

Harlem: A Poem
By Walter Dean Myers

They took the road in Waycross, Georgia
Skipped over the tracks in East St. Louis
Took the bus from Holly Springs
Hitched a ride from Gee's Bend
Took the long way through Memphis
The third deck down from Trinidad
A wrench of heart from Goree Island
A wrench of heart from Goree Island
To a place called
Harlem

Harlem was a promise
Of a better life,
of a place where a man
Didn't have to know his place
Simply because
He was Black

They brought a call
A song
First heard in the villages of
Ghana/Mali/Senegal
Calls and songs and shouts
Heavy hearted tambourine rhythms
Loosed in the hard city
Like a scream torn from the throat
Of an ancient clarinet

A new sound, raucous and sassy
Cascading over the asphalt village
Breaking against the black sky over
1-2-5 Street
Announcing Hallelujah
Riffing past resolution

Yellow, tan, brown, black, red
Green, gray, bright
Colors loud enough to be heard
Light on asphalt streets
Sun yellow shirts on burnt umber
Bodies
Demanding to be heard
Seen
Sending out warriors

From streets known to be
Mourning still as a lone radio tells us how
Jack Johnson

The poem begins with a description of the journey African Americans took to Harlem.

Listen for the ways people traveled.

What does this stanza mean?

The poem connects African Americans living in Harlem with their African heritage.

Listen for words about sounds and music.

Here, the loud colors that can be seen around Harlem are described.

Name the three African American athletes whose success keeps hope alive.

Joe Louis

Sugar Ray

Is doing with our hopes.

We hope

We pray

Our black skins

Reflecting the face of God

In storefront temples

Jive and Jehovah artists

Lay out the human canvas

The mood indigo

A chorus of summer herbs

Of mangoes and bar-b-que

Of perfumed sisters

Hip strutting past

Fried fish joints

On Lenox Avenue in steamy August

A carnival of children

People in the daytime streets

Ring-a-levio warriors

Stickball heroes

Hide-and-seek knights and ladies

Waiting to sing their own sweet songs

Living out their own slam-dunk dreams

Listening

For the coming of the blues

A weary blues that Langston knew

And Countee sung

A river of blues

Where Du Bois waded

And Baldwin preached

There is lilt

Tempo

Cadence

A language of darkness

Darkness known

Darkness sharpened at Mintons

Darkness lightened at the Cotton Club

Sent flying from Abyssinian Baptist

To the Apollo.

The uptown A

Rattles past 110th Street

Unreal to real

Relaxing the soul

This part of the poem reflects African Americans' faith.

Listen for descriptions of the hot Harlem summer, food, and people. What summer memories does it stir in you?

Listen for description of the children who live in Harlem. What kinds of games do they play? What are their dreams? What do they listen for?

References to Langston Hughes (poem: Weary Blues) and Countee Cullen (both poets wrote of rivers). Artists, poets, musicians, philosophers lived and worked in Harlem

Blues music reflected the sadness, hard times, and suffering of African Americans endured. The language of the darkness is lifted at many entertainment venues and churches.

The main transportation into and out of Harlem was the subway.

Shango and Jesus
Asante and Mende
One people
A hundred different people
Huddled masses
And crowded dreams

Squares
Blocks, bricks
Fat, round woman in a rectangle
Sunday night gospel
“Precious Lord...take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand...”

Caught by a full lipped
Full hipped Saint
Washing collard greens
In a cracked porcelain sink
Backing up Lady Day on the radio

Brother so black and blue
Patting a wide foot outside the
Too hot Walk-up
“Boy,
You ought to find the guys who told you
you could play some checkers
'cause he done lied to you!”

Cracked reed and soprano sax laughter
Floats over
a fleet of funeral cars

In Harlem
Sparrows sit on fire escapes
Outside rent parties
To learn the tunes.

In Harlem
The wind doesn't blow past Smalls
It stops to listen to the sounds

Serious business
A poem, rhapsody tripping along
Striver's Row
Not getting it's metric feel soiled
On the well-swept walks
Hustling through the hard rain at two o'clock
In the morning to its next gig.

This refers to various groups from Africa who now live together in Harlem.

Describes the shapes of things and the sounds, such as gospel musica that could be heard throughout Harlem.

A woman washes vegetables in the sink as she sings to the music on the radio.

*What is this dialogue referring to?
What's it like to be a kid in Harlem?*

Anaphora- In Harlem

Remember what rent parties are?

Why is a poem “serious business”?

A huddle of horns
And a tinkle of glass
A note
Handed down from Marcus to Malcolm
To a brother
Too bad and too cool to give his name.

Sometimes despair
Makes the stoops shudder
Sometimes there are endless depths of pain
Singing a capella on street corners

And sometimes not.

Sometimes it is the artist
looking into the mirror
Painting a portrait of his own heart.

Place
Sound
Celebration
Memories of feelings
Of place

A journey on the A train
That started on the banks of the Niger
And has not ended

Harlem.

*A note. Written? Musical?
The note passes from generation to
generation...*

Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X

*Artists (literary, musical, visual) lift the
sadness and despair with their art.*

*The poems ends as it began: with a
description of a journey that reaches
all the way back to Africa.*

Walter Dean Myers



“In truth, everything in my life in 1951 that was personal and had value was white,” Walter Dean Myers later wrote in his memoir “Bad Boy.” It wasn’t until he reached adulthood and read “Sonny’s Blues,” by James Baldwin, a fellow Harlemiter, that he felt he had permission to offer the world a narrative with blackness at its core. By then, after a stint in the Army, he was writing seriously. In 1968, his picture-book manuscript for “Where Does the Day Go” won a contest for black writers by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. It was published the following year. Eventually he would write more than a hundred books for young people: lyrical picture books and gritty novels, poetry and short stories, history, biography, memoir, books that earned him nearly every major award children’s publishing had to offer.

Heritage by Countee Cullen

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who all day long
Want no sound except the song
Sung by wild barbaric birds
Goading massive jungle herds,
Juggernauts of flesh that pass
Trampling tall defiant grass
Where young forest lovers lie,
Plighting troth beneath the sky.
So I lie, who always hear,
Though I cram against my ear
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,
Great drums throbbing through the air.
So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood dammed within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
Channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret.

Africa? A book one thumbs
Listlessly, till slumber comes.
Unremembered are her bats
Circling through the night, her cats
Crouching in the river reeds,
Stalking gentle flesh that feeds
By the river brink; no more
Does the bugle-throated roar
Cry that monarch claws have leapt
From the scabbards where they slept.
Silver snakes that once a year
Doff the lovely coats you wear,

Seek no covert in your fear
Lest a mortal eye should see;
What's your nakedness to me?
Here no leprous flowers rear
Fierce corollas in the air;
Here no bodies sleek and wet,
Dripping mingled rain and sweat,
Tread the savage measures of
Jungle boys and girls in love.
What is last year's snow to me,
Last year's anything? The tree
Budding yearly must forget
How its past arose or set
Bough and blossom, flower, fruit,
Even what shy bird with mute
Wonder at her travail there,
Meekly labored in its hair.
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

So I lie, who find no peace
Night or day, no slight release
From the unremittent beat
Made by cruel padded feet
Walking through my body's street.
Up and down they go, and back,
Treading out a jungle track.
So I lie, who never quite
Safely sleep from rain at night--
I can never rest at all
When the rain begins to fall;
Like a soul gone mad with pain
I must match its weird refrain;
Ever must I twist and squirm,
Writhing like a baited worm,
While its primal measures drip
Through my body, crying, "Strip!
Doff this new exuberance.
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!"
In an old remembered way
Rain works on me night and day.

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods
Black men fashion out of rods,
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,
In a likeness like their own,
My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of humility;
Heathen gods are naught to me.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast;
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Ever at Thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow sick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black,
Thinking then it would not lack
Precedent of pain to guide it,
Let who would or might deride it;
Surely then this flesh would know
Yours had borne a kindred woe.
Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,
Daring even to give You
Dark despairing features where,
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,
Patience wavers just so much as
Mortal grief compels, while touches
Quick and hot, of anger, rise
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.
Lord, forgive me if my need
Sometimes shapes a human creed.

All day long and all night through,
One thing only must I do:
Quench my pride and cool my blood,
Lest I perish in the flood.
Lest a hidden ember set
Timber that I thought was wet
Burning like the dryest flax,
Melting like the merest wax,
Lest the grave restore its dead.
Not yet has my heart or head
In the least way realized

They and I are civilized.

Countee Cullen

Countee Cullen is one of the most representative voices of the Harlem Renaissance. His life story is essentially a tale of youthful exuberance and talent of a star that flashed across the African American firmament and then sank toward the horizon. When his paternal grandmother and guardian died in 1918, the 15-year-old Countee LeRoy Porter was taken into the home of the Reverend Frederick A. Cullen, the pastor of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, Harlem's largest congregation. There the young Countee entered the approximate center of black politics and culture in the United States and acquired both the name and awareness of the influential clergyman who was later elected president of the Harlem chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Probably more than any other writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Cullen carried out the intentions of black American intellectual leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson. These men had nothing but the highest praise for Cullen, for he was brilliantly practicing what they advocated.

In Cullen's wish not to be "a negro poet," Johnson insisted, the writer was "not only within his right: he is right." As these authorities attest, to read Countee Cullen's work is to hear a voice as representative of the Harlem Renaissance as it is possible to find.

