Langston Hughes

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| **Let America be America again**  Let America be America again.  Let it be the dream it used to be.  Let it be the pioneer on the plain  Seeking a home where he himself is free.  (America never was America to me.)  Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--  Let it be that great strong land of love  Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  That any man be crushed by one above.  (It never was America to me.)  O, let my land be a land where Liberty  Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  But opportunity is real, and life is free,  Equality is in the air we breathe.  (There's never been equality for me,  Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")  *Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*  *And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*  I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  I am the red man driven from the land,  I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--  And finding only the same old stupid plan  Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.  I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  Tangled in that ancient endless chain  Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  Of work the men! Of take the pay!  Of owning everything for one's own greed!  I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  I am the worker sold to the machine.  I am the Negro, servant to you all.  I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--  Hungry yet today despite the dream.  Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!  I am the man who never got ahead,  The poorest worker bartered through the years.  Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  That even yet its mighty daring sings  In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  That's made America the land it has become.  O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  In search of what I meant to be my home--  For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  To build a "homeland of the free."  The free?  Who said the free? Not me?  Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  The millions shot down when we strike?  The millions who have nothing for our pay?  For all the dreams we've dreamed  And all the songs we've sung  And all the hopes we've held  And all the flags we've hung,  The millions who have nothing for our pay--  Except the dream that's almost dead today.  O, let America be America again--  The land that never has been yet--  And yet must be--the land where *every* man is free.  The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--  Who made America,  Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  Must bring back our mighty dream again.  Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--  The steel of freedom does not stain.  From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  We must take back our land again,  America!  O, yes,  I say it plain,  America never was America to me,  And yet I swear this oath--  America will be!  Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  We, the people, must redeem  The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  The mountains and the endless plain--  All, all the stretch of these great green states--  And make America again! |  |

**“Dream Deferred”**

What happens to a dream deferred?

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

Maybe it just sags   
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

**“I Too Sing America”**

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

**“Dreams”**

Hold fast to dreams

For if dreams die

Life is a broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a barren field

Frozen with snow.

**“Mother to Son”**

Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor --  
Bare.  
But all the time  
I'se been a-climbin' on,  
And reachin' landin's,  
And turnin' corners,  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.  
So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now --  
For I'se still goin', honey,  
I'se still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

**“Thank You, Ma’am”**

Thank You, M'am

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o’clock at night, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy’s weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance so, intsead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up. the large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here." She still held him. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain’t you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes’m."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn’t aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes’m," said the boy.

"Then I won’t turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"I’m very sorry, lady, I’m sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! And your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain’t you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No’m," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No’m," said the being dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No’m."

"But you put yourself in contact with me," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy’s face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half-nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose--at last. Roger looked at the door—looked at the woman—looked at the door—and went to the sink.

Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here’s a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe, you ain’t been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There’s nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we’ll eat," said the woman, "I believe you’re hungry—or been hungry—to try to snatch my pocketbook."

"I wanted a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn’t have to snatch my pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"M’am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, run, run!

The woman was sitting on the day-bed. After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy’s mouth opened. Then he frowned, but not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say but, didn’t you? You thought I was going to say, but I didn’t snatch people’s pocketbooks. Well, I wasn’t going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if he didn’t already know. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an icebox. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse which she left behind her on the day-bed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room where he thought she could easily see him out of the corner other eye, if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman not to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don’t believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty-shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, red-heads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating she got up and said, "Now, here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto my pocketbook nor nobody else’s—because shoes come be devilish like that will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But I wish you would behave yourself, son, from here on in."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Goodnight!" Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street.

The boy wanted to say something else other that "Thank you, m’am" to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but he couldn’t do so as he turned at the barren stoop and looked back at the large woman in the door. He barely managed to say "Thank you" before she shut the door. And he never saw her again.