A Selection of Poems by
Langston Hughes
An Adolescent Bard

James Langston Hughes began writing in junior high, and even at this early age was developing the voice that made him famous. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri but his parents separated soon after his birth. His father moved to Cuba, then to Mexico, and his mother moved to the North to look for work. So as a child, Hughes lived with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas until he was thirteen. Hughes's grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston, was prominent in the African American community in Lawrence. Her first husband had died at Harper's Ferry fighting with John Brown; her second husband, Langston Hughes's grandfather, was a prominent Kansas politician during Reconstruction. During the time Hughes lived with his grandmother, she often read to the young boy from W.E.B. DuBois' new NAACP magazine *The Crisis* and DuBois’ book *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, she was old and poor and unable to give Hughes as much attention as he needed. Besides, Hughes felt hurt by both his mother and his father and was unable to understand why he was not allowed to live with either of them. These feelings of rejection caused him to grow up very insecure and unsure of himself.

When Langston Hughes's was 13, his grandmother died, and his mother summoned him to her home in Lincoln, Illinois. Here, according to Hughes, he wrote his first verse and was named class poet of his eighth grade class. Hughes lived in Lincoln for only a year, however; when his stepfather found work in Cleveland, Ohio, the rest of the family then followed him there. Soon his stepfather and mother moved on, this time to Chicago, but Hughes stayed in Cleveland in order to finish high school. Teachers and classmates soon recognized his writing talent, and Hughes’ first pieces of verse were published in the *Central High Monthly*, a sophisticated school magazine. Soon he was on the staff of the *Monthly* and publishing in the magazine regularly. In high school, Hughes naturally took the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1905) as a model, but an English teacher introduced him to other works that also profoundly influenced Hughes, such as those by white American poets Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892).

During the summer after Hughes's junior year in high school, his father reentered his life. Hughes’ mother Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes had attended the University of Kansas but was forced to take menial jobs. James Nathanial Hughes, the poet’s father, was intelligent and ambitious. He had studied law but because of his race had been refused the bar examination. So he abandoned his wife and child and moved to Toluca, Mexico, where he sought an escape from the racism of the North, living as a cattle rancher. He wanted his son to join him there. After not seeing his father for ten years, Hughes joined him in Mexico for the summer but they did not get along. This conflict, though painful, apparently contributed to Hughes’s maturity. When Hughes returned to Cleveland to finish high school, his writing had also matured and he began writing poetry of distinction. This is a poem Hughes wrote in his junior year:

When Sue Wears Red

When Susanna Jones wears red  
Her face is like an ancient cameo  
Turned brown by age.  

Come with a blast of trumpets,  
Jesus!  

When Susanna Jones wears red  
A queen from some time-dead Egyptian night  
Walks once again.  

Blow trumpets, Jesus!  
And the beauty of Susanna Jones in red  
Burns in my heart a love-fire sharp like pain.  

Sweet silver trumpets,  
Jesus!  

© Kevin Bliss
After graduating from high school, Hughes returned to Mexico to visit his father, hoping to convince his father to pay for his college education at Columbia University in New York City. At Columbia, Hughes thought, he could get a college education but also begin his career as a writer. On his way to Mexico on the train, while thinking about his past and his future, Hughes wrote the famous poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," later published in the NAACP’s magazine The Crisis in June 1921. Hughes was only 19. After arriving in Mexico, strong tension developed between Hughes and his light-skinned father. He found his father to be a bitter man, thinking of nothing but money, contemptuous of the indigenous Indians he chose to live among. James Hughes told his son that in America Langston would “have to live like a n*gger with n*ggers.” Hughes responded, “But I like Negroes.” Anguished at his hatred toward his father, Hughes considered suicide and became dangerously ill.

**College Student and World Traveler**

Hughes wanted to be a writer; his father wanted him to be an engineer. After Hughes’ work was published in the NAACP-sponsored children’s magazine Brownies Book as well as in Crisis, his father was impressed enough to agree to pay for a year at Columbia University. His father didn't think he would be able to make a living at writing and encouraged him to pursue a more practical career. He paid his son’s tuition to Columbia University on the grounds he study engineering, and Hughes entered Columbia University in the fall of 1921, a little more than a year after he had graduated from Central High School.

After a short time, Langston dropped out of the program with a B+ average; all the while he continued writing poetry. In 1923, Hughes traveled abroad on a freighter to the Senegal, Nigeria, the Cameroons, Belgium Congo, Angola, and Guinea, seeing nearly thirty African ports. Later, he traveled to Italy, France, Russia and Spain, all the while taking on odd jobs to pay his expenses. He was a steward on a freighter, a dishwasher in Le Grand Duc nightclub on the Rue Pigalle in Paris, and got his pocket picked in Italy. One of his favorite pastimes whether abroad or in Washington, D.C. or Harlem, New York was sitting in the clubs listening to blues and jazz and writing poetry.

**“Discovered” at 23**

Through these experiences, a new rhythm emerged in his writing, inspiring many “blues” poems such as "The Weary Blues." He returned to Harlem, in 1924, the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925, when he was back home in Washington, D.C. working as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel, Hughes mustered up the courage to speak to Vachel Linsday, a white “performance poet” whose works were influenced by African-American rhythms. Lindsay was having dinner before his reading in the concert room of the hotel, and Hughes dropped three poems by his plate: “Jazzonia,” “Negro Dancers,” and “The Weary Blues.” The next morning Hughes learned from the newspaper that Lindsay had discovered a busboy poet, and when he arrived at work the reporters were waiting for him. They took his picture standing in the middle of the luxurious dining room, holding up a tray of dirty dishes, and Hughes was quickly famous. Lindsay also left Hughes with a note saying, “Do not let lionizers stampede you. Hide and write and study and think.”

Following his “discovery” by Lindsay, Hughes’ work was frequently published and his writing flourished. He said, "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street . . . [these songs] had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going." At this same time, Hughes accepted a job with Dr. Carter G. Woodson, editor of the Journal of Negro Life and History and founder of Black History Week in 1926.

Hughes returned to his beloved Harlem later that year, where he quickly became an integral part of the arts scene so much so that in many ways he defined the spirit of the age, from a literary point of view. The Big Sea, the first volume of his autobiography, provides such a crucial first-person account of the era and its key players that much of what we know about the Harlem Renaissance we know from Langston Hughes's point of view. Hughes began regularly publishing his work in Crisis and Opportunity magazines. He got to know other African-American writers of the time such as Countee Cullen (1903-1946), Claude McCay (1890-1948), W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1962), and James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938).
When his poem "The Weary Blues" won first prize in the poetry section of the 1925 Opportunity magazine literary contest, Hughes's literary career was launched. Alain Locke, an African-American scholar and one of the fosterers and founders of the Harlem Renaissance—a sudden flourishing of African American art, literature, and music in the 1920's—published Hughes' works in a collection called The New Negro in 1925. Locke saw Hughes as part of a "younger generation [that] was vibrant with a new psychology" that "renewed self-respect and self-dependence." Hughes also won the support of Carl Van Vechten, a white devotee of Negro culture and author of one of the most popular novels of the Harlem Renaissance, the controversial Nigger Heaven. With Van Vechten's help, Hughes published his first volume of poetry in 1926, titling it The Weary Blues.

One of Hughes' finest essays appeared in the Nation in 1926, entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". It spoke of Black writers and poets, "who would surrender racial pride in the name of a false integration," where a talented Black writer would prefer to be considered a poet—not a Black poet—which to Hughes indicated a subconscious desire to write like a white poet. Hughes argued, "No great poet has ever been afraid of being himself." He wrote in this essay, "We younger Negro artists now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they aren't, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too . . . If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

Hughes' poetry frequently makes us of the rhythms of African-American music, particularly blues and jazz. This sets his poetry apart from that of many other writers, and it allowed him to experiment with a very rhythmic free verse. Hughes's second volume of poetry, Fine Clothes to the Jew (1927), was not well received at the time of its publication because it was too experimental. Now, however, many critics believe the volume to be among Hughes' finest work.

Langston Hughes returned to school in 1926, this time to the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Alain Locke, who had published Hughes's poetry in The New Negro, arranged for Hughes' support from Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron of the arts in her seventies. Mason directed Hughes's literary career, convincing him to write the novel Not Without Laughter. However, the two had a dispute in 1930. An artistic movement called primitivism was very popular at the time, especially in African-American art, and she wanted Hughes to pursue a more primitive style. Hughes refused and the relationship came to an end.

An Increasingly Public Figure

At this point in Hughes' life he turned to the political left and began to develop his interest in socialism. In 1932, he sailed to the Soviet Union with a group of 20 young African American intellectuals to make a movie Black and White. The movie was never completed; however, the trip solidified his socio-political beliefs. The U.S. House Special Committee on Un-American Activities later used his poem “Good Morning Revolution,” first published in the 1932 issue of The Masses, a Toronto avant-garde journal associated with the Communist Party, as evidence of Communist beliefs. Hughes denied all charges.

In the 1930's and 1940's, he founded African-American theatre groups in Harlem, Chicago, and Los Angeles. In the Spanish Civil War (1937) he served as a newspaper correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American. During this time he became a friend of Ernest Hemingway, with whom he attended bullfights. In 1942 he made Harlem his permanent home, although he began lecturing at universities around the country. Hughes wrote children's stories, non-fiction, and numerous works for the stage, including lyrics for Kurt Weill's and Elmer Rice's Broadway opera Street Scene, the screenplay for the Hollywood film Way Down South with the actor Clarence Muse, and translated the poetry of Federico García Lorca and Gabriela Mistral. His drama about miscegenation and the South—Mulatto—became the longest running Broadway play written by an African American until Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun (1958). His 1964 musical play Jericho Jim Crow synthesized gospel and African American history in a cry for civil rights. Hughes's Christmas “gospel song play” Black Nativity, a mix of dance, music, poetry, and theatre, has been produced every year by major black theaters since its opening in 1947. Seattle's Intiman theatre stages it every December.

In 1942, during World War II, Hughes began writing a column for the African American newspaper, the Chicago Defender. In 1943, he created a character know as My Simple Minded Friend based on a conversation

© Kevin Bliss
with a man he knew in a Harlem bar, fictionalizing this man in a series of essays in the form of a dialogue. In 1950, he named this lovable character Jess B. Simple. This fictional everyman, while humorous, also allowed Hughes to discuss very serious racial issues. The Simple columns were also popular—they ran for twenty years and were collected in several books.

Langston Hughes continued to write poetry throughout his journalistic and theatrical career, however. Montage of a Dream Deferred, one of his best-known volumes of poetry, was published in 1951; and from that time until his death sixteen years later he wrote more than twenty additional works. By his later years, Hughes was deemed the "Poet Laureate of the Negro Race," a title he encouraged. Hughes meant to represent the race in his writing and he is, perhaps, the most beloved of all African-American poets.

A Public Persona with a Very Private Personal Life

Although open about his politics, Hughes was always circumspect about his private life. His romantic life remains a mystery; however, most scholars conclude that he was homosexual. At the very least, Hughes was familiar with and sympathetic to the Gay community, as seen in poems such as “Café: 3 a.m.” During his years in Harlem, Hughes was friends with many Gay and bisexual men, including his mentor, Howard University professor and author of The New Negro Alain Locke, and Locke’s other protégés: fellow poets Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Bruce Nugent.

Hughes became a highly regarded spokesperson for the African American Community

Locke was known both for helping link young African-American artists with wealthy white patrons, such as Hughes' own patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, and for aggressively pursuing those he favored. For a time, Locke, Thurman, Nugent, and others in their circle lived together in a Harlem rooming house mockingly dubbed “N*ggerati Manor” by Thurman and black author Zora Neal Hurston for all the African American literati who gathered there. Conservative African-American poet and schoolteacher Jessie Redmon Fauset described this crowd including Hughes as “unconventional.”

Hughes also maintained a long-term friendship with Carl Van Vechten, the openly Gay white author who helped insure the publication of Hughes’ first book of poems, Weary Blues. While he and Van Vechten corresponded for nearly 40 years—until Van Vechten’s death in 1964—Hughes did not overtly discuss his sexual orientation or mention any romantic relationships in their personal letters (published in 2001).

End to an Illustrious Life

Money was a nagging concern for Hughes throughout his life. While he managed to support himself as a writer—which was no small task—he was never financially secure. However, through his work writing the lyrics for Street Scene, he was finally able to earn enough money to purchase a house in Harlem, which had been his dream. His brownstone at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission, and his block of East 127th Street was renamed "Langston Hughes Place."

On May 22, 1967 Langston Hughes died at age 65 after having had abdominal surgery. Hughes' funeral, like his poetry, was all blues and jazz: the jazz pianist Randy Weston was called and asked to play for Hughes's funeral. Very little was said by way of eulogy, but the jazz and the blues were hot, and the final tribute to this writer so influenced by African American musical forms was fitting.

Information and images compiled from:


© Kevin Bliss
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.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
got 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. (1921)

---

1 This is the first Langston Hughes poem published in a national magazine, first published in the NAACP’s The Crisis magazine in
July 1921 when Hughes was 19. According to Hughes in his autobiography The Big Sea (1940, 54–56), the poem was written in the
summer of 1920, after his graduation from high school, while he was on a train going from Cleveland, Ohio, to Mexico to visit his
father, who lived there, and with whom the poet had a troubled relationship. “All day on the train,” Hughes recalled, “I had been
thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his own people. I didn't understand it, because I was a Negro, and I liked Negroes
very much.” As the train crossed the Mississippi at sunset over a bridge near St. Louis, Hughes began to brood on the historical
associations of that river with blacks, slavery, and the story that Abraham Lincoln had vowed to himself, on a journey in his youth, to
free the slaves someday. “Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa—and
the thought came to me: ‘I've known rivers.’” He wrote the poem on the back of an envelope containing a letter from his father
and finished it within “ten or fifteen minutes.”

2 Euphrates: river flowing south from Turkey, uniting with the Tigris to form the Tigris-Euphrates valley, location of the ancient
regions of Mesopotamia, Sumer, Babylonia, & Assyria, the seat of Western civilization. This region once covered much of modern
Iran, Iraq, & Syria.

3 Congo: Zaire river flowing from central Africa into the Atlantic.

© Kevin Bliss
NEGRO

I am a Negro:
    Black as the night is black,
    Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:
    Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
    I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:
    Under my hands the pyramids arose.
    I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:
    All the way from Africa to Georgia
    I carried my sorrow songs.
    I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:
    The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
    They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:
    Black as the night is black,
    Black like the depths of my Africa.

(1922)

---

1 First published in the January 1922 edition of the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis.*
© Kevin Bliss
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.

(1922)
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
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.

(1925)

---


7 Lenox Avenue: a working class street in Harlem known for its jazz clubs and cabarets. In A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Voices of an African American Community, Lionel Bascom observes that NAACP and Crisis magazine founder W.E.B. DuBois promoted "high cultural forms rather than the vernacular expressions, and stories set on Striver's Row rather than Lenox Avenue cabarets" (19). Striver's Row is a nickname for an area of distinguished row houses and apartments where upwardly mobile African Americans lived. Thanks to Angel Quicksey (class of 2008) for this information.

© Kevin Bliss
Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!

I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

---

8 First published in July 1936 in *Esquire* magazine and in the International Worker Order pamphlet, *A New Song*.
9 O, Pioneers!: an allusion to Walt Whitman’s rousing “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” published in *Leaves of Grass* 1855-1892. (Whitman’s collection went through nine revisions in the course of his career.)

© Kevin Bliss
Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!
**Harlem Sweeties**

Have you dug the spill
Of Sugar Hill?¹⁰
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—¹¹
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.

From *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942)

---

¹⁰ Sugar Hill: Harlem’s high-society neighborhood, on a hill overlooking Colonial Park (now Jackie Robinson Park). Alexander Hamilton lived there in a beautiful mansion in the 1790’s. After the area was developed in the 1880’s, some of the most affluent and influential African-Americans in America lived here, among them NAACP and *The Crisis* magazine founder W.E.B. Du Bois, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, activist Malcolm X, NAACP leaders Walter White and Roy Wilkins, authors Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison, jazz musicians Duke Ellington, Andy Kirk, Count Basie, and Johnny Hodges, Broadway star Paul Robeson, and Langston Hughes. Sugar Hill is known to be a great people-watching spot.

¹¹ Virginia Dare wine: Fortified wine made from the Scuppernong grape. It has a clear garnet color with a light orange-brown tinge. Note that it’s named for the first white woman born in the New World. According to legendary, Dare was so blond and fair that she was mistaken for a white doe and killed by a hunter’s arrow.

© Kevin Bliss
MADAM AND HER MADAM

I worked for a woman,
She wasn't mean—
But she had a twelve-room
House to clean.
Had to get breakfast,
Dinner, and supper, too—
Then take care of her children
When I got through.
Wash, iron, and scrub,
Walk the dog around—
It was too much,
Nearly broke me down.
I said, Madam,
Can it be
You trying to make a
Pack-horse out of me?
She opened her mouth.
She cried, Oh, no!
You know, Alberta,
I love you so!
I said, Madam,
That may be true—
But I'll be dogged
If I love you!

(1943)
MADAM AND THE PHONE BILL

You say I O.K.ed
LONG DISTANCE?
O.K.ed it when?
My goodness, Central
That was then!

I'm mad and disgusted
With that Negro now.
I don't pay no REVERSED
CHARGES nohow.

You say, I will pay it—
Else you'll take out my phone?
You better let
My phone alone.

I didn't ask him
To telephone me.
Roscoe knows darn well
LONG DISTANCE
Ain't free.

If I ever catch him,
Lawd, have pity!
Calling me up
From Kansas City.

Just to say he loves me!
I knewed that was so.
Why didn't he tell me some'n
I don't know?

For instance, what can
Them other girls do
That Alberta K. Johnson
Can't do—and more, too?

What's that, Central?
You say you don't care
Nothing about my
Private affair?

Well, even less about your
PHONE BILL, does I care!

Un-humm-m! . . . Yes!
You say I gave my O.K.?
Well, that O.K. you may keep—

But I sure ain't gonna pay!

(1943)
Harlem

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 the rotten meat
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

(1951)

---

12 First published in 1951 in Hughes’ collection Montage of a Dream Deferred.
© Kevin Bliss