

Slave Sale: New Orleans

BY CHARLES REZNIKOFF

To begin with, the slaves had to wash themselves well,
and the men who had beards had to shave them off;
the men were then given a new suit each,
cheap but clean, and a hat, shirt, and shoes;
and the women were each given a frock of calico
and a handkerchief to tie about their heads.
They were then led by the man selling them into a large room;
the men placed on one side, the women at the other;
the tallest at the head of each row
and then the next in size
and so on to the shortest.

Many called to look at the slaves for sale
and the seller kept talking about their qualities;
made them hold up their heads and walk about briskly;
and those who might buy had them open their mouths
to look at their teeth,
and felt their arms and bodies,
just as they might a horse for sale;
and asked each what they could do.
Sometimes a man or woman would be taken to a small house
in the yard,
to be stripped and looked at carefully:
if they had the scars of whips on their backs
that would show they had been troublesome.

During the day a number of sales were made;
and a planter from Baton Rouge bought Eliza's little son.
Before that the boy had to jump and run across the floor
to show his activity.
But all the time the trade was going on,
his mother was crying and wringing her hands
and kept begging the man who was thinking of buying the boy
not to buy him unless he bought her, too,
and her little daughter:
and Eliza kept saying that if he did she would be "the most
faithful slave that ever lived."
But the man from Baton Rouge said he could not afford to
buy her,
and then she began to cry aloud in her grief.

The man selling the slaves turned on her, his whip lifted,
and told her to stop her noise:
if she would not stop her "sniveling"

he would take her into the yard
and give her a hundred lashes.
She tried to wipe away her tears
but could not
and said she wanted to be with her children
and kept begging the man selling the slaves and the man from
Baton Rouge—
who by that time had bought her son—
not to separate the three of them, mother, son, and daughter;
and over and over again kept saying how faithful and obedient
she would be
and how hard she would work day and night.

But the man from Baton Rouge
said again he could not buy mother and son, let alone the three,
and that only the boy must go with him.
Then Eliza ran to her son, hugged him and kissed him
again and again
and her tears kept falling on his face.
The man selling the slaves kept cursing her
and called her a blubbering, howling wench
and ordered her back to her place in line
and to behave herself
or he would give her something really to cry about.

Notes:

From *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) by Solomon Northrup (*A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*, edited by Herbert Aptheker).

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Slavery in the U.S. [ca. 1848]

11 x 18

A Humble Appeal

FOR THE
"KNEELING SLAVE."

BY GEORGE KENT, ESQ.



SPURN not the suppliant slave,
Though abject now he lies—
Nor scorn the high behest of Heaven,
That urges him to rise.

Rise—not in fell revenge,
To break by force his chain—
But, through the power of light and love,
His brotherhood regain.

He kneels—will ye not see?
He pleads—will ye not hear?
His fettered hands are rais'd on high,
No human helper near.

The Saviour knelt and pray'd,
When none but God was nigh;
An angel strengthen'd him from Heaven,
In that deep agony.

As spirits, sent to aid
A brother in his woe,
Be, one and all, the ministers
Of God, for good below.

Like the rich generous vine,
We each supported live—
The strength we gain, in weal or woe,
Is from the embrace we give.

"Reapers" By Jean Toomer

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



reaper - a person who reaps or a machine for reaping - for cutting standing grain

hone - a stone for sharpening cutlery or tools by friction.

scythe - an agricultural tool made of a long, curving blade fastened at an angle to a handle, for cutting grass and grain by hand

Harriet Tubman

by Eloise Greenfield

Harriet Tubman didn't take no stuff
Wasn't scared of nothing neither
Didn't come in this world to be no slave
And wasn't going to stay one either

"Farewell!" she sang to her friends one night
She was mighty sad to leave 'em
But she ran away that dark, hot night
Ran looking for her freedom

She ran to the woods and she ran through the woods
With the slave catchers right behind her
And she kept on going till she got to the North
Where those mean men couldn't find her

Nineteen times she went back South
To get three hundred others
She ran for her freedom nineteen times
To save Black sisters and brothers
Harriet Tubman didn't take no stuff
Wasn't scared of nothing neither
Didn't come in this world to be no slave
And didn't stay one either

And didn't stay one either



Source: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16485>

A Dream Deferred

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?



Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fest to dreams
For if dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Knoxville, Tennessee

By Nikki Giovanni



I always like summer
best
you can eat fresh corn
from daddy's garden
and okra
and greens
and cabbage
and lots of
barbecue
and buttermilk and homemade ice-cream
at the church picnic
and listen to
gospel music
outside
at the church
homecoming
and go to the mountains with
your grandmother
and go barefooted
and be warm
all the time
not only when you go to bed
and sleep

Mother to Son

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've 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've still goin', honey,

'se still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Incident

BY COUNTEE CULLEN

(For Eric Walrond)

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.



glee - joy and happiness

Baltimorean - someone who lives in Baltimore, Maryland

no whit - not much

My Thinking

This reminds me of...

I wonder...I think...I can
see...

This confuses me because...

Ego Tripping

(there may be a reason why)

Nikki Giovanni

I was born in the Congo
I walked to the Fertile Crescent and built
The Sphinx
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star
That only glows every one hundred years falls
Into the center giving divine perfect light
I am bad

I sat on the throne
Drinking nectar with Allah
I got hot and sent an ice age to
Europe
To cool my thirst
My oldest daughter is Nefertiti
The tears from my birth pains
Created the Nile
I am a beautiful woman



I gazed on the forest and burned
Out the Sahara desert
With a packet of goat's meat
And a change of clothes
I crossed it in two hours
I am a gazelle so swift
So swift you can't catch me



For a birthday present when he was three
I gave my son Hannibal an elephant
He gave me Rome for mother's day
My strength flows ever on
My son Noah built New/Ark and
I stood proudly at the helm

As we sailed on a soft summer day
I turned myself into myself and was
Jesus
Men intone my loving name
All praises All praises
I am the one who would save

I sowed diamonds in my back yard
My bowels deliver uranium
The filings from my fingernails are
Semi-precious jewels
On a trip north
I caught a cold and blew
My nose giving oil to the Arab world
I am so hip even my errors are correct
I sailed west to reach east and had to round off
The earth as I went
The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid
Across three continents

I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended except by my permission

I mean...I...can fly
Like a bird in the sky

- **Fertile Crescent** - [an](#) area of fertile land in the Middle East, extending around the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates in a semicircle from Israel to the Persian Gulf, where civilization began
- **The Sphinx** - a figure of an imaginary creature having the head of a man or an animal and the body of a lion.
- **Allah** - the Supreme Being; God in Islam
- **Nefertiti** – Egyptian queen
- **Sahara Desert** – world’s largest desert in northern Africa
- **Gazelle** - [any](#) small antelope of Africa and Asia, noted for graceful movements and lustrous eyes.
- **Hannibal** - A general from the ancient city of [Carthage](#).
- **Uranium** – a radioactive silvery-white metallic element
- **Arab World** – Arabic-speaking countries in the Middle East
- **Ethereal** – heavenly or celestial
- **Surreal** – dream-like, unreal

An Indignation Dinner

James D. Corrothers

DEY was hard times jes fo' Christmas round our neighborhood one year;
So we held a secret meetin', whah de white folks couldn't hear,
To 'scuss de situation, an' to see what could be done
Towa'd a fust-class Christmas dinneh an' a little Christmas fun.

Rufus Green, who called de meetin', ris an' said: "In dis here town, 5
An' throughout de land, de white folks is a-tryin' to keep us down."
S' 'e: "Dey's bought us, sold us, beat us; now dey 'buse us 'ca'se we's free;
But when dey tetch my stomach, dey's done gone too fur foh me!

"Is I right?" "You sho is, Rufus!" roared a dozen hungry throats. 10
"Ef you'd keep a mule a-wo'kin', don't you tamper wid his oats.
Dat's sense," continued Rufus. "But dese white folks nowadays
Has done got so close and stingy you can't live on what dey pays.

"Here 'tis Christmas-time, an', folkses, I's indignant 'nough to choke. 15
Whah's our Christmas dinneh comin' when we's 'mos' completely broke?
I can't hahdly 'fo'd a toothpick an' a glass o' water. Mad?
Say, I'm desp'ret! Dey jes better treat me nice, dese white folks had!"

Well, dey 'bused de white folks scan'lous, till old Pappy Simmons ris, 20
Leanin' on his cane to s'pote him, on account his rheumatis',
An' s' 'e: "Chilun, whut's dat wintry wind a-sighin' th'ough de street
'Bout yo' wasted summeh wages? But, no matter, we mus' eat.

"Now, I seed a beau'ful tuhkey on a certain gemmun's fahm.
He's a-growin' fat an' sassy, an' a-struttin' to a chahm.
Chickens, sheeps, hogs, sweet pertaters—all de craps is fine dis year;
All we needs is a committee foh to tote de goodies here."

Well, we lit right in an' voted dat it was a gran idee, 25
An' de dinneh we had Christmas was worth trabblin' miles to see;
An' we eat a full an' plenty, big an' little, great an' small,
Not beca'se we was dishonest, but indignant, sah. Dat's all.

Why Am I Black?

*Why Did You Make Me Black Lord
Lord Why did you make me black?
Why did you make someone
the world would hold back?
Black is the color of dirty clothes,
of grimy hands and feet...
Black is the color of darkness,
of tired beaten streets...
Why did you give me thick lips,
a broad nose and kinky hair?
Why did you create someone
who receives the hated stare?*



*Black is the color of the bruised eye
when someone gets hurt...
Black is the color of darkness,
black is the color of dirt.*



*Why is my bone structure so thick,
my hips and cheeks so high?
Why are my eyes brown,
and not the color of the sky?*

*Why do people think I'm useless?
How come I feel so used?
Why do people see my skin
and think I should be abused?*



*Lord, I just don't understand...
What is it about my skin?
Why is it some people want to hate me
and not know the person within?*

*Black is what people are 'Labeled'
when others want to keep them away...
Black is the color of shadows cast...
Black is the end of the day.*

*Lord you know my own people mistreat me,
and you know this just ain't right...
They don't like my hair, they don't like my
skin, as they say I'm too dark or too light!*



*Lord, don't you think
it's time to make a change?
Why don't you redo creation
And make everyone the same?*

GOD's Reply:

Why did I make you black?

Why did I make you black?

*I made you in the color of coal
from which beautiful diamonds are formed...*

*I made you in the color of oil,
the black gold which keeps people warm.*

*Your color is the same as the rich dark soil
that grows the food you need...*

*Your color is the same as the black stallion and
panther, Oh what majestic creatures indeed!*

*All colors of the heavenly rainbow
can be found throughout every nation...*

*When all these colors are blended,
you become my greatest creation!*

*Your hair is the texture of lamb's wool,
such a beautiful creature is he...*

*I am the shepherd who watches them,
I will ALWAYS watch over thee!*

*You are the color of the midnight sky,
I put star glitter in your eyes...
There's a beautiful smile hidden behind your pain...
That's why your cheeks are so high!*

You are the color of dark clouds
*from the hurricanes I create in September...
I made your lips so full and thick,
so when you kiss...they will remember!*

*Your stature is strong,
your bone structure thick to withstand the
burden of time...*

*The reflection you see in the mirror,
that image that looks back,..that is MINE!*

*So get off your knees,
look in the mirror and tell me what you see?
I didn't make you in the image of darkness...
I made you in the image of ME!*



Harlem Sweeties, Langston Hughes

Have you dug the spill
Of Sugar Hill?
Cast your gims
On this sepia thrill:
Brown sugar lassie,
Caramel treat,
Honey-gold baby
Sweet enough to eat.
Peach-skinned girlie,
Coffee and cream,
Chocolate darling
Out of a dream.
Walnut tinted
Or cocoa brown,
Pomegranate-lipped
Pride of the town.
Rich cream-colored
To plum-tinted black,
Feminine sweetness
In Harlem's no lack.
Glow of the quince
To blush of the rose.
Persimmon bronze
To cinnamon toes.
Blackberry cordial,
Virginia Dare wine—
All those sweet colors
Flavor Harlem of mine!
Walnut or cocoa,
Let me repeat:
Caramel, brown sugar,
A chocolate treat.
Molasses taffy,
Coffee and cream,
Licorice, clove, cinnamon
To a honey-brown dream.
Ginger, wine-gold,
Persimmon, blackberry,
All through the spectrum
Harlem girls vary—
So if you want to know beauty's
Rainbow-sweet thrill,
Stroll down luscious,
Delicious, *fine* Sugar Hill.

Lift Every Voice and Sing, BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us, and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children.

Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used.

The lines of this song repay me in an elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children.

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.