The Dream Keeper
& other poems of Langston Hughes

read by the author
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All the progress that human beings have made on this old earth of ours grew out of dreams. That is why it is wise, I should think, to:

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.

Once one of my dreams was to cross the Atlantic and see the world on the other side. So, as a young man, I went down to the waterfront in New York and I began to try to get work as a seaman on the boats. The streets facing the piers were wide, busy, old dirty streets. Although it was spring, there were no trees or flowers—only warehouses and dock fronts and cobble stones and trucks. It was then that I wrote this poem called, "Water Front Streets":

The spring is not so beautiful there—
But dreams ships sail away
To where the spring is

wondrous rare
And life is gay.

The spring is not so beautiful there—
But ships put out to sea
Who carry beauties in their hearts
And dreams, like me.

Certainly one of my dreams then was to work my way across the ocean. That dream came true. I found a job on a freighter going to Africa. It took almost three weeks to cross the Atlantic from New York to Dakar in Senegal. One of my first poems about the ocean was this one called, "Long Trip":

The sea is a wilderness of waves
A desert of water.
We dip and dive,
Rise and roll,
Hide and are hidden
On the sea.
Day, night,
Night, day,
The sea is a desert of waves,
A wilderness of water.

Later I made a trip as a seaman to Europe. As we neared the English Channel one day:

Off the coast of Ireland
As our ship passed by
We saw a line of fishing ships
Ehped against the sky.

Off the coast of England
As we rode the sea
We saw an Indian merchantman
Coming home.

From foreign ports sailors often bring home souvenirs. From Africa I brought back a monkey. Some of the sailors brought back parrots, or slippers made of leopard’s skin, or little statuettes of wood or wood. Some sailors collect souvenirs on their own bodies in the form of tattoos—drawings made directly
on their skins by tattooing artists in different ports. I knew such a sailor:

He sat upon the rolling deck
Half a world away from home,
And smoked a cigarette
And watched the blue waves tipped with foam.
He had a mermaid on his arm,
An anchor on his breast,
And tattooed on his back he had
A blue bird in a nest.

Because I had always wanted to see Paris, I went to Paris. I got there with seven dollars. Although I couldn't speak French very well at first, nevertheless, I found a job—and stayed for almost a year in France, working in Montmartre, a section where many artists and writers lived. But there were many poor people in Paris, too, who were not artists or writers. Sometimes at night I would see them rummaging through the garbage cans in the streets looking for something to eat. It was then, during that year in Paris, that I wrote this poem, "Pension Baggar Wema:"

Once you were young,
Now, hunching in the cold,
Nobody cares that you are old.
Once you were beautiful,
Now, in the street,
Your lips were sweet.
Oh, withered old woman Of rue Fontaine,
Nobody but death Will kiss you again.

In Mombasa once I wrote a poem about another old woman, an Indian peasant woman from the hills. I lived in Talam where there was a big market. And this old woman had some shoots on her back that she spread out on the earth in the market place to sell. So I wrote:

This ancient bag
Who sits upon the ground
Selling her scanty wares
Day in, day out,
Has known high wind-swept mountains,
And the sun
Has made her skin so brown.

The ship on which I sailed to Africa steamed up the Congo River and up the Niger River, and sometimes we dropped anchor at remote little villages like Buruta. Often in the night I could hear, away off in the forest somewhere, a long way from the river, drums playing for a tribal dance. It was then that I wrote this poem:

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
Low...low,
Slow...slow—
Stirs your blood:
Dance!
A night-napped girl
Whirls softly
Into a circle of light.
Whirls softly...slowly,
Like a wisp of smoke around a fire—
And the tom-toms beat,
And the tom-toms beat,
And the slow beating of the tom-toms
Stirs your blood.

It was in Africa, too, that I wrote one day this poem called, "Dream Variation:"

To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me —
That is my dream:

To fling my arms wide
In the face of the sun,
Daniel! Whirl! Whirl!
Till the quick day is done.

Rest at tale evening...
A tall, slim tree...
Night coming tenderly
Dark like me.

Many of my poems have been about the
history of the Negro people. In this
poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," I
try to link, in terms of the rivers
we have known, Africa — the land of
our ancestors — and America, our
land today:

I have known rivers:
I have 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.

When Abraham Lincoln went down to New
Orleans, he saw men and women sold in the
slave markets there, and he never forgot
it. In 1863 it was Lincoln who signed
the Emancipation Proclamation setting the
Negro slaves free. This is a poem called,
"Lincoln Monument: Washington":

Let's so see old Abe
Sitting in the marble and
the moonlight,
Quiet for ten thousand centuries

now, old Abe.
Quiet for a million, million
years.
Quiet —
And yet a voice forever
Against the
Timeless walls
Of time —
Old Abe.

And this is a poem about an old woman
who remembered slavery, "Aunt Sue's
Stories":

Aunt Sue's stories.
And the dark-faced child,
Listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories
are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue
Never got her stories out of any
book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.
And the dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's Stories.

This next poem, "As I Grew Older," might be
about one of Aunt Sue's own children, growing
up in the world:

It was a long time ago.
I have almost forgotten
my dream.
But it was there then,
In front of me,
Bright like a sun—
My dream.
And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.
Rose slowly, slowly,
Sliding,
Hiding
The light of my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky—
The wall.
Shadow.
I am black.

I lie down in the shadow.
No longer the light of my dream before me,
Above me,
Only the thick wall,
Only the shadow.

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help me to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun,
Into a thousand whirling dreams
Of sun!

And grew 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 we are
And be ashamed—
I, too, as America.

END OF STAND I
The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.
The rain makes running pools in the gutter.
The rain plays a little sleep-song on our roof at night—
And I love the rain.

During my high school days, the two poets I liked best and who influenced my way of writing, were the modern free verse poet, Carl Sandburg, and the great Negro poet of a former generation, Paul Laurence Dunbar. The first poem of mine to receive an award was "The Weary Blues" which the First Prize in a literary contest conducted by Opportunity magazine in New York City. It is a poem about a working man in Harlem coming home very late at night, very tired, and sitting down at a battered old piano, playing the blues:

Drifting a droopy syncopated tune,
Screaming out a dolorous tune,

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 of those Weary Blues.
With his shaggy hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano mean with melody.

O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad ragged tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep, sad 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 me self, It's gwine to quit my frowin' And put me troubles on de shelf."
Thump, thump, thump, went his feet on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang

When Susanna Jones wears red her face is like an ancient cameo,
Turned brown by the ages.

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!

Another very early poem of mine is "April Rain Song."

Let the rain kiss you.
Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.
some more—
"I got de Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got de Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish I had died,
And far into the night he groaned
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 man
that's dead.

Since that time I have written many poems
in the style of the Blues. Real Blues are
Negro folk songs with a strict poetic pattern:
one long line repeated, and a third line to
rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the
second line in repetition is slightly changed
and sometimes, but seldom, the second line
is omitted. The Blues are almost always
very sad songs about being friendless, or
hunger, or disappointed in love, or a long
way from home. Yet there is always
in the Blues a strong sense of determination,
love of life, and a feeling of humor that
make people laugh. One of my Blues is about
a boy who lived on one side of the river and
his sweetheart lived on the other, so this
is what he says:

My baby lives across de river
An' I ain't got no boat.
She lives across de river.
I ain't got no boat.
I ain't a good swimmer
An' I don't know how to float.

Wide, wide river
Twist me love an' me.
Wide, wide river
Twist me love an' me.
I never knew how
Wide a river can be.

I got to cross that river
An' git to me baby somehow.
Cross that river,
Git to me baby somehow—

One of the most famous of American popular
songs is "The St. Louis Blues" which begins,
"I hate to see de evenin' sun go down."
Here is a little Blues of mine that I call,
"Nights and Morn's:

Sun's a settin',
This is what I'm gonna sing.
Sun's a settin',
This is what I'm gonna sing:
I feel the blues a-comin',
Wonder what the blues'll bring?

Sun's a-risin',
This is gonna be my song.
Sun's a-risin',
This is gonna be my song;
I could be blue—
But I been blue all night long.

In the style of the Spirituals—those
beautiful old religious songs of the Negro
people—I have written many poems, too.
One of mine that Marian Anderson has used
on her concert programs is so short it
might almost be called the breath of a
Spiritual:
At de feet o' Jesus,
Sorrow like a sea.
Lords, let yo' mercy
Come driftin' down on me.

At de feet o' Jesus,
At yo' feet I stand.
O, my precious Jesus,
Please reach out yo' hand.

Another poem of mine in the same mood,
although not in the style of a Spiritual,
is this one called, "Prayer":

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which cross to bear?
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lords God,
I do not know.

And here is a very short little poem
called, "Prayer Meeting":

Glory! Hallelujah!
De dawn's a-comin'!
Glory! Hallelujah!
De dawn's a-comin'!

A black old woman croons
In the smoo-corner of the
Ebenezer Baptist Church.

A poor old woman croons ——
De dawn's a-comin'!

In our church when I was a child, there was
an old woman, like the one in this poem, who
was very poor. But she was always neat and
clean, although her clothes were most quaint
and old-fashioned. She wore a satin skirt-
waist with a high collar, and her wide skirts
and many petticoats swept the floor as she
came marching down the aisle on Sunday morn-
ing toward the smoo corner. Sometimes some
of the young people might be inclined to
giggle a little bit at this funny old lady.
One Sunday morning she heard the bell and
stopped in the aisle of the church, and
turned around and said, "That's all right.
You-all can laugh if you want to. You can
be stuck-up if you want to — but my Lord
aint stuck up." With that she went on to
her seat. Years later I remembered

what this old lady had said. It came out
like this in a poem I called, "Ha Lord:";

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 my friend," He 'lowed.

Ma Lord knew what it was to work.
He knew 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 of mine.
When He went to heaven,
His soul on fire
He told me I was gone.
He said, "Sho you'll come wid Me
An' be my friend through eternity."

Well, that's a poem about that old woman
who had faith. I like to write poems about
people. This is one about a mother calling
her baby:

Albert!
Hey, Albert!
Don't you play in dat road.

You see dem trucks
A-goin' by,
One run ovah you
An' you die.

Albert, don't you play in dat road.

And here is a poem picturing an old woman
talking to her son who is discouraged.
She says:

Well, son, I'll tell you.
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had licks in it, and slinisters,
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 find it kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I've still gain', honey,
I'm still albions!
And life for me ain't been no
crystal stair.

What she's really telling her son is:

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

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frosted with snow.

And that is just what the poems are about
in my book, "The Dream Keeper." It's
final poem is this one, called "Tooth."
It's dedicated to all the girls and boys,
young men and young women today:

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like flame.

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

And dawn-to-day
Brook up across above
The road we came.

We march,
Americans together!

We march!

END
Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. He attended public schools in Lawrence, Kansas, but had moved with his mother to Cleveland by the time he was ready for high school. At Central High he was class poet and editor of the yearbook. A year in Mexico with his father followed and one at Columbia University on his own before Hughes decided to chuck it all and go to sea. Voyages along the African coast and to the ports of Europe took the place of studies and textbooks for the next two years, and in these years, on these voyages, many of the poems by which he first became widely known were written.

He returned to college eventually, of course, graduating from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1929, and has pursued a literary career ever since. His first book of poems was THE WEARY BLUES, 1926. His first book of prose, NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER, a novel, appeared in 1930. Many others have followed in each field, but where Brown's creative impulses have expanded to include criticism and college teaching, Hughes' have tended to spill over into the entertainment field. He has written librettoes for such operas as TROUBLED ISLAND and lyrics for Broadway shows such as the musical version of STREET SCENE. Along the way he has had his share of literary approbation, however. Guggenheim and Rosenwald Fellowships, grants from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, honorary degrees. His songs are numerous.
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