“I Am”  
BY MATTIE J.T. STEPANEK

I am black.  
I am white.  
I am all skin in between.  
I am young.  
I am old.  
I am each age that has been.  
I am scrawny.  
I am well fed.  
I am starving for attention.  
I am famous.  
I am cryptic.  
I am hardly worth the mention.  
I am short.  
I am height.  
I am any frame or stature.  
I am smart.  
I am challenged.  
I am striving for a future.  
I am able.  
I am weak.  
I am some strength.  
I am none.  
I am being.  
I am thoughts.  
I am all things, said and done.  
I am born.  
I am dying.  
I am dust of humble roots.  
I am grace.  
I am pain.  
I am labor of willed fruits.  
I am a slave.  
I am free.  
I am bonded to my life.  
I am rich.  
I am poor.  
I am wealth amid strife.  
I am a shadow.  
I am glory.  
I am hiding from my shame.  
I am hero.  
I am loser.  
I am yearning for a name.  
I am empty.  
I am proud.  
I am seeking my tomorrow.  
I am growing.  
I am fading.  
I am hope amid the sorrow.  
I am certain.  
I am doubtful.  
I am desperate for solutions.  
I am leader.  
I am student.  
I am fate and evolutions.  
I am spirit.  
I am voice.  
I am memories not recalled.  
I am chance.  
I am cause.  
I am effort, blocks and walls.  
I am him.  
I am her.  
I am reasons without rhymes.  
I am past.  
I am nearing.  
I am present in all times.  
I am many.  
I am no one.  
I am seasoned by each being.  
I am me.  
I am you.  
I am all souls now decreeing.  
I am

by Mattie J.T. Stepanek, poem from "Celebrate Through Heartsongs"

For Our World, a poem written on 9/11
BY MATTIE STEPANEK

For Our World
We need to stop.
Just stop.
Stop for a moment.
Before anybody
Says or does anything
That may hurt anyone else.
We need to be silent.
Just silent.
Silent for a moment.
Before we forever lose
The blessing of songs
That grow in our hearts.
We need to notice.
Just notice.
Notice for a moment.
Before the future slips away
Into ashes and dust of humility.
Stop, be silent, and notice.
In so many ways, we are the same.
Our differences are unique treasures.
We have, we are, a mosaic of gifts
To nurture, to offer, to accept.
We need to be.
Just be.
Be for a moment.
Kind and gentle, innocent and trusting,
Like children and lambs,
Never judging or vengeful
Like the judging and vengeful.
And now, let us pray,
Differently, yet together,
Before there is no earth, no life,
No chance for peace.

September 11, 2001

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from Hope Through Heartsongs, Hyperion, 2002
Mother Doesn’t Want a Dog
JUDITH VIORST, 1931

Mother doesn’t want a dog.
Mother says they smell,
And never sit when you say sit,
Or even when you yell.
And when you come home late at night
And there is ice and snow,
You have to go back out because
The dumb dog has to go.

Mother doesn’t want a dog.
Mother says they shed,
And always let the strangers in
And bark at friends instead,
And do disgraceful things on rugs,
And track mud on the floor,
And flop upon your bed at night
And snore their doggy snore.

Mother doesn’t want a dog.
She’s making a mistake.
Because, more than a dog, I think
She will not want this snake.
if i were you
i wish we could changes shoes
because i would make you feel
unpretty too

i was told i was beautiful
but what does that mean
when you're never secure in relationship
because your man is always in between

my outside look happy
but my insides are blue
feeling so ugly about myself
and it's all because of you

other women can't offer
what i have to give
while you're out having fun
my heart feels like it can't live

when you need someone to be around
i'm always there
but at those times
what happened to
which one was it?
the one with the long hair?

games people play and i still stay the same
but at the end of the day
i have myself to blame

it was i who was pretty
and you who was not
being with those other ones
just make me available
and more hot

back out on the market
this is true indeed
while you're with on one
it is i who did succeed

and i am pretty........
Love That Boy
BY WALTER DEAN MYERS

Love that boy,
like a rabbit loves to run
I said I love that boy
like a rabbit loves to run
Love to call him in the morning
love to call him
'Hey there, son!'

He walk like his Grandpa,
Grins like his Uncle Ben.
I said he walk like his Grandpa,
And grins like his Uncle Ben.
Grins when he's happy,
When he sad, he grins again.

His mama like to hold him,
Like to feed him cherry pie.
I said his mama like to hold him.
Like to feed him that cherry pie.
She can have him now,
I'll get him by and by

He got long roads to walk down
Before the setting sun.
I said he got a long, long road to walk down
Before the setting sun.
He'll be a long stride walker,
And a good man before he done.
To Catch a Fish
BY ELOISE GREENFIELD

It takes more than a wish
to catch a fish
you take the hook
you add the bait
you concentrate
and then you wait
you wait you wait
but not a bite
the fish don’t have
an appetite
so tell them what
good bait you’ve got
and how your bait
can hit the spot
this works a whole
lot better than
a wish
if you really
want to catch
a fish

“To Catch a Fish” from Under the Sunday Tree.
Copyright © 1988 by Eloise Greenfield, used by permission of Scott Treimel NY.
Source: Under the Sunday Tree (Harper & Row, 1988)
Recess! Oh, Recess!
BY DARREN SARDELLI

Recess! Oh, Recess!
We love you! You rule!
You keep us away
from the teachers in school.
Your swings are refreshing.
Your slides are the best.
You give us a break
from a really hard test.

Recess! Oh, Recess!
We want you to know,
you’re sweeter than syrup,
you’re special like snow.

You don’t assign homework.
You make the day fun.
You let us play kickball
and run in the sun.

Recess! Oh, Recess!
You’re first on our list.
We’d be in despair
if you didn’t exist.
We’re happy we have you.
You’re awesome and cool.
Recess! Oh, Recess!
We love you! You rule!
My Doggy Ate My Essay
BY DARREN SARDELLI

My doggy ate my essay.
He picked up all my mail.
He cleaned my dirty closet
and dusted with his tail.

He straightened out my posters
and swept my wooden floor.
My parents almost fainted
when he fixed my bedroom door.

I did not try to stop him.
He made my windows shine.

My room looked like a palace,
and my dresser smelled like pine.

He fluffed up every pillow.
He folded all my clothes.
He even cleaned my fish tank
with a toothbrush and a hose.

I thought it was amazing
to see him use a broom.
I’m glad he ate my essay
on “How to Clean My Room.”


Source: Galaxy Pizza and Meteor Pie (Laugh-A-Lot Books)
Our teacher gave detention
to the fountains in the hall.
She handed extra homework
to the artwork on the wall.

We saw her point a finger
at a banner and a sign.
She said their bad behavior
was completely out of line.

The principal approached her
and said, “What is all this fuss?
I heard you tried to punish
all the tires on a bus.

“You’ve made the teachers angry
by disrupting all their classes,
so if you want to keep this job,
you have to wear your glasses!”
This Is Just To Say
BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

William Carlos Williams,"This Is Just to Say"

the right way to speak
BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

The first time my brother says ain't my mother pulls a branch from the willow tree growing down the hill at the edge of our backyard. As she slips her closed hand over it, removes the leaves, my brother begins to cry because the branch is a switch now no longer beautifully weeping at the bottom of the hill. It whirs as my mother whips it through the air and down against my brother's legs.

You will never, my mother says, say ain't in this house. You will never say ain't anywhere.

Each switching is a warning to us our words are to remain crisp and clear. We are never to say huh?

ain't or y'all
git or gonna.
Never ma'am—just yes, with eyes meeting eyes enough to show respect.
Don't ever ma'am anyone!
The word too painful a memory for my mother of not-so-long-ago southern subservient days . . .

The list of what not to say goes on and on . . .

You are from the North, our mother says. You know the right way to speak.

As the switch raises dark welts on my brother's legs Dell and I look on afraid to open our mouths. Fearing the South will slip out or into them.

football dreams
BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

No one was faster
than my father on the football field.
No one could keep him
from crossing the line. Then
touching down again.
Coaches were watching the way he moved,
his easy stride, his long arms reaching
up, snatching the ball from its soft pockets
of air.

My father dreamed football dreams,
and woke up to a scholarship
at Ohio State University.
Grown now
living the big-city life
in Columbus
just sixty miles
from Nelsonville
and from there
Interstate 70 could get you
on your way west to Chicago
Interstate 77 could take you south
but my father said
no colored Buckeye in his right mind
would ever want to go there.

From Columbus, my father said,
you could go just about
anywhere


Firefly
BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

It's almost May
and yesterday
I saw a firefly.

You don't see
them a lot
in the city.

Sometimes
in the park
in the near dark

one comes out
you'll hear
a little kid shout

Lightning bug! Firefly!

It's almost May
and yesterday
I caught a firefly in my hand.

First firefly I
seen in a
long, long time.

Make a wish,
Miss Edna said.
Make a good one.

Firefly wishes always come true.

Jacqueline Woodson, "Firefly" from Locomotion.
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Readers Group, a division of Penguin Random
House LLC.

The Letter A
BY DARREN SARDELLI

The letter A is awesome!
It simply is the best.
Without an A, you could not get
an A+ on a test.
You’d never see an acrobat
or eat an apple pie.
You couldn’t be an astronaut
or kiss your aunt goodbye.
An antelope would not exist.
An ape would be unknown.
You’d never hear a person
say “Afraid” or “All Alone”.
The A’s in avocado
would completely disappear
and certain words would be forgot
like “ankle”, “arm”, and “ear”.

Without the A, you couldn’t aim
an arrow in the air.
You wouldn’t ask for apricots
or almonds at a fair.
Aruba and Australia
would be missing from a map.
You’d never use an ATM,
an apron, or an app.
The arctic fox and aardvark
would be absent from the zoo,
and vowels, as you know them,
would be E, I, O, and U.
There wouldn’t be an A chord
on the instruments you play.
Let’s appreciate, admire,
and applaud the letter A!

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Ode to Teachers
BY PAT MORA

I remember the first day, how I looked down, hoping you wouldn't see me, and when I glanced up, I saw your smile shining like a soft light from deep inside you.

“I’m listening,” you encourage us. “Come on! Join our conversation, let us hear your neon certainties, thorny doubts, tangled angers,” but for weeks I hid inside.

I read and reread your notes praising my writing, and you whispered, “We need you and your stories and questions that like a fresh path will take us to new vistas.”

Slowly, your faith grew into my courage and for you— instead of handing you a note or apple or flowers— I raised my hand.

I carry your smile and faith inside like I carry my dog’s face, my sister’s laugh, creamy melodies, the softness of sunrise, steady blessings of stars, autumn smell of gingerbread, the security of a sweater on a chilly day.

Pat Mora, "Ode To Teachers" from *Dizzy in Your Eyes*. Copyright © 2010 by Pat Mora. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children’s Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All Rights Reserved.

Source: *Dizzy in Your Eyes* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2010)
Church
BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

On Sundays, the preacher gives everyone a chance
to repent their sins. Miss Edna makes me go
to church. She wears a bright hat
I wear my suit. Babies dress in lace.

Girls my age, some pretty, some not so
pretty. Old ladies and men nodding.

Miss Edna every now and then throwing her hand
in the air. Saying Yes, Lord and Preach!

I sneak a pen from my back pocket,
bend down low like I dropped something.

The chorus marches up behind the preacher
clapping and humming and getting ready to sing.

I write the word HOPE on my hand.

Jacqueline Woodson, "Church" from Locomotion. Copyright © 2003 by Jacqueline Woodson. Used by permission of G. P. Putnam’s Sons Books for Young Readers, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC.

If We Must Die
BY CLAUDE MCKAY

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

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


Source: Liberator (The Library of America, 2004)
The Lynching
BY CLAUDE MCKAY

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

Source: Harlem Shadows (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1922)
Storm Ending
BY JEAN TOOMER

Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
Rumbling in the wind,
Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . .
Full-lipped flowers
Bitten by the sun
Bleeding rain
Dripping rain like golden honey—
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.
Dead Fires
BY JESSIE REDMON FAUSET

If this is peace, this dead and leaden thing,
Then better far the hateful fret, the sting.
Better the wound forever seeking balm
Than this gray calm!

Is this pain's surcease? Better far the ache,
The long-drawn dreary day, the night's white wake,
Better the choking sigh, the sobbing breath
Than passion's death!
The Heart of a Woman
BY GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,
Afar 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.
The Black Finger
BY ANGELINA WELD GRIMKÉ

I have just seen a beautiful thing
Slim and still,
Against a gold, gold sky,
A straight cypress,
Sensitive
Exquisite,

A black finger
Pointing upwards.
Why, beautiful, still finger are you black?
And why are you pointing upwards?
We Wear The Mask
BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul Laurence Dunbar, ""Sympathy."" from The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, )

A Dream Deferred
BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?
Mother to Son
BY LANGSTON HUGHES

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'se 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'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.


I, Too
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.


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 Nile 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.


Source: Selected Poems (Vintage Books, 1987)
Harlem
BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?


Source: Selected Poems of Langston Hughes (Random House Inc., 1990)
Lift Every Voice and Sing
BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
 Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand.
True to our God,
True to our native land.

Source: Complete Poems (2000)
Brass Spittoons
BY LANGSTON HUGHES

Clean the spittoons, boy.
   Detroit,
   Chicago,
   Atlantic City,
   Palm Beach.
Clean the spittoons.
The steam in hotel kitchens,
And the smoke in hotel
lobbies,
And the slime in hotel
spittoons:
Part of my life.
   Hey, boy!
   A nickel,
   A dime,
   A dollar,
Two dollars a day.
   Hey, boy!
   A nickel,
   A dime,
   A dollar,
   Two dollars

Buy shoes for the baby.
House rent to pay.
Gin on Saturday,
Church on Sunday.
   My God!
Babies and gin and church
And women and Sunday
All mixed with dimes and
Dollars and clean spittoons
And house rent to pay.
   Hey, boy!
A bright bowl of brass is
beautiful to the Lord.
Bright polished brass like the
cymbals
Of King David’s dancers,
Like the wine cups of
Solomon.
   Hey, boy!
A clean spittoon on the altar
of the Lord.
A clean bright spittoon all
newly polished—
At least I can offer that.
   Com’mere, boy!


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.
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
A Time for Everything

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

2 a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
4 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
5 a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
6 a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
7 a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
8 a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.
All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin’d,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well sav’d, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
Speech: “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

(from Romeo and Juliet, spoken by Juliet)
O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name.
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love
And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.
’Tis but thy name that is my enemy:
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot
Nor arm nor face nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O be some other name.
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.
Sonnet 147: My love is as a fever, longing still
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

My love is as a fever, longing still
For that which longer nurseth the disease,
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill,
Th’ uncertain sickly appetite to please.
My reason, the physician to my love,
Angry that his prescriptions are not kept,
Hath left me, and I desperate now approve
Desire is death, which physic did except.
Past cure I am, now reason is past care,
And frantic-mad with evermore unrest;
My thoughts and my discourse as madmen’s are,
At random from the truth vainly expressed:
    For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright,
    Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Source: The Sonnets (Penguin Books, 2001)
Shall I compare Thee to a Summer Day?

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature’s changing course untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.
Speech: “To be, or not to be, that is the question”
BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
(from Hamlet, spoken by Hamlet)

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die—to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause—there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th'oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovere'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.
Because I could not stop for Death,
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

We slowly drove, he knew no haste,
And I had put away
My labor, and my leisure too,
For his civility.

We passed the school, where children strove
At recess, in the ring;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

Or rather, he passed us;
The dews grew quivering and chill,
For only gossamer my gown,
My tippet only tulle.

We paused before a house that seemed
A swelling of the ground;
The roof was scarcely visible,
The cornice but a mound.

Since then 'tis centuries, and yet each
Feels shorter than the day
I first surmised the horses' heads
Were toward eternity.

Song: Go and catch a falling star
BY JOHN DONNE

Go and catch a falling star,

    Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me where all past years are,

    Or who cleft the devil's foot,
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,

Or to keep off envy's stinging,

    And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.

If thou be'st born to strange sights,

    Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,

    Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me,

All strange wonders that befell thee,

    And swear,
No where
Lives a woman true, and fair.

If thou find'st one, let me know,

    Such a pilgrimage were sweet;
Yet do not, I would not go,

    Though at next door we might meet;
Though she were true, when you met her,

And last, till you write your letter,

    Yet she
Will be
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

Trees
BY JOYCE KILMER

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.
There is no Frigate like a Book (1286)
BY EMILY DICKINSON

There is no Frigate like a Book
To take us Lands away
Nor any Coursers like a Page
Of prancing Poetry –
This Traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of Toll –
How frugal is the Chariot
That bears the Human Soul –

Emily Dickinson, "There is no Frigate like a Book" from (02138: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,)

Source: The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999)
If—
BY RUDYARD KIPLING

('Brother Square-Toes'—Rewards and Fairies)

If you can keep your head when all about you
   Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
   But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
   Or being lied about, don’t deal in lies,
Or being hated, don’t give way to hating,
   And yet don’t look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
   If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
   And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
   Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
   And stoop and build ’em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
   And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
   And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
   To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
   Except the Will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
   Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
   If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
   With sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
   And—which is more—you’ll be a Man, my son!
Annabel Lee  
BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee;  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than love—  
I and my Annabel Lee—  
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven  
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling  
My beautiful Annabel Lee;  
So that her highborn kinsmen came  
And bore her away from me,  
To shut her up in a sepulchre  
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,  
Went envying her and me—  
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,  
In this kingdom by the sea)  
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,  
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love  
Of those who were older than we—  
Of many far wiser than we—  
And neither the angels in Heaven above  
Nor the demons down under the sea  
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,  
In her sepulchre there by the sea—  
In her tomb by the sounding sea.
“Hope” is the thing with feathers - (314)
BY EMILY DICKINSON

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I’ve heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.


Source: The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R. W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999)
I like to see it lap the Miles -
And lick the Valleys up -
And stop to feed itself at Tanks -
And then - prodigious step

Around a Pile of Mountains -
And supercilious peer
In Shanties - by the sides of Roads -
And then a Quarry pare

To fit its sides
And crawl between
Complaining all the while
In horrid - hooting stanza -
Then chase itself down Hill -

And neigh like Boanerges -
Then - prompter than a Star
Stop - docile and omnipotent
At it's own stable door -

Source: The Poems of Emily Dickinson, Edited by R.W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999)
A Red, Red Rose
BY ROBERT BURNS

O my Luve is like a red, red rose
    That’s newly sprung in June;
O my Luve is like the melody
    That’s sweetly played in tune.

So fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
    So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
    Till a’ the seas gang dry.

Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear,
    And the rocks melt wi’ the sun;
I will love thee still, my dear,
    While the sands o’ life shall run.

And fare thee weel, my only luve!
    And fare thee weel awhile!
And I will come again, my luve,
    Though it were ten thousand mile.
Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.
Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.


Source: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays (Library of America, 1995)
To My Dear and Loving Husband
BY ANNE BRADSTREET

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee.
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let’s so persever,
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.
Never give all the Heart
BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss;
For everything that’s lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.
O never give the heart outright,
For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play.
And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost.
The day is fresh-washed and fair, and there is a smell of tulips and narcissus in the air.

The sunshine pours in at the bath-room window and bores through the water in the bath-tub in lathes and planes of greenish-white. It cleaves the water into flaws like a jewel, and cracks it to bright light.

Little spots of sunshine lie on the surface of the water and dance, dance, and their reflections wobble deliciously over the ceiling; a stir of my finger sets them whirring, reeling. I move a foot and the planes of light in the water jar. I lie back and laugh, and let the green-white water, the sun-flawed beryl water, flow over me. The day is almost too bright to bear, the green water covers me from the too bright day. I will lie here awhile and play with the water and the sun spots. The sky is blue and high. A crow flaps by the window, and there is a whiff of tulips and narcissus in the air.


Source: *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002)
Count That Day Lost
BY GEORGE ELIOT (MARY ANN EVANS) (1819 - 1880)

If you sit down at set of sun
And count the acts that you have done,
And, counting, find
One self-denying deed, one word
That eased the heart of him who heard,
One glance most kind
That fell like sunshine where it went—
Then you may count that day well spent.

But if, through all the livelong day,
You’ve cheered no heart, by yea or nay—
If, through it all
You’ve nothing done that you can trace
That brought the sunshine to one face—
No act most small
That helped some soul and nothing cost—
Then count that day as worse than lost.
The Swing
BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

How do you like to go up in a swing,
Up in the air so blue?
Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing
Ever a child can do!

Up in the air and over the wall,
Till I can see so wide,
Rivers and trees and cattle and all
Over the countryside—

Till I look down on the garden green,
Down on the roof so brown—
Up in the air I go flying again,
Up in the air and down!

Bed in Summer
BY ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

In winter I get up at night
And dress by yellow candle-light.
In summer, quite the other way,
I have to go to bed by day.

I have to go to bed and see
The birds still hopping on the tree,
Or hear the grown-up people's feet
Still going past me in the street.

And does it not seem hard to you,
When all the sky is clear and blue,
And I should like so much to play,
To have to go to bed by day?

Acquainted with the Night
BY ROBERT FROST

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.


A Dream Within a Dream
BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow —
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less gone?
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand —
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep — while I weep!
O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?
The Tyger
BY WILLIAM BLAKE

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.
There Will Come Soft Rains
BY SARA TEASDALE, 1920

Sara Trevor Teasdale (1884-1933) was an American lyric poet born in St. Louis, Missouri. “There Will Come Soft Rains” was published in a collection of poems by Teasdale titled Flame and Shadow. When Teasdale wrote the poem in 1920, the devastation of World War I was fresh in the minds of many American writers.

There will come soft rains and the smell of the ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering sound;

And frogs in the pools singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white,

Robins will wear their feathery fire
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.
Lord,

when you send the rain
think about it, please,
a little?

Do

not get carried away
by the sound of falling water,
the marvelous light

on the falling water.

I

am beneath that water.
It falls with great force
and the light

Blinds

me to the light.
When the black snake
flashed onto the morning road,
and the truck could not swerve--
death, that is how it happens.

Now he lies looped and useless
as an old bicycle tire.
I stop the car
and carry him into the bushes.

He is as cool and gleaming
as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet
as a dead brother.
I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking
about death: its suddenness,
its terrible weight,
its certain coming. Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones
have always preferred.
It is the story of endless good fortune.
It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.
It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing
forward
happily all spring through the green leaves
before
he came to the road.
Do not go gentle into that good night
DYLAN THOMAS, 1914 - 1953

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Wind, Water, Stone

BY OCTAVIO PAZ

Octavio Paz (1914-1998) was a Mexican poet and diplomat. In 1990, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. In this poem, a speaker describes wind, water, and stone.

Water hollows stone,
wind scatters water,
stone stops the wind.
Water, wind, stone.

Wind carves stone,
stone’s a cup of water,
water escapes and is wind.
Stone, wind, water.

Wind sings in its whirling,
water murmurs going by,
unmoving stone keeps still.

Wind, water, stone.
Each is another and no other:
crossing and vanishing
through their empty names:
water, stone, wind.

The Road Not Taken
BY ROBERT FROST

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
I Hear America Singing  
BY WALT WHITMAN

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

n/a

Source: Selected Poems (1991)
SONNET XVII
BY PABLO NERUDA, 1959

Pablo Neruda was the pen name and, later, legal name of the Chilean poet-diplomat and politician Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto. Neruda became famous worldwide for his intense and original poetry, especially his poems about love.

I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,
or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.
I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,
in secret, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you as the plant that never blooms
but carries in itself the light of hidden flowers;
thanks to your love a certain solid fragrance,
risen from the earth, lives darkly in my body.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;
so I love you because I know no other way
than this: where I does not exist, nor you,
so close that your hand on my chest is my hand,
so close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.

From 100 LOVE SONNETS: CIEN SONETOS DE AMOR by Pablo Neruda, translated by Stephen Tapscott, Copyright © Pablo Neruda 1959 and Fundación Pablo Neruda, Copyright © 1986 by the University of Texas Press. By permission of the publisher.
i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
my heart)i am never without it(anywhere
i go you go, my dear; and whatever is done
by only me is your doing, my darling)

i fear
no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) i want
no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true)
and it’s you are whatever a moon has always meant
and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)


Mosquito

BY J. PATRICK LEWIS

I was climbing up the sliding board
When suddenly I felt
A mosquito bite my bottom
And it raised a big red welt.

So I said to that mosquito,
"I'm sure you wouldn't mind
If I took a pair of tweezers
And I tweezered your behind!"

He shriveled up his body
And he shuffled to his feet,
And he said, "I'm awfully sorry
But a skeeter's got to eat!
Still, there are mosquito manners,
And I must have just forgot 'em.
And I swear I'll never never never
Bite another bottom."

But a minute later Archie Hill
And Buck and Theo Brown
Were horsing on the monkey bars,
Hanging upside down.
They must have looked delicious
From a skeeter's point of view
'Cause he bit 'em on the bottoms,
Archie, Buck and Theo too!

You could hear 'em goin' HOLY!
You could hear 'em goin' WHACK!
You could hear 'em cuss and holler,
Goin' smack, smack, smack.

A mosquito's awful sneaky,
A mosquito's mighty sly,
But I never never never
Thought a skeeter'd tell a lie.

Lady Day
BY J. PATRICK LEWIS

for Billie Holiday

Lady could pour you a song,
Coffee and a little cream.
Stir it the whole night long
Into a brown-sugar dream.

Lady could wrap you a note
Up in a velvet night—

Sometimes Manhattan satin,
Always Harlem delight.

Lady Day could sing it
Like nobody ever has
At the Shim Sham Club, Hot Cha Cha,
Joints that swung on jazz.

Her bittersweet songs told Heartbreak,
Meet your sister Pain,
But Lady melted yesterdays
Into beautiful rain.


Source: Freedom Like Sunlight: Praisesongs for Black Americans (Creative Editions, 2000)
Aunties
BY KEVIN YOUNG

There's a way a woman
will not
relinquish
her pocketbook
even pulled
onstage, or called up
to the pulpit—
there's a way only
your Auntie can make it
taste right—
rice & gravy
is a meal
if my late Great Aunt
Toota makes it—
Aunts cook like
there's no tomorrow
& they're right.
Too hot
is how my Aunt Tuddie
peppers everything,
her name given
by my father, four, seeing
her smiling in her crib.
There’s a barrel
full of rainwater
beside the house
that my infant father will fall
into, trying to see
himself—the bottom—
& there's his sister
Margie yanking him out
by his hair grown long
as superstition. Never mind
the flyswatter they chase you
round the house
& into the yard with
ready to whup the daylights
out of you—
that's only a threat—
Aunties will fix you
potato salad
& save
you some. Godmothers,
godsends,
Aunts smoke like
it's going out of style—
& it is—
make even gold
teeth look right, shining.
saying I'll be
John, with a sigh. Make way
out of no way—
keep they key
to the scale that weighed
the cotton, the cane
we raised more
than our share of—
If not them, then who
will win heaven?
holding tight
to their pocketbooks
at the pearly gates
just in case.

Kevin Young, "Aunties" from Dear Darkness. Copyright © 2008 by Kevin Young. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.
Source: Dear Darkness (Alfred A. Knopf, 2008)
Lineage
BY MARGARET WALKER

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers are full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say.
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

Margaret Walker, “Lineage” from This is My Century: New and Collected Poems. Copyright © 1989 by Margaret Walker. Reprinted by permission of University of Georgia Press.

Source: This is My Century: New and Collected Poems (University of Georgia Press, 1989)
Caged Bird
BY MAYA ANGELOU

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing
trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright
lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of
dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” from Shaker, Why Don’t You Sing? Copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Phenomenal Woman  
BY MAYA ANGELOU

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion  
model’s size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I’m telling lies.  
I say,  
It’s in the reach of my arms,  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It’s the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me.

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can’t touch  
My inner mystery.  
When I try to show them,  
They say they still can’t see.  
I say,  
It’s in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head’s not bowed.  
I don’t shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing,  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It’s in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
The palm of my hand,  
The need for my care.  
’Cause I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me.

Maya Angelou, “Phenomenal Woman” from And Still I Rise. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Still I Rise
BY MAYA ANGELOU

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
’Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
’Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin’ in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I’ll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history’s shame
I rise
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.


Chocolate
BY RITA DOVE

Velvet fruit, exquisite square
I hold up to sniff
between finger and thumb -

how you numb me
with your rich attentions!
If I don't eat you quickly,

you'll melt in my palm.
Pleasure seeker, if I let you
you'd liquefy everywhere.

Knotted smoke, dark punch
of earth and night and leaf,
for a taste of you

any woman would gladly
crumble to ruin.
Enough chatter: I am ready
to fall in love!

Rita Dove, "Chocolate" from American Smooth. Copyright © 2004 by Rita Dove. Used by permission of the author and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. This selection may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.
Primer
BY RITA DOVE

In the sixth grade I was chased home by
the Gatlin kids, three skinny sisters
in rolled-down bobby socks. Hissing

*Brainiac!* and *Mrs. Stringbean!*, they trod my heel.

I knew my body was no big deal
but never thought to retort: who's
calling who skinny? (Besides, I knew
they'd beat me up.) I survived
their shoves across the schoolyard
because my five-foot-zero mother drove up
in her Caddie to shake them down to size.
Nothing could get me into that car.
I took the long way home, swore
I'd show them all: I would grow up.

Rita Dove, "Primer" from *Mother Love*. Copyright © 1995 by Rita Dove. Used by permission of the author and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. This selection may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Heart to Heart
BY RITA DOVE

It's neither red
nor sweet.
It doesn't melt
or turn over,
break or harden,
so it can't feel
pain,
yearning,
regret.

I can't wear it
on my sleeve,
or tell you from
the bottom of it
how I feel. Here,
it's all yours, now—
but you'll have
to take me,
too.

It doesn't have
a tip to spin on,
it isn't even
shapely—
just a thick clutch
of muscle,
lopsided,
mute. Still,
I feel it inside
its cage sounding
a dull tattoo:
I want, I want—
but I can't open it:
there's no key.
Closed Mondays
is music    is men
off early from work    is waiting
for the chance at the chair
while the eagle claws holes
in your pockets    keeping
time    by the turning
of rusty fans    steel flowers with
cold breezes    is having nothing
better to do    than guess at the years
of hair    matted beneath the soiled caps
of drunks    the pain of running
a fist ed comb through stubborn
knots    is the dark dirty low
down blues    the tender heads
of sons fresh from cornrows    all
wonder at losing    half their height
is a mother gathering hair    for good
luck    for a soft wig    is the round
difficulty of ears    the peach
faced boys asking Eddie
to cut in parts and arrows
wanting to have their names read
for just a few days    and among thin
jazz    is the quick brush of a done
head    the black flood around
your feet    grandfathers

stopping their games of ivory
dominos    just before they reach the bone
yard    is winking widowers announcing
cut it clean off    I’m through courting
and hair only gets in the way    is the final
spin of the chair    a reflection of
a reflection    that sting of wintergreen
tonic    on the neck of a sleeping snow
haired man    when you realize it is
your turn    you are next


Source: Most Way Home (Zoland Books, 1995)
Ode to Big Trend
BY TERRANCE HAYES

Pretty soon the Negroes were looking to get paid.
My partner, Big Trend, wiped his ox neck and said

He wasn’t going to wait too much longer. You
Know that look your daddy gets before he whups you?

That’s how Big Trend looked. There was a pink scar
Medduling his forehead. Most people assumed a bear

Like him couldn’t read anything but a dollar,
But I’d watched him tour the used bookstore
In town and seen him napping so I knew he held more

Than power in those hands. They could tear
A Bible in two. Sometimes on the walk home I’d hear

Him reciting poems. But come Friday, he was the one
The fellas asked to speak to the boss. He’d go alone,

Usually, and left behind, we imagined the boss buckled
Into Trend’s shadow because our money always followed.

Source: *Poetry* (March 2008)
Equinox
BY ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

Now is the time of year when bees are wild
and eccentric. They fly fast and in cramped
loop-de-loops, dive-bomb clusters of conversants
in the bright, late-September out-of-doors.
I have found their dried husks in my clothes.

They are dervishes because they are dying,
one last sting, a warm place to squeeze
a drop of venom or of honey.
After the stroke we thought would be her last
my grandmother came back, reared back and slapped

a nurse across the face. Then she stood up,
walked outside, and lay down in the snow.
Two years later there is no other way
to say, we are waiting. She is silent, light
as an empty hive, and she is breathing.

Source: Body of Life (Tia Chucha, 1996)
The Gossips
BY THEODORE ROETHKE

The vulturine necks stretch out; the mean eyes bunch,
Float over hedges, witch-like, branch after branch,
Droop down from grimy windows; lust to lynch;

Or narrow to a dark reptilian stare,
Glide, poison-fanged, from bridge tea to the store.
The victim walks, his curdled spine aware.

Whatever could this bumbling man have done
That these cold venomous eyes should merge as one,
Freeze and transfix him like an evil sun?
“Useless Things”  
BY RICHARD EDWARDS

A spout without a hole  
A Swiss without a roll  
Ladders without rungs  
Taste without tongues,

A shepherd without sheep  
A horn without a beep  
Hockey without sticks  
Candles without wicks,

A pier without the sea  
A buzz without a bee  
A lid without a box  
Keys without locks,

A harp without a string  
A pong without a ping  
A broom without its bristles  
Refs without whistles,

A glacier without ice  
Ludo without dice  
A chair without a seat  
Steps without feet,

A hat without a head  
A toaster without bread  
A riddle without a clue  
Me without you.
I note the obvious differences in the human family. Some of us are serious, some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived as true profundity, and others claim they really live the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones can confuse, bemuse, delight, brown and pink and beige and purple, tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas and stopped in every land, I've seen the wonders of the world not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women called Jane and Mary Jane, but I've not seen any two who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different although their features jibe, and lovers think quite different thoughts while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China, we weep on England's moors, and laugh and moan in Guinea, and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland, are born and die in Maine. In minor ways we differ, in major we're the same.
Another Reason Why I Don'T Keep A Gun In The House

BY BILLY COLLINS

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.  
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark  
that he barks every time they leave the house.  
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbors' dog will not stop barking.  
I close all the windows in the house and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast  
but I can still hear him muffled under the music, barking, barking, barking,

and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra, his head raised confidently as if Beethoven had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking, sitting there in the oboe section barking, his eyes fixed on the conductor who is entreating him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful silence to the famous barking dog solo, that endless coda that first established Beethoven as an innovative genius.
Women
BY ALICE WALKER

They were women then
My mama’s generation
Husky of voice—stout of
Step
With fists as well as
Hands
How they battered down
Doors
And ironed
Starched white
Shirts
How they led
Armies
Headragged generals
Across mined
Fields
Booby-trapped
Ditches
To discover books
Desks
A place for us
How they knew what
we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves.
alternate names for black boys
BY DANEZ SMITH

1. smoke above the burning bush
2. arch nemesis of summer night
3. first son of soil
4. coal awaiting spark & wind
5. guilty until proven dead
6. oil heavy starlight
7. monster until proven ghost
8. gone
9. phoenix who forgets to un-ash
10. going, going, gone
11. gods of shovels & black veils
12. what once passed for kindling
13. fireworks at dawn
14. brilliant, shadow hued coral
15. (I thought to leave this blank
   but who am I to name us nothing?)
16. prayer who learned to bite & sprint
17. a mother’s joy & clutched breath

Source: Poetry (March 2014)
THE ROSE THAT GREW FROM CONCRETE
BY TUPAC SHAKUR, 1999

Tupac Shakur (1971-1996) was an African American rapper, actor, poet, and activist. Shakur continues to be considered an influential rapper today and has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete?
Proving nature’s laws wrong it learned to walk without having feet.

Funny it seems, but by keeping its dreams, it learned to breathe fresh air.
Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else ever cared.

“The Rose That Grew from Concrete” from The Rose That Grew from Concrete by Tupac Shakur. Copyright © 1999. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
Please wake me when I’m free
I cannot bear captivity
where my culture I’m told holds no significance
I’ll wither and die in ignorance
But my inner eye can see a race
who reigned as kings in another place
the green of trees were rich and full
and every man spoke of beautiful
together as equals
War was gone because all was peaceful
But now like a nightmare I wake to see
That I live like a prisoner of poverty
Please wake me when I’m free
I cannot bear captivity
4 I would rather be stricken blind
than 2 live without expression of mind
Life Through My Eyes
BY TUPAC SHAKUR

Life through my bloodshot eyes
would scare a square 2 death
poverty, murder, violence
and never a moment 2 rest
Fun and games R few
but treasured like gold 2 me
cuz I realize that I must return
2 my spot in poverty
But mock my words when I say
my heart will not exist
unless my destiny comes through
and puts an end 2 all of this
Negative
BY KEVIN YOUNG

Wake to find everything black
what was white, all the vice
versa—white maids on TV, black

sitcoms that star white dwarfs
cute as pearl buttons. Black Presidents,
Black Houses. White horse
candidates. All bleach burns
clothes black. Drive roads
white as you are, white songs

on the radio stolen by black bands
like secret pancake recipes, white back-up
singers, ball-players & boxers all

white as tar. Feathers on chickens
dark as everything, boiling in the pot
that called the kettle honky. Even

whites of the eye turn dark, pupils
clear & changing as a cat’s.
Is this what we’ve wanted

& waited for? to see snow
covering everything black
as Christmas, dark pages written

white upon? All our eclipses bright,
dark stars shooting across pale
sky, glowing like ash in fire, shower
every skin. Only money keeps
green, still grows & burns like grass
under dark daylight.


Source: To Repel Ghosts: The Remix (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)
The fist clenched round my heart
loosens a little, and I gasp
brightness; but it tightens
again. When have I ever not loved
the pain of love? But this has moved

past love to mania. This has the strong
clench of the madman, this is
gripping the ledge of unreason, before
plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.
Teri Ellen Cross Davis is a contemporary poet whose work is known for using small, personal
moments to explore more universal themes. Her poetry also focuses readers on the
experiences of women and people of color in America. This poem comes from her 2016
collection *Haint*.

sitting too long
skinny cinnamon burnt legs
cramped, Momma’s thigh
suctioned your ear
relief was turning your head
a new view of the television

but nothing was better than
matching candy-colored beads
symmetrical cornrows
braidsswinging rhythmically
aluminum sneaking its shine
through the hair’s woven layers

and the freedom of skipping
on sidewalks, blacktopped driveways,
running round backyards, listening
to the beads clanging kiss
the crescendo then whispering — this
music celebrating the movement of you

“East 149th Street (Symphony for a Black Girl)” from the poetry collection *Haint* by Teri Ellen Cross Davis, Copyright © 2016. By permission of Gival Press.
THIS IS NOT A SMALL VOICE
BY SONIA SANCHEZ, 1995

Sonia Sanchez is an award-winning poet who has authored over a dozen books of poetry, as well as short stories, essays, plays, and children books. In this poem, a speaker asserts the strength and love of a collective set of people.

This is not a small voice
you hear                   this is a large
voice coming out of these cities.
This is the voice of LaTanya.
Kadesha. Shaniqua. This
is the voice of Antoine.
Darryl. Shaquille.
Running over waters
navigating the hallways
of our schools spilling out
on the corners of our cities and
no epitaphs1 spill out of their river mouths.
This is not a small love
you hear                   this is a large
love, a passion for kissing learning
on its face.
This is a love that crowns the feet with hands
that nourishes, conceives, feels the water sails
mends the children,
folds them inside our history where they
toast more than the flesh
where they suck the bones of the alphabet
and spit out closed vowels.
This is a love colored with iron and lace.
This is a love initialed Black Genius.
This is not a small voice
you hear.

That day in June we stopped in Meridian, I reached in my pocket for the penny I called Hope. The Negro barber nodded, Y’all come back soon. In Longdale the KKK had burned down Mount Zion Church. We had left the inferno when Sheriff Price ordered us into a cruiser for a shortcut to county jail. With the odor of pee running down my pant leg, Mickey whispered, Don’t expect that one phone call, and he was right. They fed us potatoes, peas, poke salad, and spoon bread. Our last supper. But once the Klan ambush was set up, the sheriff fined me $20, and told us, Git gone for good. Then the whole thin shimmer of our lives evaporated like smoke in a fog. Armed with cone-hat conviction and long-necked persuaders, the Klan rode in for last rites to the first rights of a gaunt trio. Flames licked the car as it sank under Bogue Chitto Swamp. After single shots to the heart had taken Mickey and Andrew, they’d saved three bullets for me. Freedom Summer is Forlorn Winter at the tag end of living. And just before they pitched our bodies into earthen graves on Old Jolly Farm, I remember that my hand was in my pocket. I could still feel Hope.

“Freedom Summer” from When Thunder Comes by J. Patrick Lewis. Copyright © 2013 by J. Patrick Lewis. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
"The Many and the Few" by J. Patrick Lewis. Copyright © 2001 by J. Patrick Lewis. Used with permission. All rights reserved.
I AM OFFERING THIS POEM
BY JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA, 1990

Jimmy Santiago Baca (b. 1952) is an award-winning American poet and writer, of Apache and Chicano descent. Following his difficult childhood, Baca was incarcerated as a young man. In prison, he taught himself to read and write.

I am offering this poem to you, since I have nothing else to give. Keep it like a warm coat when winter comes to cover you, or like a pair of thick socks the cold cannot bite through,

I love you,

I have nothing else to give you, so it is a pot full of yellow corn to warm your belly in winter, it is a scarf for your head, to wear over your hair, to tie up around your face,

I love you,

Keep it, treasure this as you would if you were lost, needing direction, in the wilderness life becomes when mature; and in the corner of your drawer, tucked away like a cabin or hogan1 in dense2 trees, come knocking, and I will answer, give you directions, and let you warm yourself by this fire, rest by this fire, and make you feel safe

I love you,

It’s all I have to give, and all anyone needs to live, and to go on living inside, when the world outside no longer cares if you live or die; remember,

I love you.

“I Am Offering This Poem”, © 1990, New Directions Publishing Corp.. Reprinted with permission, all rights reserved.
Incident
BY NATASHA TRETHEWEY

We tell the story every year—
how we peered from the windows, shades drawn—
though nothing really happened,
the charred grass now green again.

We peered from the windows, shades drawn,
at the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
the charred grass still green. Then
we darkened our rooms, lit the hurricane lamps.

At the cross trussed like a Christmas tree,
a few men gathered, white as angels in their gowns.
We darkened our rooms and lit hurricane lamps,
the wicks trembling in their fonts of oil.

It seemed the angels had gathered, white men in their gowns.
When they were done, they left quietly. No one came.
The wicks trembled all night in their fonts of oil;
by morning the flames had all dimmed.

When they were done, the men left quietly. No one came.
Nothing really happened.
By morning all the flames had dimmed.
We tell the story every year.


Source: Native Guard (Mariner Books, 2007)
Coffee Break
BY KWAME DAWES

It was Christmastime,
the balloons needed blowing,
and so in the evening
we sat together to blow
balloons and tell jokes,
and the cool air off the hills
made me think of coffee,
so I said, “Coffee would be nice,”
and he said, “Yes, coffee
would be nice,” and smiled
as his thin fingers pulled
the balloons from the plastic bags;
so I went for coffee,
and it takes a few minutes
to make the coffee
and I did not know
if he wanted cow’s milk
or condensed milk,
and when I came out
to ask him, he was gone,
just like that, in the time
it took me to think,
cow’s milk or condensed;
the balloons sat lightly
on his still lap.

Mama... I saw you raise five of us by
yourself with a father nowhere in sight.
I saw you inspire revolution with a chicken and two potatoes.
I saw you limp home late at night after
a long day’s work with sores on your feet.
I saw you gracefully remove groceries from
the cart when the bill got too high.
I saw you pray when brother stole the microwave to buy drugs.
I saw you make Christmas a ceremony and
I could’ve sworn we were royalty.
I saw you hold our home together like a foundation
that would never crumble.
But Mama, I never saw you dance. I never saw you dance.
And I wonder what happened to your music
‘Cause I’ve got an instinct you still know how to groove,
So like a soulful incantation I write this dream for you:
I see you stand in a celestial ballroom lit by the moon.
I see you wear a gown of rose petals woven with gold thread.
I see you sparkle like the necklace of stars upon your neck.
I see you comfortable in shoes cut from the clouds.
I see you happy with a mate adoring every inch of your essence —
And mama, he looks like Denzel.
I see you laugh as Nina and Luther sing eternally for you
And Mama I see you dance. Yes, Mama I see you dance.
And I say Dance Mama Dance
Break the floodgates of countless uncried tears
And Dance Mama Dance
For all the nights you slept alone with no warm arms
to hold you
Dance Mama Dance
For all the dreams that you forgot so we could make it through the day
Dance Mama Dance
Like your nightmare is ending
Like joy is beginning
Like life is not through with you yet
Laugh, Cry, Swirl, Twirl,
Dance Mama — Dance, Dance, Dance
Dance Mama — Dance!

“Dance Mama Dance” from Through the Night by Daniel Beaty. Copyright © 2010 by Daniel Beaty (www.danielbeaty.com). Used with permission. All rights reserved.
A Small Needful Fact
BY ROSS GAY

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.
I will not shoot myself
In the head, and I will not shoot myself
In the back, and I will not hang myself
With a trashbag, and if I do,
I promise you, I will not do it
In a police car while handcuffed
Or in the jail cell of a town
I only know the name of
Because I have to drive through it
To get home. Yes, I may be at risk,
But I promise you, I trust the maggots
And the ants and the roaches
Who live beneath the floorboards
Of my house to do what they must
To any carcass more than I trust
An officer of the law of the land
To shut my eyes like a man
Of God might, or to cover me with a sheet
So clean my mother could have used it
To tuck me in. When I kill me, I will kill me
The same way most Americans do,
I promise you: cigarette smoke
Or a piece of meat on which I choke
Or so broke I freeze
In one of these winters we keep
Calling worst. I promise that if you hear
Of me dead anywhere near
A cop, then that cop killed me. He took
Me from us and left my body, which is,
No matter what we’ve been taught,
Greater than the settlement a city can
Pay a mother to stop crying, and more
Beautiful than the brand new shiny bullet
Fished from the folds of my brain.
childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you’re Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father’s pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you’re poor it isn’t poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn’t your father’s drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they’ll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy