

CLAUDE MCKAY

Six Poems from *Harlem Shadows*

---

AMERICA

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate.  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,  
I stand within her walls with not a shred  
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.  
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
And see her might and granite wonders there,  
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

HOME THOUGHTS

Oh something just now must be happening there!  
That suddenly and quiveringly here,  
Amid the city's noises, I must think  
Of mangoes leaning o'er the river's brink,  
And dexterous Davie climbing high above,  
The gold fruits ebon-speckled to remove,  
And toss them quickly in the tangled mass  
Of wis-wis twisted round the guinea grass ;  
And Cyril coming through the bramble-track  
A prize bunch of bananas on his back;  
And Georgie—none could ever dive like him—  
Throwing his scanty clothes off for a swim;  
And schoolboys, from Bridge-tunnel going home,  
Watching the waters downward dash and foam.  
This is no daytime dream, there's something in it,  
Oh something's happening there this very minute!

#### AFTER THE WINTER

Some day, when trees have shed their leaves  
And against the morning's white  
The shivering birds beneath the eaves  
Have sheltered for the night,  
We'll turn our faces southward, love,  
Toward the summer isle  
Where bamboos spire to shafted grove  
And wide-mouthed orchids smile.

And we will seek the quiet hill  
Where towers the cotton tree,  
And leaps the laughing crystal rill,  
And works the droning bee.  
And we will build a cottage there  
Beside an open glade,  
With black-ribbed blue-bells blowing near,  
And ferns that never fade.

#### HARLEM SHADOWS

I hear the halting footsteps of a lass  
In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall  
Its veil. I see the shapes of girls who pass  
To bend and barter at desire's call.  
Ah, little dark girls who in slippered feet  
Go prowling through the night from street to street!

Through the long night until the silver break  
Of day the little gray feet know no rest;  
Through the lone night until the last snow-flake  
Has dropped from heaven upon the earth's white breast,  
The dusky, half-clad girls of tired feet  
Are trudging, thinly shod, from street to street.

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way  
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,  
Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,  
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!  
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet  
In Harlem wandering from street to street.

#### ENSLAVED

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,  
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,  
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place  
In the great life line of the Christian West;  
And in the Black Land disinherited,  
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,  
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,  
For this my race that has no home on earth.  
Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry  
To the avenging angel to consume  
The white man's world of wonders utterly:  
Let it be swallowed up in earth's vast womb,  
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke  
To liberate my people from its yoke!

#### OUTCAST

For the dim regions whence my fathers came  
My spirit, bondaged by the body, longs.  
Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame;  
My soul would sing forgotten jungle songs.  
I would go back to darkness and to peace,  
But the great western world holds me in fee,  
And I may never hope for full release  
While to its alien gods I bend my knee.  
Something in me is lost, forever lost,  
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart,  
And I must walk the way of life a ghost  
Among the sons of earth, a thing apart;  
For I was born, far from my native clime,  
Under the white man's menace, out of time.

has received fellowships from the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the NEA and co-directs the Africana Studies Program at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York. His forthcoming book is *In Time*.

**Claude McKay** (1889–1948) was born in Sunny Ville, Clarendon Parish, Jamaica. He moved to Harlem, New York, after publishing his first books of poetry, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*. His next books were *Spring in New Hampshire* and *Harlem Shadows*. He also wrote three novels: *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, and *Banana Bottom*. His other works include *Gingertown*, a collection of twelve short stories; *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, a collection of essays; and *A Long Way from Home*, an autobiography.

**Ming Di** is a Chinese poet, translator, and editor based in the U.S. She has published six books of poetry in Chinese, plus a collaborative translation, *River Merchant's Wife*. With Neil Aitken, she cotranslated Zang Di's *The Book of Cranes*, and with Jennifer Stern, Liu Xia's *Empty Chairs: Selected Poems*, a finalist for the 2016 Best Translated Book Award. She edited and cotranslated *New Cathay: Contemporary Chinese Poetry* and *New Poetry from China 1917–2017*. A recipient of Henry Luce Foundation fellowships, she is a cofounder of *Poetry East West* journal and the China editor for *Poetry International Rotterdam*.

**Mihaela Moscaliuc** was born and raised in Romania. Her collections of poetry include *Immigrant Model* and *Father Dirt*. Her books as a translator include *Clay and Star* by Liliana Ursu and *The Hiss of the Viper* by Carmelia Leonte. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Le Chateau de Lavigny (Switzerland), and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts; she also received a Fulbright fellowship to Romania.

**Masud Mufti** is a Pakistani writer living in Islamabad and the author of thirteen books. While working in East Pakistan in the 1970s, he was deeply affected by the suffering caused by the war. His 1972 novel, *Chehray* (Faces), is about the last days of undivided Pakistan. He received the Pride of Performance award from the Government of Pakistan for his contributions to literature.

**Ramsey Nasr** was born in Rotterdam and lives in Amsterdam. He is half Palestinian and half Dutch. His books of poetry include *Onhandig bloesemend*, winner of the Hugues C. Pernath Prize. His poetry collection in English translation is *Heavenly Life*. He was appointed poet of the city of Antwerp in 2005 and elected Dutch poet laureate in 2009.

**Víctor Rodríguez Núñez** was born in Havana, Cuba. Many of his eighteen books of poetry have received awards, including the David Prize (Cuba), Plural Prize (Mexico), EDUCA Prize (Costa Rica), and, in Spain, the Renacimiento Prize, Fray Luis de León Prize, Leonor Prize, and Rincón de la Victoria Prize. His poetry collection in English is *The Infinite's Ash*, translated by Katherine M. Hedeem.

**Manjula Padmanabhan** is a Delhi-based writer and artist. Her comic strips appeared weekly in Bombay's *Sunday Observer* (1982–1986) and daily in New Delhi's *Pioneer* (1991–1997). Her books include *Kleptomania*, *Getting There*, *This is Suki!*

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.