

**I AM THE
AMERICAN
NEGRO**



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The Book and the Author

I Am The American Negro is a collection of poetry written by Frank Marshall Davis since the appearance in September, 1935, of his first volume, *Black Man's Verse*, which drew high critical praise as excerpts from reviews, printed on the outside and inside back cover, indicate.

This volume offers a varied excursion into the realms of free verse. From the title poem, which is a poetic drama to be read and not acted, the subject matter goes into the grimly realistic and the lyrically passionate, ending in the section, "Ebony Under Granite" (continued from *Black Man's Verse*), inspired by the Greek Anthology.

I Am The American Negro belongs in the libraries of all literate persons, both black and white, who are interested in brilliant free verse and the reaction of a Midwestern Negro to the American scene.

The author, Frank Marshall Davis, is a former Kansan now living in Chicago where he is feature editor and a syndicated columnist for the Associated Negro Press.

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What critics said of

BLACK MAN'S VERSE

By Frank Marshall Davis

"*Black Man's Verse* unites sardonic realism and mysticism, a union here of cause and effect, not at all strange to any reader knowing Sandberg. Mr. Davis is embittered by American life, and at times seems to escape from it in dreams of Mandy Lou's loveliness, and of vestiges from an earlier, exotic Africa . . . The book's contribution is in its realism."

Sterling A. Brown, *Opportunity*

◆

"No Negro poet — nor any white poet — has sung with as great force of the intellectual and spiritual bleakness of the black island which exists in dominantly white America. His singing is in a minor chord like music at a synagogue or keening at a wake."

Prof. C. E. Rogers, *Kansas Industrialist*

◆

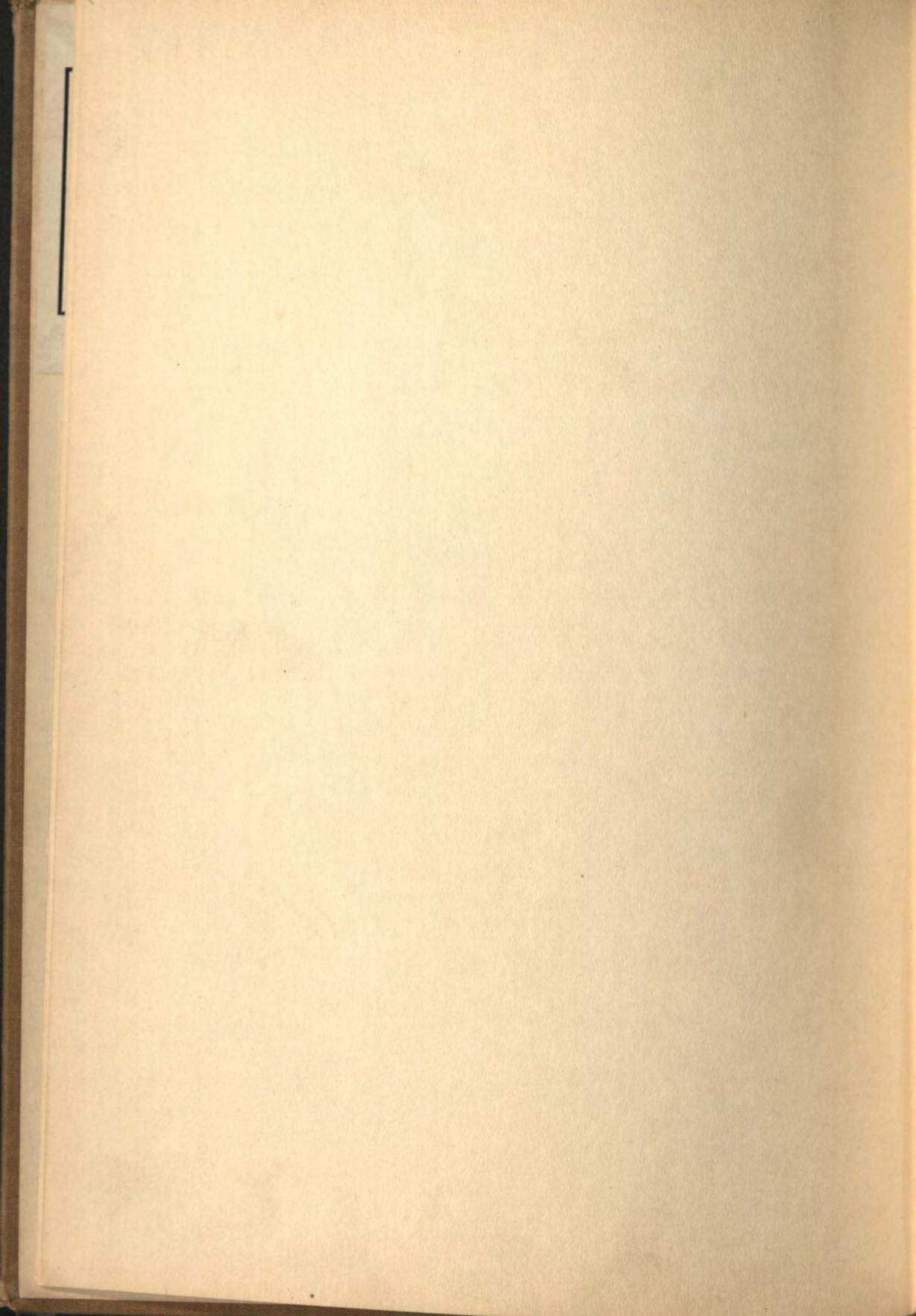
"Throughout he has stamped his own individuality in lines and frequently his experimental moods have caught the essence of an originality surcharged with a vigour of well rounded expression."

James O. Hopson, *Crisis*

◆

"Frank Marshall Davis . . . has an etcher's touch and an acid bite to his vignettes of life that any 'proletarian poet' or Marxian critic might well envy and emulate . . . His social analysis is as accurate as his social description is trenchant."

Dr. Alain LeRoy Locke, *Race*, Summer, 1936



I am the
AMERICAN NEGRO

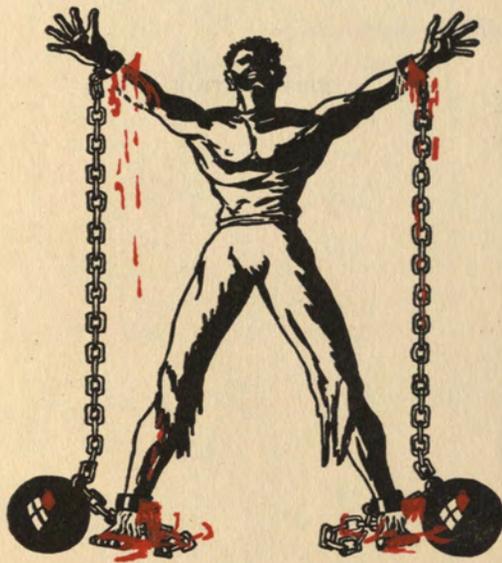
THE
AMERICAN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Black Man's Verse



I AM THE AMERICAN NEGRO



BY FRANK MARSHALL DAVIS

BLACK CAT PRESS • CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1937

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FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America

To PROFESSOR C. E. ROGERS
of Kansas State College, whose rare friendship
is a valuable part of my few assets

FOREWARNING

Fairy words . . . a Pollyanna mind

Do not roam these pages.

Inside

There are coarse victuals

A couch of rough boards

Companions who seldom smile

Yet

It is the soul's abode

Of a Negro dreamer

For being black

In my America

Is no rendezvous

With Venus . . .

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

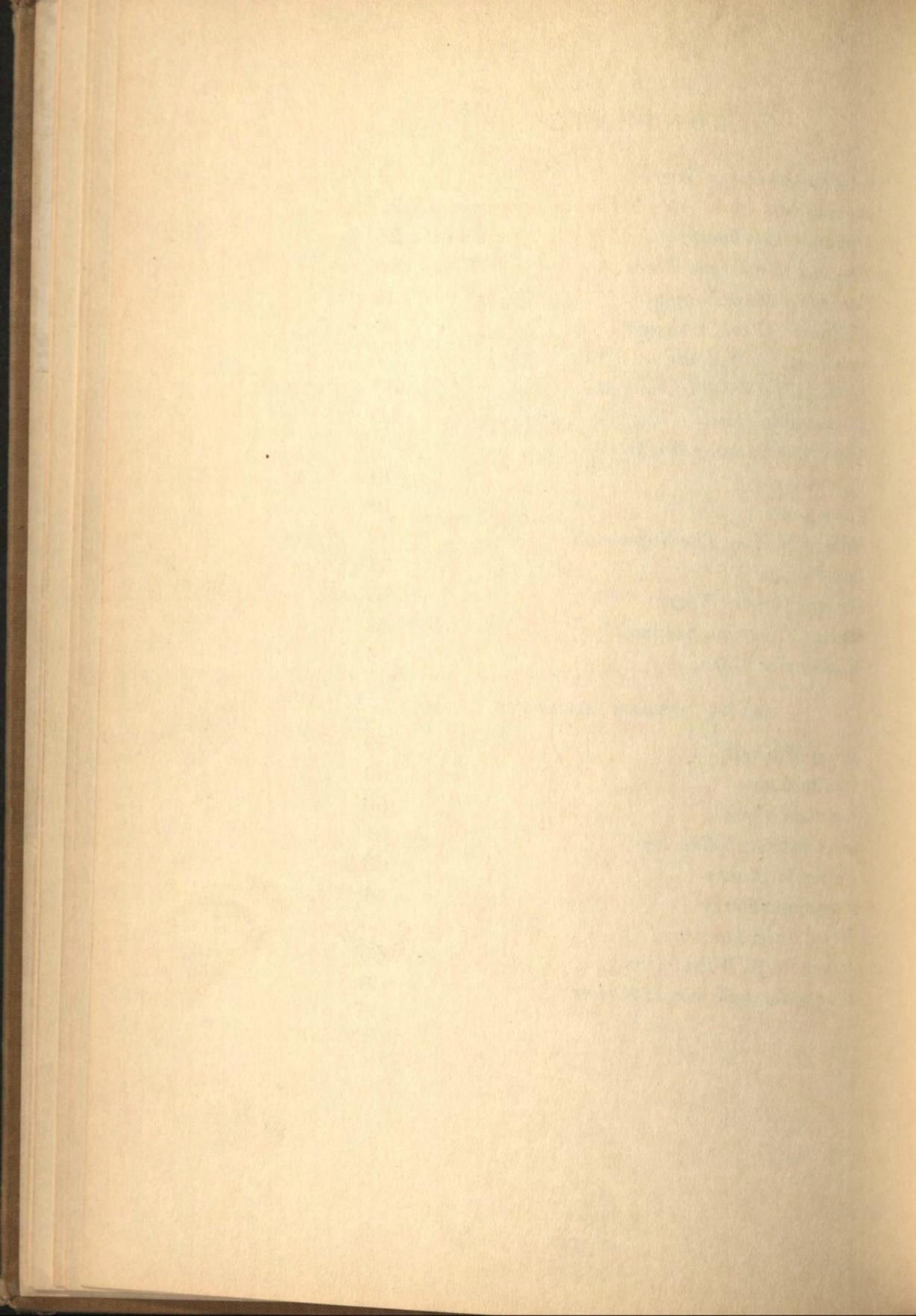
A few of the poems in this volume appeared originally in the Kansas Magazine. Others have not previously been published

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I AM THE AMERICAN NEGRO

(*A sequence to be imagined*)

A very small, dark lad dressed in a linen robe of dazzling whiteness stands speaking on a busy corner. Passers-by gaze at him curiously. Some stop while others hurry on, but his voice carries his words evenly until he has finished.

“Amid the colossal cacophonies
the strident symphonies
of your sprawling steel mills
of your star-snatching skyscrapers
of your bellowing freights and expresses
of your rich-loamed farm lands
of your lusty cities and your crawling towns
amid your frenzied hallelujahs
to a mighty masquerader
to a robot of levers and wires
you call either God or Progress
I lift up my small voice
I, a numerical nonentity
in your already forgotten
twelve million brown stepchildren
Will you listen awhile?
There is much I would say.”

* * *

THE SCENE VANISHES.

Now is shown the interior of a tall temple in semi-darkness. The dim figure of a giant of indeterminate brown, his

arms and legs shackled, is faintly seen, kneeling before an altar. There is heard the low monotony of a prayer. White faces peer through the dark windows showing increased satisfaction at every word.

“Lord, have pity on me!
From my soul’s depth I speak
It is truth You hear
Although my words have a strange sound—
For I am the American Negro!
I am a man apart”

A mist falls over the faces at the windows. A strong white light plays on the kneeling giant’s features. The jangle of the shackles on his arms beats a tom-tom rhythm to the words that come first slowly and deliberately, and then more quickly from his mouth.

“I, the American Negro, am a rainbow race, a kaleidoscopic breed found only in this land.
In my veins runs the blood of Caucasian Europe and of the Indians of America for my slave women were tempting to their white masters and my men came to the New World with Cortes.
In me is a monstrous union of many African tribes . . . tribes who were mortal enemies in the deep green jungles of the great dark continent.
Yet I do not value my savage ancestry for my white folk tell me black Africa has given nothing to civilization . . . my historians sing of the golden glories of the ancient empires . . . of Mandingo,

Benin, Yoruba; of old Timbuctoo, Kana, Zimbabwe, Zegzeg, of the great king Abuade Izchia but I will neither listen nor believe for no white lips have phrased these words, and therefore they cannot be true.

My dream is to be physically white . . . so I straighten my kinks, bleach my skin and look down on those darker than I . . . For myself I build pale gods to serve . . . whatever white folk do I imitate.”

* * *

The voice of the giant grows louder. The jangle of his chains almost drowns out his words. He stops kneeling and stands erect, his head thrown back, blood trickling from his legs where the shackles dig into his flesh. Great drops of sweat glisten on his forehead. The white faces at the window reappear and smiles play on their features.

“But most of all, dear Lord, I have no guts and I refuse to heed the law of self-preservation.

I cry . . . yet I will not heal those ills bringing tears to my eyes.

I will not support men and movements battling for my betterment.

I will not pool my dollars to fight in the courts atrocities committed against me or illegal laws denying rights guaranteed by the Constitution of my country.

I will not unite my resources to found businesses giving jobs to my people nor will I lend wholehearted support to enterprises run by men and women of my race.

I send my young to college and then I let them go forth as graduates into hotels as waiters and bell-hops, into railway stations as redcaps for I have no work they may do but teach or sell insurance. If I am lynched or shot or my women raped I will complain in low whispers to my black brothers and sisters . . . more I dare not do.

I am afraid to protect myself against anything white.”

* * *

Great veins stand out in the giant's throat. His hands claw the air before him. His body rocks and sways. His hair mats against his forehead from the sweat that pours from his body and mixes with the small ooze of warm, red blood.

“I grin, I dance, I sing. I am the minstrel man for white America!

I am a hodge-podge of paradox, a crazy collection of inconsistencies.

Seldom to myself and before no whites dare I confess these traits.

Pity me, Lord, for there is none other like me . . .
I am the American Negro!”

* * *

Suddenly the temple is brilliantly lighted. The giant—still chained, still erect—raises his arms above his head. His face changes constantly, chameleon-like, from milky white to inky black. Then the light fades and the giant stands still. As he speaks, the white listeners cease their smiles and, one by one, leave the windows. Only one or two remain.

*His voice is low, deliberate . . . the tones firm and even
. . . he drops wearily to the floor with his hands in an
attitude of prayer before him.*

“And yet, Lord, with my weakness there is strength
for who but I could carry these bonds and still exist?
I have given America loyalty unequalled in man’s
history.

From the loins of my brown women, sons have come
forth to fight and die for a democracy that may
lynch the survivors.

I have planted seed deep in the womb of the good
earth and reaped only cotton . . . and mobs . . .
and peonage.

I am the public martyr for America’s arena . . . I gave
Crispus Attucks at the Boston Tea Party and today
I am handed Scottsboro, in Alabama.

My country’s papers give me front page headlines
for my murderers and one paragraph beside the
want ad section for my men of letters and science.

“God the Father” and “Love thy Neighbor” shout my
white brothers in Christ from behind the doors of
their gaudy churches slammed shut and locked
when I seek to enter

Writers sling buckets of ink to show the skin You gave
me proves inferiority . . . purses bulge with cash
exchanged for the mass privilege of systematic hate.

In courts down South I am fodder for chaingang and
electric chair since any white convict has more say-
so than my Doctors of Philosophy

Only my dollars know no color line . . . and sometimes even they are banned!"

The forehead of the giant wrinkles in a frown. His eyes open, stare before him . . . his face looks puzzled . . . wonderment . . . incomprehension . . . hesitancy . . . amazement . . . all these expressions pass across his countenance. His voice goes on . . . slowly . . . carefully.

"Yet I cannot hate America for this land sprouts out of my bleached bones from Bunker Hill to St. Michel and in my veins flows the blood of these my brother races.

But I cannot love America for my back is sore from the welts of prejudice rubbed with the salt of segregation.

Lord, what shall I do?"

Beside the giant there suddenly appears a form neither male nor female, neither black or white. It wears tattered clothing and holds its body with stately majesty. The newcomer speaks. The giant turns his head to listen. Fear passes first across his face . . . then as the newcomer goes on in a satin-soft voice the low hum of a mighty choir is heard in the distance . . . the sound gains momentum . . . the music can now be heard quite distinctly . . . yet the satin-soft voice of the speaker is heard above it all . . .

CHOIR "Come on
Black man

Grab your hat
Let's get goin'
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm
mmmmmmMMMMMM"

VOICE "Fathered by Lincoln
Mothered by a Civil War
Born in the smoke and blood
of Spottsylvania Courthouse,
Bull Run, Gettysburg.
Given the sharp daggers
Of three Constitutional Amendments.
Clothed in the greatest
Civilization known to modern man
Then set on the road to town . . .
But today
You lie sleeping
Far, far outside the City Gates."

CHOIR "Come on
Black man
Grab your hat
Let's get goin'
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm
mmmmmmMMMMMM"

VOICE "Singer of hymns, warbler of the blues, picker of
cotton, layer of railroad ties . . . poet and bone-
crusher . . . big muscles and Ph.D's.
America has seen you go to school at Howard,
Atlanta, Tuskegee; at Harvard, Oxford, Berlin

and come out prattling of Plato and Einstein in sixty different jargons.

Poppies in France grow from your blood and flesh . . . San Juan hill knows the victorious tread of black feet . . . but here the story ends.

String 'em up in Alabama . . . burn 'em in the hot-seat in Georgia . . . give a cop a bonus for everyone he kills . . . kick 'em till they're down, mister, then kick 'em again for fallin' . . . they're black and they won't fight back."

CHOIR "Come on
Black man
Grab your hat
Let's get goin'
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm
mmmmmmMMMMMM"

VOICE "Arm your Christ with a shotgun . . . hire six attorneys to work with Jehovah . . . teach your priests how to uppercut . . . if David had slung a prayer and a hymn Goliath would have chalked up another win.

Sure, we all know there's one of you to nine of them so try to win sitting down . . . but if that won't work let 'em have it, buddy . . . you can't live forever anyhow!"

CHOIR "Come on
Black man
Grab your hat

Let's get goin'
You can't live forever
Anyhow!
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm

mmmmmmMMMMMM"

* * *

The giant trembles from head to foot . . . his voice rumbles . . . roars . . . as he stands before this stranger . . .

GIANT "Who are you? Who are you? I never saw you before . . ."

The stranger fades into the deepening shadows . . . and as the figure disappears only a satin-smooth voice is heard.

The giant, strengthened by the stranger's words, tears the shackles from his arms. He takes a step forward, forgetting his legs are shackled too . . . He falls crouching on the floor . . . He beats the floor with each heavy, bleeding fist.

GIANT "Who are you? Who are you?"

VOICE "I am experience!"

The giant crawls to the edge of a window. With great agony he draws his body up closer . . . closer . . . closer to the sill . . . Finally he stands erect . . . weak . . . tottering . . . he peers through the window into the coming darkness . . . the low humming sound of the choir can still be heard.

There are no faces left at the windows.

The giant turns . . . looks at the emptiness around him . . . frowns in disgust . . . opens his mouth to speak when the temple falls in a crash . . . and the voice of the giant is stilled.

The low, satin-soft voice he heard is drowned out by the rolling tumble of loose, crashing stones . . . these stones that formed the temple of America's Social System end the life and problems of the Negro giant as they collapse.

Barely audible above the din there sounds the laughter of the gods . . .

DANCING GAL

Black and tan—yeah, black and tan
Spewing the moans of a jigtime band
What does your belly crave?

A brown-sugar brown
Slim gal sways
Pretzel twisting
Beneath a yellow thumb
Of steel-stiff light
Amid a striped rain
Of red-note, blue-note

Jazz-hot jazz
Gazelle graceful
Lovely as a lover's dream
Silken skinned, stillwater soft
Young girl breasts in gold encased
Scant gold around her lower waist
Red lips parted
Dark eyes flashing
She dances
Dips, whirls, undulates
Her body a living chord
Set loud and sweet
Against the bitter quiet
Of drab and muted human shapes

I see a long lean god
Standing in painted splendor

Motionless in the scented air
Of Tanganyika
I see a frozen idol
Set free from a single stone
Shielding with seven arms
His world in Hindustan . . .
Africa's madness, India's sadness
Wedded in Chicago
By a Midwest gal
In a Jew's cafe . . .

Black and tan—yeah, black and tan
Drenched in the jazz of a swingtime band
Is this what your belly craves?

FLOWERS OF DARKNESS

Slowly the night blooms, unfurling
Flowers of darkness, covering
The trellised sky, becoming
A bouquet of blackness
Unending
Touched with sprigs
Of pale and budding stars

Soft the night smell
Among April trees
Soft and richly rare
Yet commonplace
Perfume on a cosmic scale

I turn to you Mandy Lou
I see the flowering night
Cameo condensed
Into the lone black rose
Of your face
The young woman-smell
Of your poppy body
Rises to my brain as opium
Yet silently motionless
I sit with twitching fingers
Yea, even reverently
Sit I
With you and the blossoming night
For what flower, plucked,
Lingers long?

THEY ALL HAD GRAND IDEAS

Alexander cried for new worlds to conquer and he was
hustled into the stout toms without learning millions
stood ready to split his skull in unknown China, Africa,
America, Australia and the South Sea Islands

Christ went hoarse telling them to toss in their swords, give
away their cash and put on a perpetual brother act . . .
Judas sold him down the river for forty pieces of silver
and they lynched him with nails sharp as any spear or
dagger

Columbus located new real estate for the Big Dogs of Spain
. . . France and England muscled in . . . today the United
States holds up the Monroe Doctrine and dares any of
the elderly mother nations to come over after more than
what little they have left

Lenin and Trotzky fought for a Russia without czars and
aristocracy . . . today both are in the city dump as Stalin
and his crew strongarm the liberated peasants into ac-
cepting state control and ownership

Napoleon licked 'em all until Waterloo . . . an actor slipped
Lincoln the last curtain call —

They all had grand ideas

* * *

Men dream and die to give way to other men with a
different slant on the same idea

Mohamed for Christ, Kaiser Wilhelm for Hannibal,
Einstein for Newton, Shaw for Shakespeare

Each caught the deathless butterfly of a grand idea in
the silken mesh of his mind . . . held it for such a little
while . . . then had to let it go

I pick no winner
There isn't any

The world slushes on

The world where men struggle for victuals and shelter and
safety today as when Adam strode Eden and Ab hid
from the sabre-toothed tiger

The world where women want their men and babies and
bank accounts or soft skins and trinkets hidden deep
in a cave

What has it mattered? . . . what has anything mattered?
What has the world done but smash its dreamers?

These men with the grand ideas —

Do they dream in the sod of success?

Do their hopes spill over into the cool silent earth?

Or do they laugh at the new dreamers and say "Boy,
you'll learn . . . I got that way once and see what
happened?"

Tomorrow more dreamers

Yet nothing wins but the hungry waiting graves

Chisel these words on the tall tombstones and you get the
whole story yesterday, today and forever —

"I had a grand idea—but it wouldn't keep . . ."

CHRIST IS A DIXIE NIGGER

You tell me Christ was born nearly twenty centuries ago
in a little one horse town called Bethlehem . . . your
artists paint a man as fair as another New White Hope
Well, you got it all wrong . . . facts twisted as hell . . . see?

Let me tell you wise guys something
I've got my own ideas . . . I've got a better Christ and a
bigger Christ . . . one you can put your hands on today
or tomorrow.

My Christ is a Dixie nigger black as midnight, black as the
roof of a cave's mouth

My Christ is a black bastard . . . maybe Joe did tell the
neighbors God bigged Mary . . . but he fooled nobody
. . . they all knew Christ's father was Mr. Jim who owns
the big plantation . . . and when Christ started bawling
out back in the cabins Mr. Jim made all three git

You see, I know

Christ studied medicine up North in Chicago then came
back to Mississippi a good physician with ideas for gettin'
the races together . . . he lectured in the little rundown
schoolhouses awaiting Rosenwald money . . . he talked
of the brotherhood and equality of man and of a Con-
stitution giving everybody a right to vote and some of
the nigger listeners told their white folks . . . then they
found how Christ healed a white woman other doctors
gave up for lost . . . the two things together got him in
the calaboose

They called him a Communist and a menace to the Existing
Relationship Between Black and White in the South
Sheriff and judge debated whether to open the hoosegow
and tell reporters the mob stormed the jail or let the
state lynch him on the gallows

Anyhow they got him

Maybe the rope was weak or Christ was too strong to die
. . . I don't know

They cut him down and they patched him up . . . he hid
in the swamps until he got well enough to get around
again . . . then he lectured a little more . . . and faded out

Whether he went to heaven or Harlem or the white folks
broke his neck and hid the corpse somewhere is a ques-
tion they still ask —

See what I mean?

I don't want any of your stories about somebody running
around too long ago to be anything but a highly public-
ised memory

Your pink priests who whine about Pilate and Judas and
Gethsemane I'd like to hogtie and dump into the stinking
cells to write a New Testament around the Scottsboro
Boys

Subdivide your million dollar temples into liquor taverns
and high class whore-houses . . . my nigger Christ can't
get past the door anyway

Remember this, you wise guys

Your tales about Jesus of Nazareth are no-go with me

I've got a dozen Christs in Dixie all bloody and black . . .

WASHINGTON PARK, CHICAGO

The heat roars
Like a tidal wave
Over Chicago's Congo
Inundating
A rusty raft of a house
On Dearborn Street
A sleek schooner
Of a brownstone mansion
On South Parkway.
Long foam fingers
Of wet heat
Clutch ebon throats
Paw bronze thighs
Tear into shreds
Thin white sheets of coolness.
High breakers of heat
Split into dry mist —
A harmless spray —
As the tidal wave
Dashes against strong rocks
Of tall trees
In Washington Park.

Upon the wrinkled green skin
Of growing grass,
Amid fat shrubs
Squatting in lazy content,
Beneath willow and oak

Watching like anxious mothers,
Along the tangled yarn
Of gray paths,
Beside still pools
The color of old ice
In Washington Park
The people go —
When the heat
Is an African python
Crushing amid its coils
The black carcass
Of Chicago's Congo . . .

II

Sun by day
Moon and mazda by night
Rinse kaleidoscopic faces
Twirling slowly against the light;
Faces of infants and con men
Of turnip breasted virgins
And worn out prostitutes
Their bodies piled along the grass
Or poured into wooden benches.
Others walk up and down
Up and down
Then back,
Men call to girls
And to other men.
Voices swing like monkeys
Through a thick forest

Of continuous sound.
Here one may be
Surrounded and alone.

Along pretzel crooked roads
Racehorse autos gallop
In great herds
Or stand in insolent silence
Rubber feet among green blades of grass
Sniffing in mechanical disdain
At those who walk
And barely dodge
A mile a minute hoof.

The park shoulders
Its people and cars
On a verdant back
And marches on
To the steady boom
Of the taut heat drum.

III

In the wide pocket
Of an aged bench
Sleeps ragged Sam
Covered with old newspaper.
Above his face smiles Dolly Smythe
Queen of the Burlesque Houses
In her printed magnificence.
Martha, the Love Murderess,

Is an unconscious pillow
For his head.
But Sam, remembering many,
Has forgotten women;
He dreams these nights
Of steaks and chops three times a day
Of a soft bed in a quiet room
Then stirs his homeless bones
And Dolly Smythe,
Queen of the Burlesque Houses,
Falls face down into the litter
From Sam's nickle dinner
Bummed off a peanut vender . . .

Until anyway eleven
By a park policeman's watch
They will sit
This boy and gal,
On the soft sweet sod
Or a silent bench
His head against
Her warm thighs
The brown full moon
Of her face above.
The heat that sniffs
Like a curious cur
About walled flats
Is left behind —
For them the fire
Of two dry sticks

Rubbed together:
And only they know
Which is harder to bear . . .

A lanky Communist
Tosses baited words
To faces beneath him,
Faces fish-mouthed
In a sitting sea
Of human forms.
"Proletariat" . . . "Bourbon"
"Workers" . . . "Starvation"
"Equality" . . . "Comrades"
Are flung at 'em
By the glib fisherman
On the angler's stand.
And if now and then
A fish lands the Red
Will Stalin sniffle in his vodka?

* * *

Does the Rev. Moses Wagner,
Pastor of Golgotha Church,
Come here to pick up chippies?
When Inky White strolls here,
Inky the broken down pug,
Is it to hunt out pansies?
Does Montell Duke,
Poet and Ph. D.,
Stride the winding paths

Gnawing an ice cream cone?

I don't know —
Lord, I don't know —
Ask me some other time . . .

IV

Impatient tomorrow
Jerks at the chains of Time;
The tiger heat
Crouches low and tense;
People leave
Or they remain;
Dried pea faces
A-rattle in a pod
And tender sprouts
For next season's harvesting . . .

I saw the night
Tuck Washington Park
Into her star-torn apron
And dodder on
As an aged woman
Gathers wood for the stove
From a fallen-in house.

I saw the sun
Sputter and mew—
A great yellow cat
Walking the backyard fence

Of a gray new day . . .

V

A white cloud hand
Writes on the blue sky wall:
"Men build skyscrapers
Cleaving the air;
Men boast of Progress
Of steel thewed Science
Of a million Inventions
Advancing the human race;
Of Edison, Marconi, Einstein, Darwin,
Yet if the thin green grass
The humble waving grass
That crawls on its belly
Should not return
With its cool soft kiss
Which one could make
A duplicate?"

None reads but the park
Inarticulate, strong;
Holding Chicago's Congo
To its soothing breast
While the heat roars
Like a tidal wave
Dashed to harmless spray
Against strong rocks
Of tall trees . . .

NOTE LEFT BY A SUICIDE

Tomorrow I shall die
Suicide, the coroner will say
Electric light of a heart switched off
Yet to me only another death . . . nothing new . . . nothing
new
I have seen my dreams yanked from me, tossed to the
earth, ground into thin dust
I loved . . . the woman who bore my name passed into
infinity bearing a son for another
I offered the world my soul in words . . . rejection slips
from editors buried my gift in the Potter's Field
What have I left but flesh? . . . of what use are walls of a
building when fire eats all else?
Tomorrow I shall die . . .

Today I rose to the fortieth story of a skyscraper
Through a window I gazed at two-legged ants of men crawling
about streets, busying themselves in anthills of steel
and stone
As a boy, I crushed anthills with one shoe . . . what did it
matter but to the ants themselves? . . . did this universe
stop? . . . if a greater shoe should stamp out Chicago what
would it matter except to ants in other hills? . . . then
what of the life and death of one ant?
I looked again . . . yet I could not leap
You say it takes strength to live
I have seen Masks of Fear worn in hospitals, sickrooms,
death cells of stout jails

I know man flees from the unknown mystery of Death
I know from Terror comes strength to run
I did not leap
I lacked the greater strength to die
For that I am ashamed

But tomorrow . . . surely, surely
I shall dwell with billions who have swung on . . . today
the poorest idiot among them wiser than Socrates, Espinoza,
Kant, Einstein
I shall not linger dreading the certain step of Death
A year or a century . . . then curtains
Food by day, sleep by night . . . will-o'-the-wisp dreams . . .
if caught, a quest for more . . . it has always been
They all wait tossed by chance into existence . . . for what?
to be tossed again into oblivion?

You think Life . . . egotistic, hairy chested, strong armed
. . . has conquered me?
Go ahead, you . . . bare your back to his slave whip
But not I
I seek freedom . . . I go before Life cuts me, worn and use-
less, from his chains
Now or later . . . for fifty years more what could I gain
but new scars?
So I go
I am too brave to live!

TO ONE WHO WOULD LEAVE ME

Not yet . . . not yet
Unended is the Opera of Us
This curtain . . . only a pause
Time has new tunes
Life is a husky scene-shifter
Arranging new backdrops
Soon the show goes on . . .

* * *

With a ballet of smooth dancing words
Amid a jargon of sharply silken sounds
Behind steel strong lights
Hoofing a crazy razzle-dazzle of mental jigs
Before the sixty gods of Happiness
We sang
Sang a year and a day
I played a stumbling Romeo
To your dulcet Juliet
Soon the show swings on
The Great Author cannot
Hustle in another cast . . .

* * *

Sure, I understand
Ask Bernhardt, ask Duse
They both got that way
Sure
Life's not always sprayed with attar of roses

Sometimes Trouble comes around with a dun
Or grief camps on the back stairs
It's not easy then
To smile like a Christ-kissed angel
For the stuffed shirts
In the orchestra seats
Out front

* * *

You won't really go, will you?
I look into your brown eyes deep as high lakes clasped
to the breast of unknown Africa hills
I have reeled and rocked in shameful drunkenness
from the scented wine of your red lips
Circe's wand is less potent than the feel of your velvet
flesh against me
I am Midas with the wealth of your love
Yet you are a woman
And I cannot tell —
You won't really go, will you?

* * *

The orchestra clears its throat for speech
Time beckons
Life steps into the wings
All unended is the Opera of Us
Not yet . . . not yet
Shall we take our places
Or must we tell the sixty gods of Happiness
"That's all there is . . . that's all there is
Go out and get your money back . . .?"

'MANCIPATION DAY

Hallowed be the memory of Abraham Lincoln!
He was a great man, he gave us our freedom!

In Chicago, Atlanta, Louisville, Memphis, Kansas City,
Los Angeles, Miami, Boston a million kaleidoscopic
people gather and lift high hosannas in memory of a
misty Emancipation Day

(In hobo camps from Maine to California sprawl a thousand
bums recalling the hour gates closed behind them at
Sing Sing, Joliet, Leavenworth, San Quentin)

In Birmingham they ride jim-crow cars to a nigger park
guarded by white cops ready to shoot to kill if the black
bastards annex the idea they're human and Citizens of
Alabama . . . listening brown folk balloon with pride
as sweet speeched speakers canonize Lincoln — the air
reeks with the stench of burned brothers lynched in
courthouse yards

In Gary, Indiana, from the hot bellies of steel mills come
celebrants . . . tomorrow some will starve as their jobs
are snatched and given to Jan Pidarski direct from Ellis
Island . . . tomorrow others sweat gold for the gods of
the steel corporation in whose shrines none may walk

Words splash like water over ebony skulls . . . see a people
proud because white men died, another freed them when

impotent ancestors worked the plantation while Ole
Massa fought their liberators

(In the hobo jungles let there be barbecues and long winded
programs . . . let Convict 67895 and his comrades burst
with pride . . . are they not the ones set free by the whims
of the prison commission?)

Praise ye Warden Laws of Sing Sing
And the New York Board of Pardons and Paroles:
They gave us our freedom!)

NOTES ON A SUMMER NIGHT

Past wood and water, over steel and stone
Through the forty-room mansion of a millionaire
Into the one-room cabin of a cotton picker
Dark purple runners of darkness run —
Today is another grain of sand
And the shore is long and smooth . . .

Twenty brownskin babies suckle the wet teats of gin bottles
at Mojo Mike's in Chicago

Twenty gin guzzling gals gone to the dogs with a grin at
two bucks a throw

The hot air staggers under the heavy smell of beer and
bourbon, dead tobacco and dripping sweat

A five cent phonograph flings vermilion streamers of jazz
through the atmosphere

Outside a mazda-bandaged night limps slowly along Forty-
seventh street in Chicago's Congo.

(Do you remember, Mandy Lou,

When shadows of oak leaves danced a slow mazurka

Plucked by clouds from a banjo moon

Near Kankakee?)

"Not now, anyhow" says the barber shop porter

In a forty dollar suit ogling sheer frocked gals

"Gimme a skinny chick

When it's too hot to cover up nights

They don't cut off no breeze

It ain't like sleepin' wit' a furnace

An' yuh don' need brakes to keep from slidin'
'Yuh wants a fat broad in wintah
But kiss 'em goodbye in June
I don't want no heavy mama —
Not now, anyhow . . .”

I have seen nights like this piled bargain counter high
with lust

I have seen paunchy pimps loll in darkened doors while
their painted women pulled in poor suckers

I have heard the man-pack tear down a county jail and
burn black Mose beside the Baptist Church

I have watched a ghetto father fix it for his daughter who
bedded without a license

I saw them bring back Nicky Pottello . . . Nicky crammed
dead into a culvert for crossing the Malorto Gang

I have heard a hundred wives lying naked with their lovers
as their husbands sought out other women

And . . . Yes . . . Indeed

I have heard America at the breakfast table froth for the
blood of uncivilized Chinese bastards who dared kidnap
the daughter of a Wall Street broker

Anxiously the moon clucks to a new brood of white moon-
beams hatched in the Missouri River at Kansas City

On Lake Michigan boats move like phosphorescent water
spiders

The tall tree of the Empire State Building holds ripe clusters
of white lights above the groping fingers of New York's
skyline

Butterfly cars flit along the gossamer highway between
Denver and Colorado Springs
A bluefire diamond night glitters through all the land
"Christ" mutter ten thousand cops in a thousand snoring
towns between Miami and Seattle "Five more hours t'
daybreak" . . .

In the director's chamber of the First National Bank in
Cincinnati
All is quiet
In the shuttered room of one just passed
There is silence
Dollars and death have spilled their small talk —
Only the star-white stars
Whisper in lazy circles above Ohio . . .

Ninety thousand Negroes sleep in Atlanta
Ninety thousand dreams spin in black heads
Atlanta now is a bearded myth
Of jim crow laws and hair trigger cops
The Coast Line Railway to Jacksonville
Is a lie in steel
Maybe such never was —
A Pollyanna moon croons a soft lullaby
"Everything's all right, honey
Tomorrow will be different, don't you know . . ."

AWAKENING

Born in the pages of letters
Nursed by strong sweet words
Reared in the vast expanse of two wild minds
Is Our Love . . .

Vigorous — Big Muscled
Tender as a mother caring for her first born
Soft as the fall of night
Massive as the universe
Eternal as life and death
Blinding as the midday sun
is Our Love

Now

In his steel arms he has taken us
Welding two souls, two bodies
Into a boundless one
Inhabiting a sky world built for us
By us

Vigorous, big muscled Love wraps our world in a blanket
Only if vigorous, big muscled Love goes shall we leave . . .

Yet flesh has not touched flesh
Our words . . . our only caresses
Just our minds have kissed
For Love has saved hot blood for the last
For another beginning . . .

I know your lips have the honey from dreamed-of wild
flowers

I know your fragrance surpasses Purple Hyacinths
I know your eyes have the deep beauty of clear dark pools
on mountain tops
I know your hair is more radiant than a rainbow
I know your body is more beautiful than an alabaster
vase . . .

Why wonder then,
that my heart falters, breath leaves me
when I think of you?

When we meet
How shall we ever part?
Can lip leave lip, breast quit breast, or thigh be torn from
thigh?
How can I take away the Me you own . . . which is a
part of you?

I want the warm loveliness of you branded into my flesh
. . . your kisses a song in my soul . . . hands-full of soft
words . . . your breath on me like a spring zephyr . . .
your hair a fountain bathing my face . . . let me lose
myself in the ageless beauty of you . . . let our passion
be incense burning on the altar to Very-Love . . .

We shall never quite part . . . the scars left by hot flesh on
hot flesh will hurl us together at night with their throbbing
even though we are separated by a million miles
. . . our world will always be . . . for Our Love belongs
to the Infinite . . .

COME TO ME

Ah, beloved,
Come to me—
My throat is leather dry
The flesh of my parted lips
Lies taut and burning
My heart pounds
Like a thousand lashes

The kiss of your small hand
Has soothed my brow
Your warm breasts
Girl-firm, woman-soft,
Have pressed hard against me
The fragrance of your body
Has been incense to my soul
Your wet mouth—
A rose with burning dew—
Has lain trembling
Against my own
While I drank
Until
No honey remained

I have had so very much of you
But never enough . . .
Never enough
Always
The feast of your love

Increases my hunger
And I cannot end
Either feast or hunger

Come to me
Kiss me . . . hold me . . . kiss me
Ah, sweet,
You of the midnight hair
Cascading
About your face
Like a blackened waterfall,
Let me place my mouth
In the smooth valley
Between twin hills
Of your barren bosom
Let my lips clothe
The flesh of you
In a warm robe of kisses
All unashamed
You will lie
Against my racing heart
Eager life
Careening joyously, madly,
Through taut veins
As we drink
The perfumed wine
Of our love

I know of you,
Broken melodies of living;

Human harps strung, tuned, played
Then snapped into silence
All strings forever useless
With so much music waiting
With so few chords rendered
And never the knowing
When melodies will crash
Into infinite nothingness.
Soon we too will hush
Stop
Be stilled
You, beloved,
And I, your lover,
But today
You are very much you
I am still I
Worshipping
At the temple
Of your soul and body
Today we live—
Come to me,
Beloved!

MODERN MAN — THE SUPERMAN

(*A Song of Praise for Hearst, Hitler, Mussolini
and the Munitions Makers*)

*Eight airplane motors,
each keyed to a different
pitch, are turned on and
off to furnish musical ac-
companiment within the
range of an octave.*

Let us have war
A pedigreed, civilized war
With gas for the women
Dumdums for the kiddies
Shrapnel and bombs
For Red Cross Hospitals
And gold for the munitions makers

Heigh-ho!

We have come a long way, don't you
know;

Only savages
Savages and heathens
Would use sharpened spears
Flint tipped arrows flung from a bow
Or cool silent knives
Killing one at a time
With a personal touch.
In a day of big business
Mass production
Sanitary methods
And "untouched by human hands"
With millions of acres
To seed the dead
Tons of lead and steel
For guns and bullets

A billion two-legged mammals
To shoot and be shot
(They'd die someday anyway)
Politicians and moneyed men
For masterly direction—
In such a day
War takes on
A respectable dignity

Alexander was a neighborhood bully
Cæsar was a piker
Only Napoleon
Had some pale glimmer
Of the right idea
And thank you Kaiser

* * *

*Music of an organ sup-
plants the airplane mo-
tors only to be drowned
out after a few bars by
the whirl of a dynamo, an
occasional shriek from a
factory whistle, and the
approaching and receding
gong of an ambulance.*

Don't you think—
Mister Hearst
Signor Mussolini
Herr Hitler—
It's time to change
This Bible and God
To a civilized
Misconception?

Let us revere the machine which gives
to us our life, our joy, our well-being,
our progress
In St. Judas Hospital . . . machine con-

structed, machine equipped . . . is
born a child who may soon return
the victim of other machines

Up and down in streets outside ma-
chines run . . . they carry men and
women to work at different machines
for food and clothing more machines
have made . . . they use their rubber
legs and metal backs hauling men
to murder with other machines call-
ed guns . . . they crush blood and life
in scornful vengeance from those not
moving by steel and oil

Nearby a small boy hawks the daily
press displaying smooth lies ma-
chine printed to tighten the grip of
those controlling machines at work

Come let us sing mechanical hallelu-
jahs to a pile of levers and pulleys
high as the Chrysler Tower

By such a God do we live and die
Through orders of His priests do we
kill in battle

And civilization marches onward
For Jehovah is always just

* * *

*The accompaniment
again changes. A uni-
formed marksman fires a
loaded pistol at eight dif-
ferently pitched bells,*

Give us another war
Shaming antiquity
Belittling the puny efforts

each giving a strong metallic sound when hit. They are labelled "Jews," "Negroes," "Socialism," "Communism," "Tolerance," "Independence," "Free Speech," and "Individuality."

The bells break and fall to the ground as the song ends.

Of ignorant ancestors
Let us slaughter the unfit
For science knows
The fit will always survive

Have we sufficient rifles and howitzers?
Will our poison gas
Make death horrible enough?
Can our dum dum bullets
Shred the target's vital organs?
Have big guns the range
Of the largest hospitals?
Do our bombing planes know
Where the women and children will
flee?

Then let's go!
Let Modern Man, the Superman
Make civilization safe
For Hearst and Hitler
Mussolini and the Munitions Makers!

TWO WOMEN

As maid for Mrs. Harold Billingsworth
Dahlia Green
supplemented the Petite Beauty Salon
by curling her mistress' straight hair
several times weekly.

Paydays

Dahlia went straightway
to the Afro Beauty College
to have her own moss unkinked.

At sixty both women
from efforts to imitate
the natural appearance of each
above the ears
were forced to buy wigs
from the salons.

Yet this was a triumph for civilization
and American progress —
Think how they aided
the entire hair industry!

FOR ANY UNBORN NEGRO

Brush his
Lips lightly, Life!
Though this is home he's black.
Too soon he'll know that none loves him
But Death . . .

“ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS!”

The religion of Sweet Jesus
The spirit of Our Saviour
March on
With missionaries
And civilization
Into darkest Africa

Day by day
Black folk learn
Rather than with
A heathen spear
’Tis holier to die
By a Christian gun . . .

MIDSUMMER MORN

A tom-tom sun awakens day’s jungle with heat beats
The moon was a white war canoe moored to the night
Morning stars scurry to cover like shaking hares fearful
of the Great Yellow Hunter
Last night’s tall hunchback fishing in a pool of raven’s
breasts is a green elm tree
Thin wings of grass pound helplessly against hard ground
And the robins are no longer afraid . . .

Ebony Under Granite



MOSES MITCHELL

It was in 1917
That Moses Mitchell
Left Natchez, Mississippi,
To help make the world
Safe for democracy
Thereby gaining
A distinguished service cross
For conspicuous bravery
In the Argonne Forest

Eighteen years later
Back home in cotton country
Moses' life was saved
When the metal decoration
Pinned inside his shirt pocket
Stopped a leaden bullet
Sheriff Pete Jones fired at the Negro
Blonde Victoria Bates
Swore assaulted her
As she hoboed through to New Orleans
From Scottsboro, Alabama,
And in so doing kept herself
From being picked up for vagrancy

How fortunate!
Because he served his nation bravely
Moses now was able
To die upon the gallows . . .

SAM JACKSON

The moon was a thick slab of yellow cheese between thin
slices of toasted clouds

The night air spilled steak and coffee smells from a sack
of odors hauled from the Elite Cafe

Beneath penniless Sam Jackson's window two dogs argued
like nations over a morsel found in a garbage can

Strong Hunger slashed Sam's belly with eagle talons until
he staggered wounded and sore to the street

Daily papers itemed: "An unidentified Negro was shot and
instantly killed late last night by Officer Patrick Riley
while trying to break into the rear of the Dew Drop
Inn . . ."

JONATHAN WOOD

Editors said
Jonathan Wood
Never found the path of words
To his star high dreams
At twenty five
Even Life
Sent him
A rejection slip . . .

CLEO AND SARAH GREELEY

At the age of sixteen
Cleo Greeley
More female than feminine
Had learned to walk
With a suggestive slither
To her unhampered hams
Firing the lusty lads
Of both races
In Charleston.
At thirty
Tired of peddling love
At bargain prices
Cleo went to Los Angeles
Under another name
And wed the woman-hungry pastor
Of Big Bethel A.M.E. Church.
Being thoroughly trained
She kept him content at home
Thus avoiding
The forked tongue of scandal
Which added respectability
To their marriage
And indirectly prosperity
To the House of Worship.

Sarah was twenty-five
A voluptuous Madonna
Nursing the crimson child

Of her virginity
When she mated
With Oscar Simmons
Who had just inherited
The Excelsior Cafe.
It was scarce six months
For all her eyesome charms
Before her husband
Sick of inexperienced flesh
Turned to the brazen buttocks
Of the moral-less ladies
Who patronized his restaurant
Thus signaling the slinging
Of sharp darts of pity
By the town
At Mrs. Oscar Simmons.

Cleo and Sarah
Are both dead
These five years —
Who remembers either?

BENJAMIN BLAKEY

Benjamin Blakey
Did quite well for himself
And the people of his town
It isn't everybody
Who leaves behind
The showplace of his state—
A six-story Odd Fellows Temple
He built and managed—
As well as control of the affairs
Of big Sinai A. M. E. Church
A son who finished Harvard
A daughter with a Vassar degree
A wife so well satisfied outwardly
She never showed jealousy
Of the six women
The town whispered
Her husband kept

Still
Benjamin Blakey
Would have died more content
Had he ever learned
From which of his mistresses
He contracted
That fatal social disease . . .

NICODEMUS PERRY

Walking pensively along
looking at the narrow sidewalk
Saturday afternoon in Reelton, Alabama,
thinking how his mother
while a young girl
working for Judge Stinson
bore a child that died
how his oldest sister
was known to be intimate
with the mayor's son
and how only last night
his youngest sister
coming home alone
was raped by three white men
and the sheriff
merely asked how much she got
Nicodemus Perry
was shot and fatally wounded
by several corner loiterers
who said something about "assault"
as he bumped smack into
a white woman.

MRS. CLIFTON TOWNSEND

High yellow and snobbish
Proud of her family and color
Was Mrs. Clifton Townsend
Of Nashville, Tennessee,
For in her veins
Flowed the blood of Senator Withers
(Her maternal grandmother
Was productively seduced)
Thus this lady's marriage
To Dr. Townsend
Equally yellow and ancestored
Had satisfied the families of both
As did the birth
Of their near-white daughter, Angeline,
Who was trained to follow tradition
And eventually mated legally
With young Anthony Monroe
(A secret descendant
Of Governor Windsor)
Who could pass for Nordic any evening.

It was not childbirth
In her forty-second year
That took the life
Of Mrs. Clifton Townsend
But shame at bearing
Through inconsiderate Nature
A penny-brown son . . .

EDITOR RALPH WILLIAMSON

For twenty racing years
As editor of
The weekly News-Protest
Ralph Williamson
Had been a verbal swashbuckler
Waging unending battle
Against discrimination
In courts and public places
Jim crow both North and South
Racial designations in
Columns of white papers
Fighting for an end
To the color question
And the treatment of black folk
As Americans instead of Negroes
Thereby building himself
A national reputation
As a great leader
And a respectable bankroll.

Given a testimonial banquet
Starting his twenty-first year
For "service to the race"
Ralph Williamson
Died of shock that same night
From the horrible dream
Of a perfect nation
Without prejudice or segregation

Racial complaint or color line
Thus causing the weekly News-Protest
Now with no excuse for being
To pass into nothingness
Hand in hand
With the editor's
Checking account and income . . .

FRANK MARSHALL DAVIS: WRITER

“He is bitter
A bitter bitter
Cynic”
They said
“And his wine
He brews from wormwood”

I was black and black I always was
From the ebony house of me I watched days swing into
weeks to months to years

I hunted golden orchids where “All Men are Created Free
and Equal”—and my skin lay raw and sore from the
poison ivy of discrimination and the hidden brambles
of jim crow

I say no sensitive Negro can spend his life in America with-
out finding his cup holds vinegar and his meat is seas-
oned with gall

A Mississippi manpack, mobbing bent, beat a tinpan bed-
lam when I would pluck sweet airs from a Muse’s harp

I aimed my eyes at the holy doors of a white man’s church
and I heard God’s Servant say “Niggers must be saved
elsewhere”

While thousands cheered as the Governor of Georgia thun-
dered “Stand pat on the Constitution” I saw the hungry
mouths of six-guns daring his black folk to come to the
polls and vote

I turned to what was called my own race . . . and I looked
at a white man's drama acted by inky performers

I was a weaver of jagged words
A warbler of garbled tunes
A singer of savage songs
I was bitter
Yes
Bitter and sorely sad
For when I wrote
I dipped my pen
In the crazy heart
Of mad America

Wormwood wine?
Vinegar?
Gall?
A daily diet—
But
I did not die
Of diabetes . . .

COLOPHON

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