AFRO AMERICAN POETRY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

COMPiled AND READ BY ARNA BONTEMPS

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

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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

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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, and he 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, Mami!"

"Will you tell me how?"
"Yes, Mami!"

"Oh, what did you give her?"
"Corn an' hay."

"Oh, what did you give her?"
"Corn an' hay."

"Did you milk her good?"
"Yes, Mami!"

"Did you do like you should?"
"Yes, Mami!"

"Oh, how did you milk her?"
"Swish! Swish! Swish!"

"Oh, how did you milk her?"
"Swish! Swish! Swish!"

"Did that cow die?"
"Yes, Mami!

"With a pain in her eye?"
"Yes, Mami!

"Oh, how did she die?"
"Uh! Uh! Uh!"

"Oh, how did she die?"
"Uh! Uh! Uh!"

"Did the buzzards come?"
"Yes, Mami!"

"For to pick her bone?"
"Yes, Mami!"

"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 Cuneey)

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 knew 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 tol' 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 straightforward 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.

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

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.

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.

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 hollow ground.

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

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 palm and
Surrounded by his brave warriors;
A robust crew, with skin as glossy as
Black satin.
They were robed in tawny tiger
skins
Armed with fantastic shields
And pointed menacing spears.
The barbaric floats passed in
review.
A majestical 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 nurie-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.

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 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 blow across the
day,
And, cuddled close and out of sight,
The young pigs squealed with
sudden fright.
Like something scared or javeled,
"Poor little pigs, they see the wind."

North and South
(Claude McKay)
0 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 leisureed buzzard floats upon the
breeze,
Riding a crescent cloud for endless
hours.
The sea beats softly on the emerald
strands —
0 sweet for quiet dreams are tropic
lands!

Sister Lou
(Sterling Brown)
Honey
When de man
Calls out de las' train
You're gonna 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' green grape jellies,
An' give po' Lazarus
A passel of them Golden Biscuits.

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

An' sit around
An' tell em Hebrew Chilen
All yo' stories . . .

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

Let Michael tote yo' burden
An' yo' pocketbook an' evahthing
'Cep't yo' Bible,
While Gabriel blows sopp'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 de 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 hobbit 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 leves, 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.

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.

Dreams
(Langston Hughes)

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

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largest independent record
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