

the United States. He was keenly aware that the modernist "vogue in things Negro" among white Americans was potentially exploitative and voyeuristic; he confronted such racial tourists with the misery as well as the jazz of Chicago's South Side. Early and late, Hughes's poems demanded that African Americans be acknowledged as owners of the culture they gave to the United States and as fully enfranchised American citizens.

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

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

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

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. 5
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. 10

1921, 1926

Mother to Son

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up, 5

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I've been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's, 10

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 15

'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.

20

1922, 1926

I, Too

I, too, sing America.

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

5

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

10

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

15

I, too, am America.

1925, 1959

The Weary Blues

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

5

10

What's the body of your mother?
Silver moonlight everywhere. 20

What's the body of your mother?
Sharp pine scent in the evening air.
A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow 25
Bastard boy.

Naw, you ain't my brother.
Niggers ain't my brother.
Not ever.
Niggers ain't my brother. 30
The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

O, sweet as earth,
Dusk dark bodies
Give sweet birth 35
To little yellow bastard boys.

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

The bright stars scatter everywhere.
Pine wood scent in the evening air. 40
A nigger night,
A nigger joy.

I am your son, white man!

A little yellow
Bastard boy. 45

1927

Song for a Dark Girl

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

Way Down South in Dixie 5
(Bruised body high in air)
I asked the white Lord Jesus
What was the use of prayer.

1. Last line of "Dixie," the popular minstrel song, probably composed by Daniel D. Emmett (1815–1904).

- Way Down South in Dixie
 (Break the heart of me) 10
 Love is a naked shadow
 On a gnarled and naked tree.
 1927

Genius Child

- This is a song for the genius child.
 Sing it softly, for the song is wild.
 Sing it softly as ever you can—
 Lest the song get out of hand.
- Nobody loves a genius child.* 5
- Can you love an eagle,
 Tame or wild?
 Can you love an eagle,
 Wild or tame?
 Can you love a monster
 Of frightening name? 10
- Nobody loves a genius child.*
- Kill him*—and let his soul run wild!
 1937, 1947

Visitors to the Black Belt

- You can talk about
Across the railroad tracks—
 To me it's *here*
 On this side of the tracks. 5
- You can talk about
Up in Harlem—
 To me it's *here*
 In Harlem.
- You can say
 Jazz on the South Side¹—
 To me it's hell
 On the South Side: 10

1. African American neighborhood in Chicago. See also Archibald J. Motley's 1934 painting, *Black Belt*, in the color insert to this volume.