

Downtown at eight,
Sometimes working late,
Overtime pay
To sport away,
Or save,
Or give my Sugar
For the things
She needs.

My Sugar,
Consider her
Who works, too—
Has to.
One don't make enough
For all the stuff
It takes to live.
Forgive me
What I lack,
Black,
Caught in a crack
That splits the world in two
From China
By way of Arkansas
To Lenox Avenue.

Consider me,
On Friday the eagle flies.
Saturday laughter, a bar, a bed.
Sunday prayers syncopate glory.
Monday comes,
To work at eight,
Late,
Maybe.

Consider me,
Descended also
From the
Mystery.

Langston Hughes

MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED

In terms of current Afro-American popular music and the sources from which it has progressed—jazz, ragtime, swing, blues, boogie-woogie, and be-bop—this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of the jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and distortions of the music of a community in transition.

[LH]

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1951

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Dream Boogie

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a—

*You think
It's a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a—

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

*Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!*

Y-e-a-h!

Seven ladies
and seventeen gentlemen
at the Elks Club Lounge
planning planning a parade:
Grand Marshal in his white suit
will lead it.
Cadillacs with dignitaries
will precede it.

And behind will come
with band and drum
on foot . . . on foot . . .
on foot . . .

Motorcycle cops,
white,
will speed it
out of sight
if they can:
Solid black,
can't be right.

Marching . . . marching . . .
marching . . .
noon till night . . .

*I never knew
that many Negroes
were on earth,
did you?*

I never knew!

PARADE!

A chance to let

PARADE!

the whole world see

PARADE!

old black me!

Parade

Children's Rhymes

When I was a chile we used to play,
"One—two—buckle my shoe!"
and things like that. But now, Lord,
listen at them little varmint!

*By what sends
the white kids
I ain't sent:
I know I can't
be President.*

There is two thousand children
in this block, I do believe!

*What don't bug
them white kids
sure bugs me:
We knows everybody
ain't free!*

Some of these young ones is cert'ly bad—
One batted a hard ball right through my window
and my gold fish et the glass.

*What's written down
for white folks
ain't for us a-tall:
"Liberty And Justice—
Huh—For All."*

*Oop-pop-a-da!
Skee! Daddle-de-do!
Be-bop!*

Salt' peanuts!

De-dop!

Sister

That little Negro's married and got a kid.
Why does he keep on foolin' around Marie?
Marie's my sister—not married to me—
But why does he keep on foolin' around Marie?
Why don't she get a boy-friend
I can understand—some decent man?

*Did it ever occur to you, son,
the reason Marie runs around with trash
is she wants some cash?*

Don't decent folks have dough?
Unfortunately usually no!

Well, anyway, it don't have to be a married man.

*Did it ever occur to you, boy,
that a woman does the best she can?*

*Comment on Stoop
So does a man.*

Preference

I likes a woman
six or eight and ten years older'n myself.
I don't fool with these young girls.
Young girl'll say,
Daddy, I want so-and-so.
I needs this, that, and the other.
But a old woman'll say,
Honey, what does YOU need?
I just drawed my money tonight
and it's all your'n.
That's why I likes a older woman
who can appreciate me:
When she conversations you
it ain't forever, Gimme!

Necessity

Work?
I don't have to work.
I don't have to do nothing
but eat, drink, stay black, and die.
This little old furnished room's
so small I can't whip a cat
without getting fur in my mouth
and my landlady's so old
her features is all run together
and God knows she sure can overcharge—
Which is why I reckon I *does*
have to work after all.

Question [2]

Said the lady, *Can you do
what my other man can't do—
That is
love me, daddy—
and feed me, too?*

Figurine

De-dop!

Buddy

That kid's my buddy,
still and yet
I don't see him much.
He works downtown for Twelve a week.
Has to give his mother Ten—
she says he can have
the other Two
to pay his carfare, buy a suit,
coat, shoes,
anything he wants out of it.

Juke Box Love Song

I could take the Harlem night
and wrap around you,
Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue busses,
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down.
Take Harlem's heartbeat,
Make a drumbeat,
Put it on a record, let it whirl,
And while we listen to it play,
Dance with you till day—
Dance with you, my sweet brown Harlem girl.

Ultimatum

Baby, how come you can't see me
when I'm paying your bills
each and every week?

If you got somebody else,
tell me—
else I'll cut you off
without your rent.
I mean
without a cent.

Warning

Daddy,
don't let your dog
curb you!

Croon

I don't give a damn
For Alabam'
Even if it is my home.

New Yorkers

I was born here,
that's no lie, he said,
right here beneath God's sky.
*I wasn't born here, she said,
I come—and why?
Where I come from
folks work hard
all their lives
until they die
and never own no parts
of earth nor sky
So I come up here.
Now what've I got?
You!*

She lifted up her lips
in the dark:
The same old spark!

Wonder

Early blue evening.
Lights ain't come on yet.
*Looky yonder!
They come on now!*

Easy Boogie

Down in the bass
That steady beat
Walking walking walking
Like marching feet.

Down in the bass
That easy roll,
Rolling like I like it
In my soul.

Riffs, smears, breaks.

Hey, Lawdy, Mama!
Do you hear what I said?
Easy like I rock it
In my bed!

Movies

The Roosevelt, Renaissance, Gem, Alhambra:
Harlem laughing in all the wrong places
at the crocodile tears
of crocodile art
that you know
in your heart
is crocodile:

(Hollywood
laughs at me,
black—
so I laugh
back.)

Tell Me

Why should it be *my* loneliness,
Why should it be *my* song,
Why should it be *my* dream
deferred
overlong?

Not a Movie

Well, they rocked him with road-apples
because he tried to vote
and whipped his head with clubs
and he crawled on his knees to his house
and he got the midnight train
and he crossed that Dixie line
now he's livin'
on a 133rd.

He didn't stop in Washington
and he didn't stop in Baltimore
neither in Newark on the way.
Six knots was on his head
but, thank God, he wasn't dead!
And there ain't no Ku Klux
on a 133rd.

Neon Signs

WONDER BAR

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• •

WISHING WELL

•
• •

MONTEREY

•
• •

MINTON'S

(ancient altar of Thelonious)

•
• •

MANDALAY

Spots where the booted
and unbooted play

•
• •

SMALL'S

•
• •

CASBAH

•
• •

SHALIMAR

•
• •

Mirror-go-round
where a broken glass
in the early bright
smears re-bop
sound

•
• •

•
• •

Numbers

If I ever hit for a dollar
gonna salt every dime away
in the Post Office for a rainy day.

I ain't gonna
play back a cent.

(Of course, I might
combinate *a little*
with my rent.)

What? So Soon!

I believe my old lady's
pregnant again!
Fate must have
some kind of trickeration
to populate the
cullud nation!

Comment against Lamp Post
You call it fate?

Figurette
De-daddle-dy!
De-dop!

Motto

I play it cool
And dig all jive.
That's the reason
I stay alive.

My motto,
As I live and learn,
is:
Dig And Be Dug
In Return.

Dead in There

Sometimes
A night funeral
Going by
Carries home
A cool bop daddy.

Hearse and flowers
Guarantee
He'll never hype
Another paddy.

It's hard to believe,
But dead in there,
He'll never lay a
Hype nowhere!

He's my ace-boy,
Gone away.
Wake up and live!
He used to say.

Squares
Who couldn't dig him,
Plant him now—
Out where it makes
No diff' no how.

Situation

When I rolled three 7's
in a row
I was scared to walk out
with the dough.

Dancer

Two or three things in the past
failed him
that had not failed people
of lesser genius.

In the first place
he didn't have much sense.
He was no good at making love
and no good at making money.
So he tapped,

trucked,
boogied,
sanded,
jittered,
until he made folks say,
*Looky yonder
at that boy!*
Hey!

But being no good at lovin' —
the girls left him.
(When you're no good for dough they go.)
With no sense, just wonderful feet,
What could possibly be all-reet?
Did he get anywhere? No!

Even a great dancer
can't C.P.T.
a show.

Green Memory

A wonderful time — the War:
when money rolled in
and blood rolled out.

But blood
was far away
from here —
Money was near.

Wine-O

Setting in the wine-house
Soaking up a wine-souse
Waiting for tomorrow to come —
Then
Setting in the wine-house
Soaking up a new souse.
Tomorrow . . .
Oh, hum!

Relief

My heart is aching
for them Poles and Greeks
on relief way across the sea
because I was on relief
once in 1933.

I know what relief can be —
it took me two years to get on WPA.
If the war hadn't come along
I wouldn't be out the barrel yet.
Now, I'm almost back in the barrel again.

To tell the truth,
if these white folks want to go ahead

Advice

Folks, I'm telling you,
birthing is hard
and dying is mean —
so get yourself
a little loving
in between.

and fight another war,
or even two,
the one to stop 'em won't be me.

Would you?

Ballad of the Landlord

Landlord, landlord,
My roof has sprung a leak.
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on—till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.

Police! Police!
Come and get this man!
He's trying to ruin the government
And overturn the land!

Copper's whistle!
Patrol bell!
Arrest.

Precinct Station.
Iron cell.
Headlines in press:

MAN THREATENS LANDLORD

TENANT HELD NO BAIL

JUDGE GIVES NEGRO 90 DAYS IN COUNTY JAIL.

Corner Meeting

Ladder, flag, and amplifier:
what the soap box
used to be.
The speaker catches fire
looking at their faces.
His words
jump down to stand
in listeners' places.

Projection

On the day when the Savoy
leaps clean over to Seventh Avenue
and starts jitterbugging
with the Renaissance,
on that day when Abyssinia Baptist Church
throws her enormous arms around
St. James Presbyterian
and 409 Edgecombe

stoops to kiss 12 West 133rd,
on that day—
Do, Jesus!
Manhattan Island will whirl
like a Dizzy Gillespie transcription
played by Inez and Timme.
On that day, Lord,
Sammy Davis and Marian Anderson
will sing a duet,
Paul Robeson
will team up with Jackie Mabley,
and Father Divine will say in truth,

Peace!
It's truly
wonderful!

Flatted Fifths

Little cullud boys with beards
re-bop be-bop mop and stop.

Little cullud boys with fears,
frantic, kick their draftee years
into flatted fifths and flatter beers
that at a sudden change become
sparkling Oriental wines
rich and strange
silken bathrobes with gold twines
and Heilbronner, Crawford,
Nat-undreamed-of Lewis combines
in silver thread and diamond notes
on trade-marks inside
Howard coats.

Little cullud boys in berets
oop pop-a-da
horse a fantasy of days
ool ya koo
and dig all plays.

Tomorrow

Tomorrow may be
a thousand years off:

TWO DIMES AND A NICKEL ONLY

says this particular
cigarette machine.

Others take a quarter straight.

Some dawns
wait.

Mellow

Into the laps
of black celebrities
white girls fall
like pale plums from a tree
beyond a high tension wall
wired for killing
which makes it
more thrilling.

Live and Let Live

Maybe it ain't right—
but the people of the night
will give even
a snake
a break.

Gauge

Hemp . . .
A stick . . .
A roach . . .
Straw . . .

Bar

That whiskey will cook the egg.
Say not so!
Maybe the egg
will cook the whiskey.
You ought to know!

Café: 3 a.m.

Detectives from the vice squad
with weary sadistic eyes
spotting fairies.

Degenerates,
some folks say.

But God, Nature,
or somebody
made them that way.

Police lady or Lesbian
over there?
Where?

Drunkard

Voice grows thicker
as song grows stronger
as time grows longer until day
trying to forget to remember
the taste of day.

Street Song

Jack, if you got to be a rounder
Be a rounder right—
Just don't let mama catch you
Makin' rounds at night.

125th Street

Face like a chocolate bar
full of nuts and sweet.

Face like a jack-o'-lantern,
candle inside.

Face like slice of melon,
grin that wide.

Dive

Lenox Avenue
by daylight
runs to dive in the Park
but faster . . .
faster . . .
after dark.

Warning: Augmented

Don't let your dog curb you!
Curb your doggie
Like you ought to do,
But don't let that dog curb you!
You may play folks cheap,

Act rough and tough,
But a dog can tell
When you're full of stuff.
Them little old mutts
Look all scraggly and bad,
But they got more sense
Than some people ever had.
Cur dog, fice dog, kerry blue —
Just don't let your dog curb you!

Up-Beat

In the gutter
boys who try
might meet girls
on the fly
as out of the gutter
girls who will
may meet boys
copping a thrill
while from the gutter
both can rise:
But it requires
plenty eyes.

Jam Session

Letting midnight
out on bail
pop-a-da
having been
detained in jail
oop-pop-a-da
for sprinkling salt
on a dreamer's tail
pop-a-da

Be-Bop Boys

Imploring Mecca
to achieve
six discs
with Decca.

Tag

Little cullud boys
with fears,
frantic,
nudge their draftee years.

Pop-a-da!

Theme for English B

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: