Langston Hughes
(1902-1967)

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
    went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
    bosom turn all golden in the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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?

Justice

That Justice is a blind goddess
Is a thing to which we black are
    wise:
Her bandage hides two festering
    sores
That once perhaps were eyes.

Children's Rhymes

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

What don't bug
them white kids
sure bugs me:
We know everybody
ain't free.

Lies written down
for white folks
ain't for us a-tall:
Liberty And Justice--
Huh!--For All?

Dinner Guest: Me

I know I am

The Negro Problem
Being wined and dined,
Answering the usual questions
That come to white mind
Which seeks demurely
To Probe in polite way
The why and wherewithal
Of darkness U.S.A.--
Wondering how things got this way
In current democratic night,
Murmuring gently
Over *fraises du bois*,
"I'm so ashamed of being white."

The lobster is delicious,
The wine divine,
And center of attention
At the damask table, mine.
To be a Problem on
Park Avenue at eight
Is not so bad.
Solutions to the Problem,
Of course, wait.

Junior Addict

The little boy
who sticks a needle in his arm

and seeks an out in other worldly dreams,
who seeks an out in eyes that droop
and ears that close to Harlem screams,
cannot know, of course,

a sunrise that he cannot see
beginning in some other land –
but destined sure to flood – and soon –
this very room in which he leaves
his needle and his spoon,
the very room in which today the air
is heavy with the drug
of his despair.

      (Yet little can
      tomorrow's sunshine give
      to one who will not live.)

Quick, sunrise, cone –
Before the mushroom bomb
Pollutes his stinking air
With better death
Than is his lving here,
With viler drugs
Than bring today's realease
In poison from the fallout of our peace.

      "It's easier to get dope
      than it is to get a job."

Yes, easier to get dope
than to get a job –
daytime or nighttime job,
teen-age, pre-draft,
pre-lifetime job.

Quick, sunrise, come!
Sunrise out of Africa,
Quick, come!
Sunrise, please come!

Come! Come!

Who But the Lord?

I looked and I saw
That man they call the Law.
He was coming
Down the street at me!
I had visions in my head
Of being laid out cold and dead,
Or else murdered
By the third degree.

 I said, O, Lord, if you can,
Save me from that man!
Don't let him make a pulp of me!
But the Lord he was not quick.
The Law raised up his stick
And beat the living hell
Out of me!

Now I do not understand
Why God don't protect a man
From police brutality.
Being poor and black, I've no weapon to
strike back
So who but the Lord
Can protect me?

      We'll see.

I, Too, Sing America

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--
I, too, am America.

Cross

My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.
If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm going to die,
Being neither white nor black?