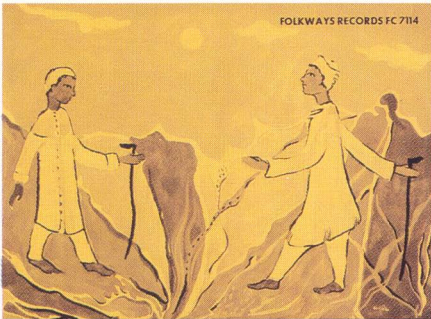


FOLKWAYS RECORDS FC 7114



# AN ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

COMPILED AND READ BY ARNA BONTEMPS

POEMS BY: ARNA BONTEMPS • STIRLING BROWN  
• JOSEPHINE COPELAND • COUNTTEE CULLEN  
• WARING CUNNEY • WESLEY CURTRIGHT • PAUL  
LAURENCE DUNBAR • FRANK HORNE • LANGSTON  
HUGHES • FENTON JOHNSON • HELENE JOHNSON  
• CLAUDE MCKAY • BEATRICE M. MURPHY

*Originally issued in 1958 as Folkways FC 7114*

SMITHSONIAN/  
FOLKWAYS



## AFRO AMERICAN POETRY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Smithsonian/Folkways Records

Office of Folklife Programs,

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The best part of the African American's contribution to American literature is still his and her poetry, and simple lyrical verse is the best of this poetry. However, the African American's genius for the singing word goes back more than a hundred years before Paul Laurence Dunbar. It survives from those dim times in the lyrics of the spirituals, in ballads like "John Henry" and in the work and play songs of the slaves. By the time James Bland put his lively verses into minstrel songs like "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginy," a tradition was already established.

A standard compilation of African American poetry suited to young as well as adult readers is Arna Bontemps' well known and widely used *Golden Slippers* (Harpers). The poems in this volume have been selected from that book.

The poems have been selected for their entertainment value. They deal with washing dishes, the creation of the world, rainy days, an incident on the streets of Baltimore—in short, all the things of which African American songs are made.

Arna Bontemps was born in Alexandria, Louisiana. When he was a small child, his parents moved to California, where he attended public and private schools and received his first college degree, in 1923. He taught in high schools and colleges, continued graduate studies at the University of Chicago, and then became Head Librarian at Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee.

# An Anthology of African American Poetry for Young People

COMPILED AND READ BY ARNA BONTEMPS

Smithsonian/Folkways Records  
SF 45044  
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Negro Poetry For Young People

## Introduction

A major part of the African American contribution to American literature has been lyrical verse. Arna Bontemps' *Golden Slippers* (Harpers) remains a classic compilation of this style of poetry suited for young as well as adult readers. The poems on this recording have been selected from that book.

Arna Bontemps was born in Alexandria, Louisiana. When he was a small child, his parents moved to California. There he attended public and private schools and received his first college degree. He taught in high schools and colleges, continued graduate studies at the University of Chicago, and then became Head Librarian at Fisk University, in Nashville Tennessee.

Mr. Bontemps was a prolific and creative writer. He wrote for young people as often as he did for adults, and his books, magazine articles, poems, and plays cover a wide range of subjects. He co-authored the musical play "St. Louis Woman," which was based on his first novel, and he edited W. C. Handy's autobiography *Father of the Blues*. With Langston Hughes he compiled the anthology *The Poetry of the Negro: 1746-1949* and *The Book of Negro Folklore*. His novels and stories for young people include *Black Thunder*, *Sad Faced Boy*, *Chariot in the Sky*, and *Lonesome Boy*.

Selected and read by Mr. Bontemps, the poems in this recording deal with washing dishes, daydreams, rainy days, an incident on the streets of Baltimore - in short, the details of everyday life. This anthology includes works by some of the most outstanding poets of the twentieth century, including Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Countee Cullen.

## Dawn

(Paul Laurence Dunbar)

An angel, robed in spotless white,  
Bent down and kissed the sleeping  
Night.  
Night woke to blush; the sprite was  
gone.  
Men saw the blush and called it  
Dawn.

## Youth

(Langston Hughes)

We have tomorrow  
Bright before us  
Like a flame.

Yesterday  
A night-gone thing,  
A sun-down name.

And dawn-today  
Broad arch above the road we  
came.

We march!

## Did You Feed My Cow?

(Traditional)

"Did you feed my cow?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"Will you tell me how?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"Oh, what did you give her?"  
"Corn an' hay."  
"Oh, what did you give her?"  
"Corn an' hay."

"Did you milk her good?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"Did you do like you should?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"Oh, how did you milk her?"  
"Swish! Swish! Swish!"  
"Oh, how did you milk her?"  
"Swish! Swish! Swish!"

"Did that cow die?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"With a pain in her eye?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"Oh, how did she die?"  
"Uh! Uh! Uh!"  
"Oh, how did she die?"  
"Uh! Uh! Uh!"

"Did the buzzards come?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"For to pick her bone?"  
"Yes, Mam!"  
"Oh, how did they come?"  
"Flop! Flop! Flop!"  
"Oh, how did they come?"  
"Flop! Flop! Flop!"

## Bedbug

(Traditional)

The June-bug's got the golden wing,  
The Lightning-bug the flame;  
The Bedbug's got no wing at all,  
But he gets there just the same.

The Pumpkin-bug's got a pumpkin  
smell,  
The Squash-bug smells the worst;  
But the perfume of that old Bedbug,  
It's enough to make you burst.

When that Bedbug come down to my  
house,  
I takes my walking cane.  
Go get a pot and scald him hot!  
Good-bye, Miss Liza Jane!

## Precious Things

(Traditional)

Hold my rooster, hold my hen,  
Pray don't touch my Grecian Bend.

Hold my bonnet, hold my shawl,  
Pray don't touch my waterfall.

Hold my hands by the finger tips  
But pray don't touch my sweet little  
lips.

## I'm A Round-Town Gent

(Traditional)

I ain't no wagon, ain't no dray,  
Just come to town with a load of  
hay.  
I ain't no cornfield to go to bed  
With a lot of hayseeds in my head.  
I'm a round-town gent, and I don't  
choose  
To work in the mud and do without  
shoes.

## Signs

(Beatrice M. Murphy)

I'm sure that Spring is on the way,  
My Ma gave me a sign.  
She swept the heavy rugs today  
And hung them on the line.

## No Images

(Waring Cuney)

She does not know  
Her beauty,  
She thinks her brown body  
Has no glory.

If she could dance  
Under palm trees  
And see her image in the river  
She would know.

But there are no palm trees  
On the street,  
And dish water gives back no  
images.

**Florida Road Workers**  
(Langston Hughes)

I'm makin' a road  
For the cars to fly by on,  
Makin' a road  
Through the palmetto thicket  
For light and civilization  
To travel on.  
I'm makin' a road  
For the rich old white man  
To sweep over in their big cars  
And leave me standin' here.

Sure,  
A road helps everybody!  
Rich folks ride—  
And I get to see 'em ride.  
I ain't never seen nobody  
Ride so fine before.

Hey, buddy!  
Look at me!  
I'm makin' a road!

**Troubled Jesus**  
(Waring Cuney)

Ma Jesus  
Was a troubled man,  
Wid lots o' sorrow  
In His breast.  
Oh, He was weary  
When they laid Him  
In the tomb to rest.  
Po', good Jesus.

**Ma Lord**  
(Langston Hughes)

Ma Lord ain't no stuck-up man.  
Ma Lord, he ain't proud.  
When he goes a-walkin'  
He gives me his hand.  
"You ma friend," he 'lowed.

Ma Lord knowed what it was to  
work.  
He knowed how to pray.  
Ma Lord's life was trouble, too,  
Trouble every day.

Ma Lord ain't no stuck-up man.  
He's a friend o' mine.  
When He went to Heaben,  
His soul on fire,  
He tole me I was gwine.  
He said, "Sho you'll come wid Me  
An' be ma friend through eternity."

**For My Grandmother**  
(Countee Cullen)

This lovely flower fell to seed;  
Work gently sun and rain;  
She held it as her dying creed  
That she would live again.

**Miracles**  
(Arna Bontemps)

Doubt no longer miracles,  
This spring day makes it plain  
A man may crumble into dust  
And straightway live again.

A jug of water in the sun  
Will easy turn to wine  
If love is stopping at the well  
And love's brown arms entwine.

And you who think him only man,  
I tell you faithfully  
That I have seen Christ clothed in  
rain  
Walking on the sea.

**Spring in New Hampshire**  
(Claude McKay)

Too green the springing April grass,  
Too blue the silver-speckled sky,  
For me to linger here, alas,  
While happy winds go laughing by,  
Wasting the golden hours indoors,  
Washing windows and scrubbing  
floors.

Too wonderful the April night,  
Too faintly sweet the first May  
flowers,  
The stars too gloriously bright,  
For me to spend the evening hours,  
When fields are fresh and streams  
are leaping,  
Wearied, exhausted, dully sleeping.

**Home Thoughts**  
(Claude McKay)

Oh something just now must be  
happening there!  
That suddenly and quiveringly here,  
Amid the city's noises, I must think  
Of mangoes leaning o'er the river's  
brink  
And dexterous Davie climbing high  
above,  
The gold fruits ebon-speckled to  
remove,  
And toss them quickly in the tangled  
mass  
Of wis-wis twisted round the guinea  
grass;  
And Cyril coming through the  
bramble-track  
A prize branch of bananas on his  
back;  
and Georgie—none could ever dive  
like him—  
Throwing his scanty clothes off for a  
swim;  
And schoolboys, from Bridge-tunnel  
going home,  
Watching the waters downward  
dash and foam.  
This is no daytime dream, there's  
something in it,  
Oh something's happening there this  
very minute!

**Brown Boy and Girl Under the  
Mistletoe**  
(Countee Cullen)

I did not know she'd take it so,  
Or else I'd never dared;  
Although the bliss was worth the  
blow,  
I did not know she'd take it so.  
She stood beneath the mistletoe  
So long I thought she cared;  
I did not know she'd take it so,  
Or else I'd never dared.

**Heart of the Woods**  
(Wesley Curtright)

Deep in to the woods we'll go,  
Hand in hand.  
Let the woods close about us,  
Let the world outside be lost—  
And let us find that Secret City  
Lost so long ago—  
In the Heart of the Woods.

**To James**  
(Frank Horne)

Do you remember  
How you won  
That race?  
How you flung your body  
At the start . . .  
How your spikes  
Ripped the cinders  
In the stretch . . .  
How you catapulted  
Through the tape . . .  
Do you remember?  
Don't you think  
I lurched with you  
Out of those starting holes?  
Don't you think  
My sinews tightened  
At those first  
Few strides . . .  
And when you flew into the stretch  
Was not all my thrill  
Of a thousand races  
In your blood?  
At your final drive  
Through the finish line  
Did not my shout  
Tell of the  
Triumphant ecstasy  
Of victory?  
Live  
As I have taught you  
To run, Boy—  
It's a short dash  
Dig your starting holes  
Deep and firm  
Lurch out of them  
Into the straightaway  
With all the power  
That is in you  
Look straight ahead  
To the finish line  
Think only of the goal  
Run straight  
Run high  
Run hard

Save nothing  
And finish  
With an ecstatic burst  
That carries you  
Hurling  
Through the tape  
To victory . . .

**Dark Girl**  
(Arna Bontemps)

Easy on your drums,  
Easy wind and rain,  
And softer on your horns,  
She will not dance again.

Come easy little leaves  
Without a ghost of sound  
From the China trees  
To the fallow ground.

Easy, easy drums  
And sweet leaves overhead,  
Easy wind and rain;  
Your dancing girl is dead.

**In Time Of Silver Rain**  
(Langston Hughes)

In time of silver rain  
The earth  
Puts forth new life again,  
Green grasses grow  
And flowers lift their heads,  
And over all the plain  
The wonder spreads  
Of life, of life, of life!

In time of silver rain  
The butterflies lift silken wings  
To catch a rainbow cry,  
And trees put forth  
New leaves to sing  
In joy beneath the sky  
As down the roadway passing boys  
And girls go singing, too,

In time of silver rain  
When spring  
And life are new.

**Red**  
(Countee Cullen)

She went to buy a brand new hat,  
And she was ugly, black, and fat:  
"This red becomes you well," they  
said,  
And perched it high upon her head.  
And then they laughed behind her  
back  
To see it glow against the black.  
She paid for it with a regal mien,  
and walked out proud as any queen.



**New Orleans: The Zulu King**  
(Josephine Copeland)

The Zulu King arrived at the new  
Basin  
Canal in his royal barge,  
Profusely decorated with palms and  
Surrounded by his brave warriors;  
A robust crew, with skin as glossy as  
Black satin.  
They were robbed in tawny tiger  
skins  
Armed with fantastic shields  
And pointed menacing spears.  
The barbaric floats passed in  
review,  
A majestic parade.  
Cheers rose from thousands of loyal  
Subjects on Rampart Street.  
On one float stood a huge ebony  
kettle  
Containing a naked pot-bellied babe  
Simmering over a mock bush fire.  
Tom-toms beat a steady monotonous  
tune.  
They stirred long buried savage  
impulses.  
The blood quickened in my pagan  
heart;  
Africa called to her own again.

**The Tropics in New York**  
(Claude McKay)

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-  
root,  
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,  
And tangerines and mangoes and  
grape fruit,  
Fit for the highest prize at parish  
fairs,  
Set in the window, bringing  
memories  
Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing  
rills,  
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue  
skies  
In benediction over nun-like hills.  
My eyes grew dim, and I could no  
more gaze;  
A wave of longing through my body  
swept,  
And, hungry for the old, familiar  
ways,  
I turned aside and bowed my head  
and wept.

**Trip: San Francisco**  
(Langston Hughes)

I went to San Francisco.  
I saw the bridges high  
Spun across the water  
Like cobwebs in the sky.

**City: San Francisco**  
(Langston Hughes)

In the morning the city  
Spreads its wings  
Making a song  
In stone that sings.

In the evening the city  
Goes to bed  
Hanging lights  
About its head.

**Rulers: Philadelphia**  
(Fenton Johnson)

It is said that many a king in  
troubled Europe would sell his  
crown for a day of happiness.  
I have seen a monarch who held  
tightly the jewel of happiness.  
On Lombard Street in Philadelphia,  
as evening dropped  
to earth, I gazed upon a laborer  
duskier than a sky devoid of  
moon. He was seated on a throne  
of flour bags, waving his hand  
imperiously as two small boys  
played on their guitars the  
ragtime tunes of the day.  
God's blessing on the monarch who  
rules on Lombard Street in  
Philadelphia.

**The City Called Heaven**  
(Langston Hughes)

Heaven is  
The place where  
Happiness is  
Everywhere.

Animals  
And birds sing—  
As does  
Everything.

To each stone,  
"How-do-you-do?"  
Stone answers back,  
"Well! And you?"

**The Spanish Needle**  
(Claude McKay)

Lovely dainty Spanish needle  
With your yellow flower and white,  
Dew bedecked and softly sleeping,  
Do you think of me tonight?

Shadowed by the spreading mango,  
Nodding o'er the rippling stream,  
Tell me, dear plant of my childhood,  
Do you of the exile dream?

Do you see me by the brook's side  
Catching crayfish 'neath the stone,  
As you did the day you whispered:  
Leave the harmless dears alone?

Do you see me in the meadow  
Coming from the woodland spring  
With a bamboo on my shoulder  
And a pail slung from a string?

Do you see me all expectant  
Lying in an orange grove,  
While the swee-sweets sing above  
me,  
Waiting for my elf-eyed love?

Lovely dainty Spanish needle  
Source to me of sweet delight  
In your far off sunny southland  
Do you dream of me tonight?

**The Snail**  
(Langston Hughes)

Little snail,  
Dreaming you go.  
Weather and rose  
Is all you know.

Weather and rose  
Is all you see,  
Drinking the dewdrop's  
Mystery.

**The Unknown Color**  
(Countee Cullen)

I've often heard my mother say,  
When great winds blew across the  
day,  
And, cuddled close and out of sight,  
The young pigs squealed with  
sudden fright  
Like something speared or javelined,  
"Poor little pigs, they see the wind."

**North and South**  
(Claude McKay)

O sweet are tropic lands for waking  
dreams!  
There time and life move lazily  
along.  
There by the banks of blue-and-  
silver streams;  
Grass-sheltered crickets chirp  
incessant song,  
Gay-colored lizards loll all through  
the day,  
Their tongues outstretched for  
careless little flies,  
And swarthy children in the fields at  
play,  
Look upward laughing at the smiling  
skies.  
A breath of idleness is in the air  
That casts a subtle spell upon all  
things,  
And love and mating-time are  
everywhere,  
And wonder to life's commonplaces  
clings.  
The fluttering humming-bird darts  
through the trees  
And dips his long beak in the big  
bell-flowers,

The leisured buzzard floats upon the  
breeze,  
Riding a crescent cloud for endless  
hours,  
The sea beats softly on the emerald  
strands —  
O sweet for quiet dreams are tropic  
lands!

**Sister Lou**  
(Sterling Brown)

Honey  
When de man  
Calls out de las' train  
You're gona ride,  
Tell him howdy.

Gather up yo' basket  
An' yo' knittin' an' yo' things,  
An' go on up an' visit  
Wid frien' Jesus fo' a spell.

Show Marfa  
How to make yo' greengrape jellies,  
An' give po' Lazarus  
A passell of them Golden Biscuits.

Scald some meal  
Fo' some rightdown good  
spoonbread  
Fo' li'l box-plunkin' David.

An' sit around'  
An' tell them Hebrew Chillen  
All yo' stories . . .

Honey Don't be feared of them  
pearly gates,  
Don't go 'round to de back,  
No mo' dataway  
Not evah no mo'.

Let Michael tote yo' burden  
An' yo' pocketbook an' evathing  
'Cept yo' Bible,  
While Gabriel blows somp'n  
Solemn but loudsome  
On dat horn of his'n.

Honey  
Go straight on to de Big House,  
An' speak to yo' God  
Widout no fear an' tremblin'.

Then sit down  
An' pass de time of day awhile.

Give a good talkin' to  
To yo' favorite 'postle Peter,  
An' rub the po' head  
Of mixed-up Judas,  
An' joke awhile wid Jonah.

Then, when you gits de chance,  
Always rememberin' yo' raisin',  
Let 'em know youse tired  
Jest a mite tired.

Jesus will find yo' bed for you  
Won't no servant evah bother wid  
yo' room.  
Jesus will lead you

To a room wid windows  
Openin' on cherry trees an' plum  
trees  
Bloomin' everlastin'.

An' dat will be yours  
Fo' keeps.

Den take yo' time . . .  
Honey, take yo' blessed time.

**Aunt Jane Allen**  
(Fenton Johnson)

State Street is lonely today. Aunt  
Jane Allen has driven her chariot  
to Heaven.

I remember how she hobbled along,  
a little woman, parched of skin,  
brown as the leather of a satchel  
and with eyes that had scanned  
eighty years of life.

Have those who bore her dust to the  
last resting place buried with her  
the basket of aprons she went up  
and down State Street trying to  
sell?

Have those who bore her dust to the  
last resting place buried with her  
the gentle word Son that she gave  
to each of the seed of Ethiopia?

**The Banjo Player**  
(Fenton Johnson)

There is music in me,  
The music of a peasant people.  
I wander through the levee, picking  
my banjo  
And singing my songs of the cabin  
and the field.

At the Last Chance Saloon I am as  
welcome as the Violets in March;  
There is always food and drink for  
me there,

And the dimes of those who love  
honest music.

Behind the railroad tracks the little  
children Clap their hands and love  
me as they love Kris Kringle.  
But I fear that I am a failure.

Last night a woman called me a  
troubadour.

What is a troubadour?

**Alabama Earth (At Booker  
Washington's Grave)**  
(Langston Hughes)

Deep in Alabama earth  
His buried body lies —  
But higher than the singing pines  
And taller than the skies  
And out of Alabama earth  
To all the world there goes  
The truth a simple heart has held  
And the strength a strong hand  
knows,  
While over Alabama earth

These words are gently spoken:  
Serve — and hate will die unborn.  
Love — and chains are broken.

**For a Lady I Know**  
(Countee Cullen)

She even thinks that up in heaven  
Her class lies late and snores,  
While poor black cherubs rise at  
seven  
To do celestial chores.

**After Winter**  
(Sterling Brown)

He snuggles his fingers  
In the blacker loam  
The lean months are done with.  
The fat to come.

His eyes are set  
On a brushwood-fire  
But his heart is soaring  
Higher and higher.

Though he stands ragged  
An old scarecrow.  
This is the way  
His swift thoughts go.

"Butter beans fo' Clara  
Sugar corn fo' Grace  
An' fo' de little feller  
Runnin' space.

"Radishes and lettuces  
Eggplants and beets  
Turnips fo' de winter  
An' candied sweets.

"Homespun tobacco  
Apples in de bin  
Fo' smokin' an' fo' cider  
When de folks draps in."

He thinks with the winter  
His troubles are gone;  
Ten acres unplanted  
To raise dreams on.

The lean months are done with,  
The fat to come,  
His hopes, winter wanderers,  
Hasten home.

"Butterbeans fo' Clara  
Sugar corn fo' Grace  
An' fo' de little feller  
Runnin' space . . ."

**Winter Sweetness**  
(Langston Hughes)

This little house is sugar.  
Its roof with snow is piled,  
And from its tiny window  
Peeps a maple-sugar child.

**My Little Dreams**  
(Georgia Douglas Johnson)

I'm folding up my little dreams  
Within my heart tonight,  
And praying I may soon forget  
The torture of their sight.  
For Time's deft fingers scroll my  
brow  
With fell relentless art—  
I'm folding up my little dreams  
Tonight, within my heart!

**For A Poet**  
(Countee Cullen)

I have wrapped my dreams in a  
silken cloth,  
And laid them away in a box of gold;  
Where long will cling the lips of the  
moth,

I have wrapped my dreams in a  
silken cloth;  
I hide no hate; I am not even wroth  
Who found earth's breath so keen  
and cold;

I have wrapped my dreams in a  
silken cloth,  
And laid them away in a box of gold.

**Dreams**  
(Langston Hughes)

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

Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

**The Day Breakers**  
(Arna Bontemps)

We are not come to wage a strife  
with swords upon this hill,  
It is not wise to waste a life against  
a stubborn will.  
Yet would we die as some have done  
Beating a way for a rising sun?

**Smithsonian Folkways  
Recordings**

Folkways Records was one of the  
largest independent record  
companies of the mid-twentieth  
century. Founded by Moses Asch  
in 1947 and run as an  
independent company until its  
sale in 1987, Folkways was  
dedicated to making the world of  
sound available to the public.  
Nearly 2,200 titles were issued,  
including a great variety of  
American folk and traditional  
music, children's songs, world  
music, literature, poetry, stories,  
documentaries, language  
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