

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.

Langston Hughes, 1920

The Lynching^o

His Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.

His father, by the cruelest way of pain,

Had bidden him to his bosom once again;

The awful sin remained still unforgiven.

All night a bright and solitary star

(Perchance the one that ever guided him,

Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)

Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun.
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue.
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

Claude McKay, 1920

Strange Fruit

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop

Abel Meeropol (Lewis Allan), 1937

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 a one bulb 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.

Langston Hughes, 1925

Too Blue

I got those sad old weary blues.
I don't know where to turn.
I don't know where to go.
Nobody cares about you
When you sink so low.

What shall I do?
What shall I say?
Shall I take a gun and
Put myself away?

I wonder if
One bullet would do?
Hard as my head is,
It would probably take two.

But I ain't got
Neither bullet nor gun –
And I'm too blue
To look for one.

Langston Hughes (1943)

The Trumpet Player

The Negro
With the trumpet at his lips
Has dark moons of weariness
Beneath his eyes
where the smoldering memory
of slave ships
Blazed to the crack of whips
about thighs

The negro
with the trumpet at his lips
has a head of vibrant hair

tamed down,
patent-leathered now
until it gleams
like jet-
were jet a crown

the music
from the trumpet at his lips
is honey
mixed with liquid fire
the rhythm
from the trumpet at his lips
is ecstasy
distilled from old desire—

Desire
that is longing for the moon
where the moonlight's but a spotlight
in his eyes,
desire
that is longing for the sea
where the sea's a bar-glass
sucker size

The Negro
with the trumpet at his lips
whose jacket
Has a fine one-button roll,
does not know
upon what riff the music slips

It's hypodermic needle
to his soul
but softly
as the tune comes from his throat
trouble
mellows to a golden note

Langston Hughes, 1947

For Sidney Bechet

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,

Building for some a legendary Quarter
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,
Everyone making love and going shares—

Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles
Others may license, grouping around their chairs
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced

Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,
While scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.

On me your voice falls as they say love should,
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City
Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural noise of good,
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.

Philip Larkin, 1954

The Accompanist

Don't play too much, don't play
too loud, don't play the melody.
You have to anticipate her
and to subdue yourself.
She used to give me her smoky
eye when I got boisterous,
so I learned to play on tip-

toe and to play the better half
of what I might. I don't like
to complain, though I notice
that I get around to it somehow.
We made a living and good music,
both, night after night, the blue
curlicues of smoke rubbing their
staling and wispy backs
against the ceilings, the flat
drinks and scarce taxis, the jazz life
we bitch about the way Army pals
complain about the food and then
re-up. Some people like to say
with smut in their voices how playing
the way we did at our best is partly
sexual. OK, I could tell them
a tale or two, and I've heard
the records Lester cut with Lady Day
and all that rap, and it's partly
sexual but it's mostly practice
and music. As for partly sexual,
I'll take wholly sexual any day,
but that's a duet and we're talking
accompaniment. Remember "Reckless
Blues"? Bessie Smith sings out "Daddy"
and Louis Armstrong plays back "Daddy"
as clear through his horn as if he'd
spoken it. But it's her daddy and her
story. When you play it you become
your part in it, one of her beautiful
troubles, and then, however much music
can do this, part of her consolation,
the way pain and joy eat off each other's
plates, but mostly you play to drunks,
to the night, to the way you judge
and pardon yourself, to all that goes
not unsung, but unrecorded.

William Matthews (1987)

Reckless Blues

When I wasn't nothing but a child
When I wasn't nothing but a child
All you men tried to drive me wild

Now I'm, now I'm growing old
Now, now I'm growing old
And I've got what it takes to get all of you men told

My mama says I'm reckless, my daddy says I'm wild
My mama says I'm reckless, my daddy says I'm wild
I ain't good looking but I'm somebody's angel child

Daddy, mama wants some loving
Daddy, mama need some hugging
Darn it pretty papa
Mama wants some lovin' I vow
Darn pretty papa
Mama wants some lovin' right now

Bessie Smith, 1925**Scrambled Eggs and Whiskey**

Scrambled eggs and whiskey
in the false-dawn light. Chicago,
a sweet town, bleak, God knows,
but sweet. Sometimes. And
weren't we fine tonight?
When Hank set up that limping
treble roll behind me
my horn just growled and I
thought my heart would burst.

And Brad M. pressing with the
soft stick and Joe-Anne
singing low. Here we are now
in the White Tower, leaning
on one another, too tired
to go home. But don't say a word,
don't tell a soul, they wouldn't
understand, they couldn't, never
in a million years, how fine,
how magnificent we were
in that old club tonight.

Hayden Carruth, 1995

Boxcar

for John and Miles, together

Black as snow & ice as cool/ Miles stood horn-handed while
John so&solloed/ I mean mad but mute like you be when you
got five minutes/ to be somewhere ten minutes away & a train
outta nowhere stops you/ boxcarboxcarboxcar & tracknoise/
that might out shout your radio if you had your windows
down/ boxcarboxcar & hotcars lined up around you/this is
how mad Miles was/ Impatient like his dentist daddy/ listenin
to a badmouth whine about some aching pain/ *See, Doc I was
tryin to blow down my old lady's door/* Theres Miles listenin/ to
Johns long song about sufferin & loss/ & hes heard it all before
in a club in the village/ He standin horn-handed but the
jazzfolk sit lovin it/ cause it all sounds new as sunday
shoes/ / Ticked Miles checks his watch/ tickles his trumpet/
& listens to a muscular music that wont stop/ & he loves it or
maybe he scared nobody will ever hear him again/ or maybe he
hungry & want to get/ home to silence/John got nowhere but
here/ got nothin but this/ cause his wifes asleep/ & she cant

give him this kind of love/ his lips swoll as carolina clay/
almost bleedin on the reed & its just what he wants/ Blood/ / &
when he finally hush/ dead years later/ his liver rotten as corn
& Naimas gone/ Miles aint even glad its over/ His ears full of
whats left him/ & he thinkin of black hands dancin like
crowswings/ & he thinkin of a lovesupreme a lovesupreme a
lovesupreme/ & this too is what Im thinkin/ as I drive to see my
diva/ with old jazz in my speakers & the only thing between us
these boxcars pullin & pullin & pullin past

Terrance Hayes, 1999

The poem was inspired by the story about John Coltrane's notoriously long solos in the years he played with the Miles Davis Quartet. When Miles reportedly asked him why he always played so long, John answered, "When I start, I don't know how to stop."

"Just take the damn horn out of your mouth," Miles told him.

Blue in Green

Blue in green: baywater seen through grasses
that quiver over it, stirring the air,
slanted against the water's one-em dashes.
Each blade is a brushstroke on thin rice paper,

unrehearsed, undrafted, no revision,
right on the first take. In "Blue in Green,"
on tenor sax, John Coltrane fills the blues
with mournful chords on scales older than Jubal's,

ending in air. He'd not played it before
that recording, with that piano and bass
rising alone and, birds in flight, together.

Right on the first take. Improvisation,

he called it, but it must have been foreseen,
like the painter's brushstroke. A wrong line
could blot the composition, snag the paper.
It had to be unstudied, like a tern's cry,

and natural, like a rope's clink on a mast
with wind as bass player, huge and invisible.
If only I could remember the past
without regret for the windrose petal's fall,

for words unspoken, and without remorse
for loves withheld. Rough-draft mistakes.
If only my heart could teach my hands
to play, and get it right on the first take.

Grace Schulman, 2007

Keep Ya Head Up

Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice
I say the darker the flesh then the deeper the roots
I give a holler to my sisters on welfare
Tupac cares, if don't nobody else care
And uhh, I know they like to beat ya down a lot
When you come around the block brothas clown a lot
But please don't cry, dry your eyes, never let up
Forgive but don't forget, girl keep your head up
And when he tells you you ain't nuttin don't believe him
And if he can't learn to love you you should leave him
Cause sista you don't need him
And I ain't tryin to cash up, I just call em how I see em
You know it makes me unhappy (what's that)

When brothas make babies, and leave a young mother to be unhappy
And since we all came from a woman
Got our name from a woman and our game from a woman
I wonder why we take from our women
Why we rape our women, do we hate our women?
I think it's time to kill for our women
Time to heal our women, be real to our women
And if we don't we'll have a race of babies
That will hate the ladies, that make the babies
And since a man can't make one
He has no right to tell a woman when and where to create one
So will the real men get up
I know you're fed up ladies, but keep your head up

Tupac Shakur, 1993

Pirate Jenny's Song

You people can watch while I'm scrubbing these floors
And I'm scrubbin' the floors while you're gawking
Maybe once ya tip me and it makes ya feel swell
In this crummy Southern town
In this crummy old hotel
But you'll never guess to who you're talkin'.
No. You couldn't ever guess to who you're talkin'.

Then one night there's a scream in the night
And you'll wonder who could that have been
And you see me kinda grinnin' while I'm scrubbin'
And you say, "What's she got to grin?"
I'll tell you.

There's a ship
The Black Freighter
With a skull on its masthead
Will be coming in

You gentlemen can say, "Hey gal, finish them floors!
Get upstairs! What's wrong with you! Earn your keep here!
You toss me your tips
And look out to the ships
But I'm counting your heads
As I'm making the beds
Cuz there's nobody gonna sleep here, honey
Nobody
Nobody!

Then one night there's a scream in the night
And you say, "Who's that kicking up a row?"
And ya see me kinda starin' out the winda
And you say, "What's she got to stare at now?"
I'll tell ya.

There's a ship
The Black Freighter
Turns around in the harbor
Shootin' guns from her bow

Now
You gentlemen can wipe off that smile off your face
Cause every building in town is a flat one
This whole frickin' place will be down to the ground
Only this cheap hotel standing up safe and sound
And you yell, "Why do they spare that one?"
Yes.
That's what you say.
"Why do they spare that one?"

All the night through, through the noise and to-do
You wonder who is that person that lives up there?
And you see me stepping out in the morning
Looking nice with a ribbon in my hair

And the ship
The Black Freighter

Runs a flag up its masthead
And a cheer rings the air

By noontime the dock
Is a-swarmin' with men
Comin' out from the ghostly freighter
They move in the shadows
Where no one can see
And they're chainin' up people
And they're bringin' em to me
Askin' me,
"Kill them NOW, or LATER?"
Askin' ME!
"Kill them now, or later?"

Noon by the clock
And so still by the dock
You can hear a foghorn miles away
And in that quiet of death
I'll say, "Right now.
Right now!"

Then they'll pile up the bodies
And I'll say,
"That'll learn ya!"

And the ship
The Black Freighter
Disappears out to sea
And
On
It
Is
Me

Bertolt Brecht, 1928

translated by **Nina Simone, 1965**