

JAZZONIA¹

Oh, silver tree!
 Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret
 Six long-headed jazzers play.
 A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
 Lifts high a dress of silken gold. 5

Oh, singing tree!
 Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve's eyes
 In the first garden 10
 Just a bit too bold?²
 Was Cleopatra gorgeous
 In a gown of gold?³

Oh, shining tree!
 Oh, silver rivers of the soul! 15

In a whirling cabaret
 Six long-headed jazzers play.

[1923, 1994]

1. Jazzonia: The Greek suffix *onia* suggests the land or country of jazz, located here in a nightclub in Harlem.

2. Eve's eyes . . . bold?: According to the Old Testament account, after Eve is tempted by the serpent and she and Adam eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (Genesis 3:7).

3. Cleopatra . . . gold?: The seductive queen Cleopatra of Egypt (69-30 BCE) was often associated with extravagance and sensuality, most famously in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*.

LANGSTON HUGHES (1902-1967)

I, Too

I, too, sing America.¹

I am the darker brother.
 They send me to eat in the kitchen
 When company comes,
 But I laugh,
 And eat well, 5
 And grow strong.

1. *I, too, sing America*: An allusion to "I Hear America Singing" by the white poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892), whom Hughes admired and who is often described as the "poet of America."

Tomorrow,
 I'll be at the table²
 When company comes. 10
 Nobody'll dare
 Say to me,
 "Eat in the kitchen,"
 Then.
 Besides, 15
 They'll see how beautiful I am
 And be ashamed –
 I, too, am America.

[1925, 1994]

2. I'll be at the table: In early versions of this poem, including its first publication in the *Survey Graphic* (March 1, 1925), this line read: "I'll sit at the table."

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 an old gas light 5
 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. 10
 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. 15
 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. 20
 I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
 And put ma troubles on the shelf."

HARLEM

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run? 5
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load. 10

Or does it *explode*? [1951, 1994]

Countee Cullen

[1903-1946]

Countee Cullen was born on March 30, 1903, to Elizabeth Thomas Lucas in Louisville, Kentucky. The identity of his father and most other details of his early life are unknown. He was raised by a woman named Amanda Porter, possibly his paternal grandmother, who took him to New York City. When she died in 1917, Cullen went to live with Reverend Frederick Asbury Cullen, the popular minister of the largest church in Harlem, the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, and his wife, Carolyn Belle Mitchell Cullen. Although the couple never formally adopted him, Cullen began to use their surname in 1918 and always referred to them as his parents. An outstanding student at DeWitt Clinton High School, Cullen helped edit the school newspaper and literary magazine. He also began to write poetry, winning a citywide contest for his poem "I Have a Rendezvous with Life." After high school, he attended New York University, where he excelled academically and regularly published poems in the school's literary magazine, the *Arch*, and later in prominent national magazines such as H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, the *Bookman*, the *Century*, *Harper's*, and the *Nation*. He also won a string of literary prizes, including the John Reed Memorial Prize awarded by *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

The precocious Cullen soon became the most popular and acclaimed African American poet since Paul Laurence Dunbar. During his senior year of college, the prestigious firm of Harper and Brothers published Cullen's first collection of poems, *Color* (1925). Some of the poems in the volume also appeared in Alain Locke's influential anthology, *The New Negro* (1925). Locke joined in the chorus of praise for the author of *Color*,



Countee Cullen

Inscribed "with admiration" to James Weldon Johnson, this photograph was taken in the mid-1920s, when the young Cullen was one of the most popular poets in the United States.