a highly commercialized mass culture, from which he turned in disgust. *The Leader of the People* expresses his sense that America's best times are past and locates value in the story's socially marginal characters—a child, an old man, and a farmhand. In a pre-war automobile with his poodle, named Charley, he toured America; the title of his account, *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), again reveals this conviction that "America" was now hard to find. He won the Nobel Prize in 1963.

The text is that of *The Red Pony* (1945).

The Leader of the People

On Saturday afternoon Billy Buck, the ranch-hand, raked together the last of the old years' haystack and pitched small forkfuls over the wire fence to a few mildly interested cattle. High in the air small clouds like puffs of cannon smoke were driven eastward by the March wind. The wind could be heard whishing in the brush on the ridge crests, but no breath of it penetrated down into the ranch-cup.

The little boy, Jody, emerged from the house eating a thick piece of buttered bread. He saw Billy working on the last of the haystack. Jody tramped down scuffling his shoes in a way he had been told was destructive to good shoe-leather. A flock of white pigeons flew out of the black cypress tree as Jody passed, and circled the tree and landed again. A half-grown tortoiseshell cat leaped from the bunkhouse porch, galloped on stiff legs across the road, whirled and galloped back again. Jody picked up a stone to help the game along, but he was too late, for the cat was under the porch before the stone could be discharged. He threw the stone into the cypress tree and started the white pigeons on another whirling flight.

Arriving at the used-up haystack, the boy leaned against the barbed wire fence. "Will that be all of it, do you think?" he asked.

The middle-aged ranch-hand stopped his careful raking and stuck his fork into the ground. He took off his black hat and smoothed down his hair. "Nothing left of it that isn't soggy from ground moisture," he said. He replaced his hat and rubbed his dry leathery hands together.

"Ought to be plenty mice," Jody suggested.

"Lousy with them," said Billy. "Just crawling with mice."

"Well, maybe, when you get all through, I could call the dogs and hunt the mice."

"Sure, I guess you could," said Billy Buck. He lifted a forkful of the damp ground-hay and threw it into the air. Instantly three mice leaped out and burrowed frantically under the hay again.

Jody sighed with satisfaction. Those plump, sleek, arrogant mice were doomed. For eight months they had lived and multiplied in the haystack. They had been immune from cats, from traps, from poison and from Jody. They had grown smug in their security, overbearing and fat. Now the time of disaster had come; they would not survive another day.

Billy looked up at the top of the hills that surrounded the ranch. "Maybe you better ask your father before you do it," he suggested.

"Well, where is he? I'll ask him now."

"He rode up to the ridge ranch after dinner. He'll be back pretty soon."

Jody slumped against the fence post. "I don't think he'd care."

As Billy went back to his work he said ominously, "You'd better ask him anyway. You know how he is."

Jody did know. His father, Carl Tiflin, insisted upon giving permission for anything that was done on the ranch, whether it was important or not. Jody sagged farther against the post until he was sitting on the ground. He looked up at the little puffs of wind-driven cloud. "Is it like to rain, Billy?"

"It might. The wind's good for it, but not strong enough."

"Well, I hope it don't rain until after I kill those damn mice." He looked

THEME FOR ENGLISH B

By Langston Hughes

The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York too.) Me—who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Jody got up from his place. "I'll wait outside for you, sir. I've got a good stick for those mice."

He waited by the gate until the old man came out on the porch. "Let's go down and kill the mice now," Jody called.

"I think I'll just sit in the sun, Jody. You go kill the mice."

"You can use my stick if you like."

"No, I'll just sit here a while."

Jody turned disconsolately away, and walked down toward the old haystack. He tried to whip up his enthusiasm with thoughts of the fat juicy mice. He beat the ground with his flail. The dogs coaxed and whined about him, but he could not go. Back at the house he could see Grandfather sitting on the porch, looking small and thin and black.

Jody gave up and went to sit on the steps at the old man's feet.

"Back already? Did you kill the mice?"

"No, sir. I'll kill them some other day."

The morning flies buzzed close to the ground and the ants dashed about in front of the steps. The heavy smell of sage slipped down the hill. The porch boards grew warm in the sunshine.

Jody hardly knew when Grandfather started to talk. "I shouldn't stay here, feeling the way I do." He examined his strong old hands. "I feel as though the crossing wasn't worth doing." His eyes moved up the side-hill and stopped on a motionless hawk perched on a dead limb. "I tell those old stories, but they're not what I want to tell. I only know how I want people to feel when I tell them.

"It wasn't Indians that were important, nor adventures, nor even getting out here. It was a whole bunch of people made into one big crawling beast. And I was the head. It was westering and westering. Every man wanted something for himself, but the big beast that was all of them wanted only westering. I was the leader, but if I hadn't been there, someone else would have been the head. The thing had to have a head.

"Under the little bushes the shadows were black at white noonday. When we saw the mountains at last, we cried—all of us. But it wasn't getting here that mattered, it was movement and westering.

"We carried life out here and set it down the way those ants carry eggs. And I was the leader. The westering was as big as God, and the slow steps that made the movement piled up and piled up until the continent was crossed.

"Then we came down to the sea, and it was done." He stopped and wiped his eyes until the rims were red. "That's what I should be telling instead of stories."

When Jody spoke, Grandfather started and looked down at him. "Maybe I could lead the people some day," Jody said.

The old man smiled. "There's no place to go. There's the ocean to stop you. There's a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them."

"In boats I might, sir."

"No place to go, Jody. Every place is taken. But that's not the worst—no, not the worst. Westering has died out of the people. Westering isn't a hunger any more. It's all done. Your father is right. It is finished." He laced his fingers on his knee and looked at them.

Jody felt very sad. "If you'd like a glass of lemonade I could make it for you."

Grandfather was about to refuse, and then he saw Jody's face. "That would be nice," he said. "Yes, it would be nice to drink a lemonade."

Jody ran into the kitchen where his mother was wiping the last of the breakfast dishes. "Can I have a lemon to make a lemonade for Grandfather?"

His mother mimicked—"And another lemon to make a lemonade for you."

"No, ma'am. I don't want one."

"Jody! You're sick!" Then she stopped suddenly. "Take a lemon out of the cooler," she said softly. "Here, I'll reach the squeezer down to you."

1945

COUNTEE CULLEN

1903-1946

The African American artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance faced difficult problems as they attempted to enunciate a collective identity for themselves and their people. Should they demonstrate excellence by working within traditional art forms, or should they develop new forms specifically derived from black experience? Should they write (or paint, or sing) only about their experiences as black people, or should they write like Americans, or about universal issues? If the answer was always to write as blacks, could it be maintained that there was just one black experience common to all African Americans? Countee Cullen, a black middle-class New Yorker, experienced these issues in a particularly divisive fashion: he wanted to be a traditional poet but felt it his duty to articulate a black experience that was not entirely his own.

He was the adopted son of a Methodist minister and enjoyed a secure, comfortable childhood. He attended New York public schools, and traveled to Europe. He earned a Phi Beta Kappa key at New York University, where he received his B.A. in 1925; he took an M.A. at Harvard in 1926. He returned to New York as a public-school teacher. His first book of poems, *Color*, appeared in 1925, when he was only twenty-two. His youth, his technical proficiency, and the themes of the poems—truth, beauty, and goodness, in the world of time and circumstance—established him as the "black Keats," a prodigy.

Cullen's anthology of black poetry, *Caroling Dusk* (1927), was an important document for Harlem Renaissance poets. He prefaced his selection with the assertion that the forms of English poetry, not transcriptions of black dialects or militant manifestos, were the proper tools of the artist. In this idea he went counter to the practices of such other Harlem writers as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes; he wanted to be a poet as he understood poets to be. Nevertheless, the titles of his books—*Color* as well as *Copper Sun* in 1927 and *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* in 1928—showed that, like Claude McKay, he felt a responsibility to write about being black even if he did so in modes alien to black folk traditions. As he explained in the preface to *Caroling Dusk*, it was not easy to be both a black and an American.

Cullen won a Guggenheim fellowship to complete *The Black Christ* in 1929 and published a novel, *One Way to Heaven*, in 1932. He succeeded in his aim of becoming a literary man recognized for his skill as a traditional artist; it is an important

part of his achievement that in an era when American society was far more racially segregated than it is now he worked to bring black themes to the awareness of white readers who admired him because he worked with poetic modes that they found familiar.

The text of *From the Dark Tower* is that of *Copper Sun* (1927); the text of the other poems included here is that of *Color* (1925).

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 Sisyphus¹
 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!

1925

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.

1925

1. Tantalus and Sisyphus are figures in Greek mythology who were punished in Hades for committed on earth. Tantalus's punishment was to be offered food and water that was

then instantly snatched away. Sisyphus's torment was to roll a heavy stone to the top of a hill and, after it rolled back down, to repeat the ordeal perpetually.

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?

5

10

So I lie, who all day long
 Want no sound except the song
 Sung by wild barbaric birds
 Goading massive jungle herds,
 Juggernauts¹ 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.

15

20

25

30

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;

35

40

1. The juggernaut is a sacred Hindu idol dragged on a huge car in the path of which devotees were believed to throw themselves—hence any power

demanding blind sacrifice, here splashed with the image of elephants.

What's your nakedness to me? 45
 Here no leprous flowers rear
 Fierce corollas² in the air;
 Here no bodies sleek and wet,
 Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
 Tread the savage measures of 50
 Jungle boys and girls in love.
 What is last year's snow to me,³
 Last year's anything? The tree
 Budding yearly must forget
 How its past arose or set— 55
 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 60
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 65
 From the unremittant beat
 Made by cruel padded feet
 Walking through my body's street.
 Up and down they go, and back,
 Treading out a jungle track. 70
 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 75
 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! 80
 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 85
 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, 90
 Preacher of humility;
 Heathen gods are naught to me.

2. The whorl of petals forming the inner envelope of a flower.
 3. An echo of the lament "Where are the snows

of yesteryear?" from the poem *Grand Testament* by the 15th-century French poet François Villon.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
 So I make an idle boast;
 Jesus of the twice-turned cheek⁴ 95
 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, 100
 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 105
 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, 110
 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 115
 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. 120
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. 125
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realized
They and I are civilized.

1925

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 5
 Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
 Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
 We were not made eternally to weep.

4. In his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.39), Jesus declared that when struck on one cheek, one should turn the other cheek rather than strike back.

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.

10

1927

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!"

5

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

10

I wonder why here at his side,
 Face-in-the-grass with him,
 My mind should stray the Grecian urn¹
 To muse on uncle Jim.

15

1927

1. An allusion to *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by the British Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821). Cullen was particularly fond of the poetry of Keats.

RICHARD WRIGHT

1908–1960

With the 1940 publication of *Native Son* Richard Wright became the first African American author of a best-seller. *Native Son* is an uncompromising study of an African American underclass youth who is goaded to brutal violence by the oppression, hatred, and incomprehension of the white world. The sensational story disregarded conventional wisdom about how black authors should approach a white reading audience. Bigger Thomas, the main character, embodied everything that such an audience might fear and detest, but by situating the point of view within this character's consciousness Wright forced readers to see the world through Bigger's eyes and as to understand him. The novel was structured like a hard-boiled detective story, contained layers of literary allusion and symbol, and combined Marxist social analy-

sis with existential philosophy—in brief, it was at once a powerful social statement and a complex work of literary art.

Wright was born near Natchez, Mississippi. When he was five, his father abandoned the family—Wright, his younger brother, and his mother—and for the next ten years Wright was raised by a series of relatives in Mississippi. By 1925, when he went to Memphis on his own, he had moved twenty times. Extreme poverty, a constantly interrupted education that never went beyond junior high school, and the religious fundamentalism of his grandmother, along with the constant experiences of humiliation and hatred in a racially segregated South: all these contributed to Wright's growing sense that the hidden anger of black people was justified and that only by acknowledging and expressing it could they move beyond it. The title of *Native Son* made the point that the United States is as much the country of black as of white; the story showed that blacks had been deprived of their inheritance.

Two years after moving to Memphis, Wright went north to Chicago. Here he took a series of odd jobs and then joined the WPA Writers' Project (a government project of the Depression years to help support authors) as a writer of guidebooks and as a director of the Federal Negro Theater. He began to study Marxist theory, contributing poetry to leftist literary magazines and joining the Communist Party in 1932. By 1935 he had become the center of a group of African American Chicago writers and had started to write fiction. He was influenced by the naturalistic fiction of James T. Farrell, whose study of sociology at the University of Chicago had helped give structure to his popular Studs Lonigan trilogy about working people of Irish descent.

Wright moved to New York in 1937 to write for the New York Writers' Project and as a reporter on the Communist *Daily Worker*. In 1938 he published *Uncle Tom's Children*, a collection of four short stories. (An earlier novel, *Lawd Today*, was not published until after his death.) Set in the rural South, the stories center on racial conflict and physical violence. Wright's theme of the devastating effect of relentless, institutionalized hatred and humiliation on the black male's psyche was paramount in all of them.

After *Native Son*, Wright turned to autobiographical writings that eventuated in *Black Boy*, published in 1945. Many consider this to be his best book, and such writers as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin took it as a model for their own work in the 1950s and 1960s. A Communist activist in the early 1940s, Wright became increasingly disillusioned and broke completely with the party in 1944. Visiting France in 1946, he was warmly received by leading writers and philosophers. In 1947 he settled permanently in that country, where he was perceived from the first as one of the important experimental modernist prose writers and was ranked on a level with Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Faulkner. An existential novel, *The Outsider* (1953), was followed by five more books: two novels and three collections of lectures, travel writings, and sociopolitical commentary. The collection *Eight Men*, from which the story printed here is taken, was the last literary project he worked on and appeared the year after his death.

Wright's immersion in Marxist doctrine gave him tools for representing society as divided into antagonistic classes and run for the benefit of the few. But in each of his works he portrays individuals who, no matter how they are deformed and brutalized by oppression and exploitation, retain a transcendent spark of selfhood. Ultimately, it is in this spark that Wright put his faith. His writing from first to last affirmed the dignity and humanity of society's outcasts without romanticizing them, and indicted those who had cast them out. As Ralph Ellison expressed it, Wright's example "converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going underground' into a will to confront the world" and to "throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America."

The text was first published in *Harper's Bazaar* (1939) under the title *Almos' a Man*. Under its present title it appeared in *Eight Men* (1961), a posthumous collection of Wright's short fiction.