

If We Must Die

Claude McKay (1890–1948)

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 accursed lot.

If we must die—oh, 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!

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Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us still be brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but—fighting back!

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I, Too, Sing America

by Langston Hughes

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 be 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.

The Weary Blues

by Langston Hughes

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
 Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
 I heard a Negro play.
 Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
 By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
 He did a lazy sway . . .
 He did a lazy sway . . .
 To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
 With his ebony hands on each ivory key
 He made that poor piano moan with melody.
 O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
 He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
 I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--

"Ain't got nobody in all this world,

Ain't got nobody but ma self.

I's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
 He played a few chords then he sang some more--

"I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied--

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died."

And far into the night he crooned that tune.

The stars went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing and went to bed

While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.

He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

"Incident" by Countee Cullen

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.

Sonnet To A Negro In Harlem

You are disdainful and magnificent--
 Your perfect body and your pompous gait,
 Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate;
 Small wonder that you are incompetent
 To imitate those whom you so despise--
 Your shoulders towering high above the throng,
 Your head thrown back in rich, barbaric song,
 Palm trees and manoes stretched before your eyes.
 Let others toil and sweat for labor's sake
 And wring from grasping hands their mead of gold.
 Why urge ahead your supercilious feet?
 Scorn will efface each footprint that you make.
 I love your laughter, arrogant and bold.
 You are too splendid for this city street!

Written by Helene Johnson (1906-1995)

The Heart of a Woman

Georgia Douglas Johnson

THE HEART of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
 As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
 A far o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam
 In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
 And enters some alien cage in its plight,
 And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
 While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Reapers by Jean Toomer

Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones
Are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones
In their hip-pockets as a thing that's done,
And start their silent swinging, one by one.
Black horses drive a mower through the weeds,
And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds,
His belly close to ground. I see the blade,
Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade.

Conversion

African Guardian of Souls,
Drunk with rum,
Feasting on strange cassava,
Yielding to new words and a weak palabra
Of a white-faced sardonic god--
Grins, cries
Amen,
Shouts hosanna.

Jean Toomer