



Paul Laurence Dunbar

Paul Laurence Dunbar was an African-American poet, novelist, and playwright of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Much of his popular work in his lifetime used a Negro dialect, which helped him become one of the first nationally-accepted African-American writers. Much of his writing, however, does not use dialect; these more traditional poems have become of greater interest to scholars. [1896]

Selections from

The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar by Paul Laurence Dunbar

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 *Ere Sleep Comes Down to Soothe the Weary Eyes*

ERE sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
Which all the day with ceaseless care have sought
The magic gold which from the seeker flies;
Ere dreams put on the gown and cap of thought,
And make the waking world a world of lies,-
Of lies most palpable, uncouth, forlorn,
That say life's full of aches and tears and sighs,-
Oh, how with more than dreams the soul is torn,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
How all the griefs and heartaches we have known
Come up like pois'nous vapors that arise
From some base witch's caldron, when the crone,
To work some potent spell, her magic plies.
The past which held its share of bitter pain,
Whose ghost we prayed that Time might exorcise,
Comes up, is lived and suffered o'er again,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
What phantoms fill the dimly lighted room;
What ghostly shades in awe-creating guise
Are bodied forth within the teeming gloom.
What echoes faint of sad and soul-sick cries,
And pangs of vague inexplicable pain
That pay the spirit's ceaseless enterprise,
Come thronging through the chambers of the brain
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
Where ranges forth the spirit far and free?
Through what strange realms and unfamiliar skies.
Tends her far course to lands of mystery?
To lands unspeakable-beyond surmise,
Where shapes unknowable to being spring,
Till, faint of wing, the Fancy fails and dies
Much wearied with the spirit's journeying,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
How questioneth the soul that other soul,-

The inner sense which neither cheats nor lies,
But self exposes unto self, a scroll
Full writ with all life's acts unwise or wise,
In characters indelible and known;
So, trembling with the shock of sad surprise,
The soul doth view its awful self alone,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.
When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes,
The last dear sleep whose soft embrace is balm,
And whom sad sorrow teaches us to prize
For kissing all our passions into calm,
Ah, then, no more we heed the sad world's cries,
Or seek to probe th' eternal mystery,
Or fret our souls at long-withheld replies,
At glooms through which our visions cannot see,
When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Poet and His Song

A SONG is but a little thing,
And yet what joy it is to sing!
In hours of toil it gives me zest,
And when at eve I long for rest;
When cows come home along the bars,
And in the fold I hear the bell,
As Night, the shepherd, herds his stars,
I sing my song, and all is well.
There are no ears to hear my lays,
No lips to lift a word of praise;
But still, with faith unfaltering,
I live and laugh and love and sing.
What matters yon unheeding throng?
They cannot feel my spirit's spell,
Since life is sweet and love is long,
I sing my song, and all is well.
My days are never days of ease;
I till my ground and prune my trees.
When ripened gold is all the plain,
I put my sickle to the grain.
I labor hard, and toil and sweat,
While others dream within the dell;
But even while my brow is wet,
I sing my song, and all is well.
Sometimes the sun, unkindly hot,
My garden makes a desert spot;
Sometimes a blight upon the tree
Takes all my fruit away from me;
And then with throes of bitter pain
Rebellion passions rise and swell;

But - life is more than fruit or grain,
And so I sing, and all is well.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Retort

THOU art a fool," said my head to my heart,
"Indeed, the greatest of fools thou art,
To be led astray by trick of a tress,
By a smiling face or a ribbon smart;"
And my heart was in sore distress.
Then Phyllis came by, and her face was fair,
The light gleamed soft on her raven hair;
And her lips were blooming a rosy red.
Then my heart spoke out with a right bold air:
"Thou art worse than a fool, O head!"
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Accountability

FOLKS ain't got no right to censuah othah folks about dey habits;
Him dat giv' de squir'ls de bushtails made de bobtails fu' de rabbits.
Him dat built de gread big mountains hollered out de little valleys,
Him dat made de streets an' driveways wasn't shamed to make de alleys.
We is all constructed diff'ent, d'ain't no two of us de same;
We cain't he'p ouah likes an' dislikes, ef we'se bad we ain't to blame.
Ef we'se good, we need n't show off, case you bet it ain't ouah doin'
We gits into su'ttain channels dat we jes' cain't he'p pu'suin'.
But we all fits into places dat no othah ones could fill,
An' we does the things we has to, big er little, good er ill.
John cain't tek de place o' Henry, Su an' Sally ain't alike;
Bass ain't nuthin' like a suckah, chub ain't nuthin' like a pike.
When you come to think about it, how it's all planned out it's splendid.
Nuthin's done er evah happens, 'dout hit's somefin' dat's intended;
Don't keer whut you does, you has to, an' hit sholy beats de dickens,-
Viney, go put on de kittle, I got one o' mastah's chickens.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Frederick Douglass

A HUSH is over all the teeming lists,

And there is pause, a breathspace in the strife;
A spirit brave has passed beyond the mists
And vapors that obscure the sun of life.
And Ethiopia, with bosom torn,
Laments the passing of her noblest born.
She weeps for him a mother's burning tears-
She loved him with a mother's deepest love.
He was her champion thro' direful years,
And held her weal all other ends above.
When Bondage held her bleeding in the dust,
He raised her up and whispered, "Hope and Trust."
For her his voice, a fearless clarion, rung
That broke in warning on the ears of men;
For her the strong bow of his power he strung,
And sent his arrows to the very den
Where grim Oppression held his bloody place
And gloated o'er the mis'ries of a race.
And he was no soft-tongued apologist;
He spoke straightforward, fearlessly uncowed;
The sunlight of his truth dispelled the mist,
And set in bold relief each dark hued cloud;
To sin and crime he gave their proper hue,
And hurled at evil what was evil's due.
Through good and ill report he cleaved his way
Right onward, with his face set toward the heights,
Nor feared to face the foeman's dread array,-
The lash of scorn, the sting of petty spites.
He dared the lightning in the lightning's track,
And answered thunder with his thunder back.
When men maligned him, and their torrent wrath
In furious imprecations o'er him broke,
He kept his counsel as he kept his path;
'T was for his race, not for himself he spoke.
He knew the import of his Master's call,
And felt himself too mighty to be small.
No miser in the good he held was he,-
His kindness followed his horizon's rim.
His heart, his talents, and his hands were free
To all who truly needed aught of him.
Where poverty and ignorance were rife,
He gave his bounty as he gave his life.
The place and cause that first aroused his might
Still proved its power until his latest day.
In Freedom's lists and for the aid of Right
Still in the foremost rank he waged the fray;
Wrong lived; his occupation was not gone.
He died in action with his armor on!
We weep for him, but we have touched his hand,
And felt the magic of his presence nigh,
The current that he sent throughout the land,
The kindling spirit of his battlecry.
O'er all that holds us we shall triumph yet,
And place our banner where his hopes were set!

Oh, Douglass, thou hast passed beyond the shore,
But still thy voice is ringing o'er the gale!
Thou'st taught the race how high her hopes may soar,
And bade her seek the heights, nor faint, nor fail.
She will not fail, she heeds thy stirring cry,
She knows thy guardian spirit will be nigh,
And, rising from beneath the chast'ning rod,
She stretches out her bleeding hands to God!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *Life*

A CRUST of bread and a corner to sleep in,
A minute to smile and an hour to weep in,
A pint of joy to a peck of trouble,
And never a laugh but the moans come double;
And that is life!

A crust and a corner that love makes precious,
With a smile to warm and the tears to refresh us;
And joy seems sweeter when cares come after,
And a moan is the finest of foils for laughter;
And that is life!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *The Lesson*

MY cot was down by a cypress grove,
And I sat by my window the whole night long,
And heard well up from the deep dark wood
A mocking-bird's passionate song.
And I thought of myself so sad and lone,
And my life's cold winter that knew no spring;
Of my mind so weary and sick and wild,
Of my heart too sad to sing.
But e'en as I listened the mock-bird's song,
A thought stole into my saddened heart,
And I said, "I can cheer some other soul
By a carol's simple art."
For oft from the darkness of hearts and lives
Come songs that brim with joy and light,
As out of the gloom of the cypress grove
The mocking-bird sings at night.
So I sang a lay for a brother's ear
In a strain to soothe his bleeding heart,
And he smiled at the sound of my voice and lyre,
Though mine was a feeble art.
But at his smile I smiled in turn,
And into my soul there came a ray:

In trying to soothe another's woes
Mine own had passed away.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *The Rising of the Storm*

THE lake's dark breast
Is all unrest,
It heaves with a sob and a sigh.
Like a tremulous bird,
From its slumber stirred,
The moon is a-tilt in the sky.
From the silent deep
The waters sweep,
But faint on the cold white stones,
And the wavelets fly
With a plaintive cry
O'er the old earth's bare, bleak bones.
And the spray upsprings
On its ghost-white wings,
And tosses a kiss at the stars;
While a water-sprite,
In sea-pearls dight,
Hums a sea-hymn's solemn bars.
Far out in the night,
On the wavering sight
I see a dark hull loom;
And its light on high,
Like a Cyclops' eye,
Shines out through the mist and gloom.
Now the winds well up
From the earth's deep cup,
And fall on the sea and shore,
And against the pier
The waters rear
And break with a sullen roar.
Up comes the gale,
And the mist-wrought veil
Gives way to the lightning's glare,
And the cloud drifts fall,
A sombre pall,
O'er water, earth, and air.
The storm-king flies,
His whip he plies,
And bellows down the wind.
The lightning rash
With blinding flash
Comes pricking on behind.

Rise, waters, rise,
And taunt the skies
With your swift-flitting form.
Sweep, wild winds, sweep,
And tear the deep
To atoms in the storm.
And the waters leapt,
And the wild winds swept,
And blew out the moon in the sky,
And I laughed with glee,
It was joy to me
As the storm went raging by!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *Sunset*

THE river sleeps beneath the sky,
And clasps the shadows to its breast;
The crescent moon shines dim on high;
And in the lately radiant west
 The gold is fading into gray.
 Now stills the lark his festive lay,
 And mourns with me the dying day.
While in the south the first faint star
Lifts to the night its silver face,
And twinkles to the moon afar
Across the heaven's graying space,
 Low murmurs reach me from the town,
 As Day puts on her sombre crown,
 And shakes her mantle darkly down.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *The Old Apple Tree*

THERE's a memory keeps a-runnin'
Through my weary head tonight,
An' I see a picture dancin'
In the fire-flames' ruddy light;
'Tis the picture of an orchard
Wrapped in autumn's purple haze,
With the tender light about it
That I loved in other days.
An' a-standin' in a corner
Once again I seem to see
The verdant leaves an' branches
Of an old apple-tree.
You perhaps would call it ugly,
An' I don't know but it's so,

When you look the tree all over
Unadorned by memory's glow;
For its boughs are gnarled an' crooked,
An' its leaves are gettin' thin,
An' the apples of its bearin'
Would n't fill so large a bin
As they used to. But I tell you,
When it comes to pleasin' me,
It's the dearest in the orchard,--
Is that that old apple-tree.
I would hide within its shelter,
Settlin' in some cosy nook,
Where no calls or threats could stir me
From the pages o' my book.
Oh, that quiet, sweet seclusion
In its fulness passeth words!
It was deeper than the deepest
That my sanctum now affords.
Why, the jaybirds an' the robins,
They was hand in glove with me,
As they winked at me an' warbled
In that old apple-tree.
It was on its sturdy branches
That in summers long ago
I would tie my swing an' dangle
In contentment to an' fro,
Idly dreamin' childish fancies,
Buildin' castles in the air,
Makin' o' myself a hero
Of romances rich an' rare.
I kin shet my eyes an' see it
Jest as plain as plain kin be,
That same old swing a-danglin'
To the old apple-tree.
There's a rustic seat beneath it
That I never kin forget.
It's the place where me an' Hallie--
Little sweetheart--used to set,
When we' wander to the orchard
So's no listenin' ones could hear
As I whispered sugared nonsense
Into her little willin' ear.
Now my gray old wife is Hallie,
An' I'm grayer still than she,
But I'll not forget our courtin'
'Neath the old apple-tree.
Life for us ain't all been summer,
But I guess we've had our share
Of its flittin' joys an' pleasures,
An' a sprinklin' of its care.
Oft the skies have smiled upon us;
Then again we've seen 'em frown,
Though our load was ne'er so heavy

That we longed to lay it down.
But when death does come a-callin',
This my last request shall be,--
That they'll bury me an' Hallie
'Neath the old apple tree.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

A Prayer

O LORD, the hard-won miles
Have worn my stumbling feet:
Oh, soothe me with thy smiles,
And make my life complete.
The thorns were thick and keen
Where'er I trembling trod;
The way was long between
My wounded feet and God.
Where healing waters flow
Do thou my footsteps lead.
My heart is aching so;
Thy gracious balm I need.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Passion and Love

A MAIDEN wept and, as a comforter,
Came one who cried, "I love thee," and he seized
Her in his arms and kissed her with hot breath,
That dried the tears upon her flaming cheeks.
While evermore his boldly blazing eye
Burned into hers; but she uncomforted
Shrank from his arms and only wept the more.
Then one came and gazed mutely in her face
With wide and wistful eye; but still aloof
He held himself; as with a reverent fear,
As one who knows some sacred presence nigh.
And as she wept he mingled tear with tear,
That cheered her soul like dew a dusty flower,--
Until she smiled, approached, and touched his hand.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Seedling

AS a quiet little seedling
Lay within its darksome bed,

To itself it fell a-talking,
And this is what it said:
"I am not so very robust,
But I'll do the best I can;"
And the seedling from that moment
Its work of life began.
So it pushed a little leaflet
Up into the light of day,
To examine the surroundings
And show the rest the way.
The leaflet liked the prospect,
So it called its brother, Stem;
Then two other leaflets heard it,
And quickly followed them.
To be sure, the haste and hurry
Made the seedling sweat and pant;
But almost before it knew it
It found itself a plant.
The sunshine poured upon it,
And the clouds they gave a shower;
And the little plant kept growing
Till it found itself a flower.
Little folks, be like the seedling,
Always do the best you can;
Every child must share life's labor
Just as well as every man.
And the sun and showers will help you
Through the lonesome, struggling hours,
Till you raise to light and beauty
Virtue's fair, unfading flowers.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *Promise*

I GREW a rose within a garden fair,
And, tending it with more than loving care,
I thought how, with the glory of its bloom,
I should the darkness of my life illumine;
And, watching, ever smiled to see the lusty bud
Drink freely in the summer sun to tinct its blood.
My rose began to open, and its hue
Was sweet to me as to its sun and dew;
I watched it taking on its ruddy flame
Until the day of perfect blooming came,
Then hasted I with smiles to find it blushing red--
Too late! Some thoughtless child had plucked my rose and fled!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Song

MY heart to thy heart,
My hand to thine;
My lip to thy lips,
Kisses are wine
Brewed for the lover in sunshine and shade;
Let me drink deep, then, my African maid.
Lily to lily,
Rose unto rose;
My love to thy love
Tenderly grows.
Rend not the oak and the ivy in twain,
Nor the swart maid from her swarthier swain.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Mystery

I WAS not; now I am-a few days hence,
I shall not be; I fain would look before
And after, but can neither do; some Pow'r
Or lack of pow'r says "no" to all I would.
I stand upon a wide and sunless plain,
Nor chart nor steel to guide my steps aright.
Whene'er, o'ercoming fear, I dare to move,
I grope without direction and by chance.
Some feign to hear a voice and feel a hand
That draws them ever upward thro' the gloom.
But I-I hear no voice and touch no hand,
Tho' oft thro' silence infinite, I list,
And strain my hearing to supernal sounds;
Tho' oft thro' fateful darkness do I reach,
And stretch my hand to find that other hand.
I question of th' eternal bending skies
That seem to neighbor with the novice earth;
But they roll on and daily shut their eyes
On me, as I one day shall do on them,
And tell me not the secret that I ask.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Not They Who Soar

NOT they who soar, but they who plod
Their rugged way, unhelped, to God
Are heroes; they who higher fare,
And, flying, fan the upper air,
Miss all the toil that hugs the sod.

'Tis they whose backs have felt the rod,
Whose feet have pressed the path unshod,
May smile upon defeated care,
Not they who soar.
High up there are no thorns to prod,
Nor boulders lurking 'neath the clod
To turn the keenness of the share,
For flight is ever free and rare;
But heroes they the soil who 've trod,
Not they who soar!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Longing

IF YOU could sit with me beside the sea to-day,
And whisper with me sweetest dreamings o'er and o'er;
I think I should not find the clouds so dim and gray,
And not so loud the waves complaining at the shore.
If you could sit with me upon the shore to-day,
And hold my hand in yours as in the days of old,
I think I should not mind the chill baptismal spray,
Nor find my hand and heart and all the world so cold.
If you could walk with me upon the strand to-day,
And tell me that my longing love had won your own,
I think all my sad thoughts would then be put away,
And I could give back laughter for the Ocean's moan!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Lawyers' Ways

D
I 've been list'nin' to them lawyers
In the court house up the street,
An' I 've come to the conclusion
That I'm most completely beat.
Fust one feller riz to argy,
An' he boldly waded in
As he dressed the tremblin' pris'ner
In a coat o' deep-dyed sin.
Why, he painted him all over
In a hue o' blackest crime,
An' he smeared his reputation
With the thickest kind o' grime,
Tell I found myself a-wond'rin',
In a misty way and dim,
How the Lord had come to fashion
Sich an awful man as him.
Then the other lawyer started,

An' with brimmin', tearful eyes,
Said his client was a martyr
That was brought to sacrifice.
An' he give to that same pris'ner
Every blessed human grace,
Tell I saw the light o' virtue
Fairly shinin' from his face.
Then I own 'at I was puzzled
How sich things could rightly be;
An' this aggervatin' question
Seems to keep a-puzzlin' me.
So, will some one please inform me,
An' this mystery unroll--
How an angel an' a devil
Can persess the self-same soul?
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ode for Memorial Day

DONE are the toils and the wearisome marches,
Done is the summons of bugle and drum.
Softly and sweetly the sky overarches,
Shelt'ring a land where Rebellion is dumb.
Dark were the days of the country's derangement,
Sad were the hours when the conflict was on,
But through the gloom of fraternal estrangement
God sent his light, and we welcome the dawn.
O'er the expanse of our mighty dominions,
Sweeping away to the uttermost parts,
Peace, the wide-flying, on untiring pinions,
Bringeth her message of joy to our hearts.
Ah, but this joy which our minds cannot measure,
What did it cost for our fathers to gain!
Bought at the price of the heart's dearest treasure,
Born out of travail and sorrow and pain;
Born in the battle where fleet Death was flying,
Slaying with sabre-stroke bloody and fell;
Born where the heroes and martyrs were dying,
Torn by the fury of bullet and shell.
Ah, but the day is past: silent the rattle,
And the confusion that followed the fight.
Peace to the heroes who died in the battle,
Martyrs to truth and the crowning of Right!
Out of the blood of a conflict fraternal,
Out of the dust and the dimness of death,
Burst into blossoms of glory eternal
Flowers that sweeten the world with their breath.
Flowers of charity, peace, and devotion
Bloom in the hearts that are empty of strife;
Love that is boundless and broad as the ocean
Leaps into beauty and fulness of life.

So, with the singing of paeans and chorals,
And with the flag flashing high in the sun,
Place on the graves of our heroes the laurels
Which their unfaltering valor has won!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *To Louise*

OO, THE poets may sing of their Lady Irene,
And may rave in their rhymes about wonderful queens;
But I throw my poetical wings to the breeze,
And soar in a song to my Lady Louise.
A sweet little maid, who is dearer, I ween,
Than any fair duchess, or even a queen.
When speaking of her I can't plod in my prose,
For she 's the wee lassie who gave me a rose.
Since poets, from seeing a lady's lip curled,
Have written fair verse that has sweetened the world;
Why, then, should not I give the space of an hour
To making a song in return for a flower?
I have found in my life—it has not been so long—
There are too few of flowers—too little of song.
So out of that blossom, this lay of mine grows,
For the dear little lady who gave me the rose.
I thank God for innocence, dearer than Art,
That lights on a by-way which leads to the heart,
And led by an impulse no less than divine,
Walks into the temple and sits at the shrine.
I would rather pluck daisies that grow in the wild,
Or take one simple rose from the hand of a child,
Then to breathe the rich fragrance of flowers that bide
In the gardens of luxury, passion, and pride.
I know not, my wee one, how came you to know
Which way to my heart was the right way to go;
Unless in your purity, soul-clean and clear,
God whispers his messages into your ear.
You have now had my song, let me end with a prayer
That your life may be always sweet, happy, and fair;
That your joys may be many, and absent your woes,
O dear little lady who gave me the rose!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *After a Visit*

I BE'N down in ole Kentucky
Fur a week er two, an' say,
'T wuz ez hard ez breakin' oxen
Fur to tear myse'f away.

Allus argerin' 'bout fren'ship
An' yer hospitality--
Y' ain't no right to talk about it
Tell you be'n down there to see.
See jest how they give you welcome
To the best that 's in the land,
Feel the sort o' grip they give you
When they take you by the hand.
Hear 'em say, "We 're glad to have you,
Better stay a week er two;"
An' the way they treat you makes you
Feel that ev'ry word is true.
Feed you tell you hear the buttons
Crackin' on yore Sunday vest;
Haul you roun' to see the wonders
Tell you have to cry for rest.
Drink yer health an' pet an' praise you
Tell you git to feel ez great
Ez the Sheriff o' the county
Er the Gov'ner o' the State.
Wife, she sez I must be crazy
'Cause I go on so, an' Nelse
He 'lows, "Goodness gracious! daddy,
Cain't you talk about nuthin' else?"
Well, pleg-gone it, I 'm jes' tickled,
Bein' tickled ain't no sin;
I be'n down in ole Kentucky,
An' I want o' go ag'in.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Curtain

VILLAIN
Villain shows his indiscretion,
Villain's partner makes confession.
Juvenile, with golden tresses,
Finds her pa and dons long dresses.
Scapegrace comes home money-laden,
Hero comforts tearful maiden,
Soubrette marries loyal chappie,
Villain skips, and all are happy.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Night of Love

THE moon has left the sky, love,
The stars are hiding now,
And frowning on the world, love,

Night bares her sable brow.
The snow is on the ground, love,
And cold and keen the air is.
I 'm singing here to you, love;
You 're dreaming there in Paris.
But this is Nature's law, love,
Though just it may not seem,
That men should wake to sing, love,
While maidens sleep and dream.
Them care may not molest, love,
Nor stir them from their slumbers,
Though midnight find the swain, love,
Still halting o'er his numbers.
I watch the rosy dawn, love,
Come stealing up the east,
While all things round rejoice, love,
That Night her reign has ceased.
The lark will soon be heard, love,
And on his way be winging;
When Nature's poets wake, love,
Why should a man be singing?
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Dilettante: A Modern Type

HE scribbles some in prose and verse,
And now and then he prints it;
He paints a little,--gathers some
Of Nature's gold and mints it.
He plays a little, sings a song,
Acts tragic roles or funny;
He does, because his love is strong,
But not, oh, not for money!
He studies almost everything
From social art to science;
A thirsty mind, a flowing spring,
Demand and swift compliance.
He looms above the sordid crowd,
At least through friendly lenses;
While his mama looks pleased and proud,
And kindly pays expenses.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Wooing

A YOUTH went faring up and down,
Alack and well-a-day.
He fared him to the market town,

Alack and well-a-day.
And there he met a maiden fair,
With hazel eyes and auburn hair;
His heart went from him then and there,
Alack and well-a-day.
She posies sold right merrily,
Alack and well-a-day;
But not a flower was fair as she,
Alack and well-a-day.
He bought a rose and sighed a sigh,
"Ah, dearest maiden, would that I
Might dare the seller too to buy!"
Alack and well-a-day.
She tossed her head, the coy coquette,
Alack and well-a-day.
"I'm not, sir, in the market yet,"
Alack and well-a-day.
"Your love must cool upon a shelf;
Tho' much I sell for gold and pelf,
I 'm yet too young to sell myself,"
Alack and well-a-day.
The youth was filled with sorrow sore,
Alack and well-a-day.
And looked he at the maid once more,
Alack and well-a-day.
Then loud he cried, "Fair maiden, if
Too young to sell, now as I live,
You're not too young yourself to give,"
Alack and well-a-day.
The little maid cast down her eyes,
Alack and well-a-day.
And many a flush began to rise,
Alack and well-a-day.
"Why, since you are so bold," she said,
"I doubt not you are highly bred,
So take me!" and the twain were wed,
Alack and well-a-day.

Paul Laurence Dunbar


 *Merry Autumn*

IT'S all a farce,--these tales they tell
About the breezes sighing,
And moans astir o'er field and dell,
Because the year is dying.
Such principles are most absurd,--
I care not who first taught 'em;
There's nothing known to beast or bird

To make a solemn autumn.
In solemn times, when grief holds sway
With countenance distressing,
You'll note the more of black and gray
Will then be used in dressing.
Now purple tints are all around;
The sky is blue and mellow;
And e'en the grasses turn the ground
From modest green to yellow.
The seed burrs all with laughter crack
On featherweed and jimson;
And leaves that should be dressed in black
Are all decked out in crimson.
A butterfly goes winging by;
A singing bird comes after;
And Nature, all from earth to sky,
Is bubbling o'er with laughter.
The ripples wimple on the rills,
Like sparkling little lasses;
The sunlight runs along the hills,
And laughs among the grasses.
The earth is just so full of fun
It really can't contain it;
And streams of mirth so freely run
The heavens seem to rain it.
Don't talk to me of solemn days
In autumn's time of splendor,
Because the sun shows fewer rays,
And these grow slant and slender.
Why, it's the climax of the year,--
The highest time of living!--
Till naturally its bursting cheer
Just melts into Thanksgiving.

Paul Laurence Dunbar



SEEN you down at chu'ch las' night,
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.
What I mean? oh, dat's all right,
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.
You was sma't ez sma't could be,
But you could n't hide from me.
Ain't I got two eyes to see?
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.

Guess you thought you's awful keen;
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.
Evahthing you done, I seen;
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.
Seen him tek you' arm jes' so,
When he got outside de do'--
Oh, I know dat man's yo' beau!
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.
Say, now, honey, wha'd he say?--
Nevah min', Miss Lucy!
Keep yo' secrets--dat's yo' way--
Nevah min', Miss Lucy.
Won't tell me an' I'm yo' pal--
I'm gwine tell his othah gal,--
Know huh, too, huh name is Sal;
Nevah min', Miss Lucy!
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Invitation to Love

COME when the nights are bright with stars
Or when the moon is mellow;
Come when the sun his golden bars
Drops on the hay-field yellow.
Come in the twilight soft and gray,
Come in the night or come in the day,
Come, O love, whene'er you may,
And you are welcome, welcome.
You are sweet, O Love, dear Love,
You are soft as the nesting dove.
Come to my heart and bring it rest
As the bird flies home to its welcome nest.
Come when my heart is full of grief
Or when my heart is merry;
Come with the falling of the leaf
Or with the redd'ning cherry.
Come when the year's first blossom blows,
Come when the summer gleams and glows,
Come with the winter's drifting snows,
And you are welcome, welcome.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

He Had His Dream

HE HAD his dream, and all through life,
Worked up to it through toil and strife.
Afloat fore'er before his eyes,
It colored for him all his skies:

The storm-cloud dark
Above his bark,
The calm and listless vault of blue
Took on its hopeful hue,
It tintured every passing beam --
He had his dream.
He labored hard and failed at last,
His sails too weak to bear the blast,
The raging tempests tore away
And sent his beating bark astray.
But what cared he
For wind or sea!
He said, "The tempest will be short,
My bark will come to port."
He saw through every cloud a gleam --
He had his dream.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

October

OCTOBER is the treasurer of the year,
And all the months pay bounty to her store:
The fields and orchards still their tribute bear,
And fill her brimming coffers more and more.
But she, with youthful lavishness,
Spends all her wealth in gaudy dress,
And decks herself in garments bold
Of scarlet, purple, red, and gold.
She heedeth not how swift the hours fly,
But smiles and sings her happy life along;
She only sees above a shining sky;
She only hears the breezes' voice in song.
Her garments trail the woodland through,
And gather pearls of early dew
That sparkle till the roguish Sun
Creeps up and steals them every one.
But what cares she that jewels should be lost,
When all of Nature's bounteous wealth is hers?
Though princely fortunes may have been their cost,
Not one regret her calm demeanor stirs.
Whole-hearted, happy, careless, free,
She lives her life out joyously,
Nor cares when Frost stalks o'er her way
And turns her auburn locks to gray.

Paul Laurence Dunbar

A Drowsy Day

THE air is dark, the sky is gray,
The misty shadows come and go,
And here within my dusky room
Each chair looks ghostly in the gloom.
Outside the rain falls cold and slow--
Half-stinging drops, half-blinding spray.
Each slightest sound is magnified,
For drowsy quiet holds her reign;
The burnt stick in the fireplace breaks,
The nodding cat with start awakes,
And then to sleep drops off again,
Unheeding Towser at her side.
I look far out across the lawn,
Where huddled stand the silly sheep;
My work lies idle at my hands,
My thoughts fly out like scattered strands
Of thread, and on the verge of sleep--
Still half awake--I dream and yawn.
What spirits rise before my eyes!
How various of kind and form!
Sweet memories of days long past,
The dreams of youth that could not last,
Each smiling calm, each raging storm,
That swept across my early skies.
Half seen, the bare, gaunt-fingered boughs
Before my window sweep and sway,
And chafe in tortures of unrest.
My chin sinks down upon my breast;
I cannot work on such a day,
But only sit and dream and drowse.
Paul Laurence Dunbar



 *Riding to Town*

WHEN labor is light and the morning is fair,
I find it a pleasure beyond all compare
To hitch up my nag and go hurrying down
And take Katie May for a ride into town;
For bumpety-bump goes the wagon,
 But tra-la-la-la our lay.
There's joy in a song as we rattle along
In the light of the glorious day.
A coach would be fine, but a spring wagon's good;
My jeans are a match for Kate's gingham and hood;
The hills take us up and the vales take us down,

But what matters that? we are riding to town,
And bumpety-bump goes the wagon,
 But tra-la-la-la sing we.
There's never a care may live in the air
That is filled with the breath of our glee.
And after we've started, there's naught can repress
The thrill of our hearts in their wild happiness;
The heavens may smile or the heavens may frown,
And it's all one to us when we're riding to town.
For bumpety-bump goes the wagon,
But tra-la-la-la we shout,
For our hearts they are clear and there 's nothing to fear,
And we've never a pain nor a doubt.
The wagon is weak and the roadway is rough,
And tho' it is long it is not long enough,
For mid all my ecstasies this is the crown
To sit beside Katie and ride into town,
When bumpety-bump goes the wagon,
But tra-la-la-la our song;
And if I had my way, I 'd be willing to pay
If the road could be made twice as long.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

We Wear the Mask

WE wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes-
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties,
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but oh great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile,
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Phyllis

PHYLLIS, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day,
Few are my years, but my griefs are not few,
Ever to youth should each day be a May-day,
Warm wind and rose-breath and diamonded dew--

Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day.
Oh for the sunlight that shines on a May-day!
Only the cloud hangeth over my life.
Love that should bring me youth's happiest heyday
Brings me but seasons of sorrow and strife;
Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day.
Sunshine or shadow, or gold day or gray day,
Life must be lived as our destinies rule;
Leisure or labor or work day or play day--
Feasts for the famous and fun for the fool;
Phyllis, ah, Phyllis, my life is a gray day.
Paul Laurence Dunbar



IF LIFE were but a dream, my Love,
And death the waking time;
If day had not a beam, my Love,
And night had not a rhyme,--
A barren, barren world were this
 Without one saving gleam;
 I 'd only ask that with a kiss
 You 'd wake me from the dream.
If dreaming were the sum of days,
And loving were the bane;
If battling for a wreath of bays
Could soothe a heart in pain,--
I 'd scorn the meed of battle's might,
 All other aims above
 I 'd choose the human's higher right,
 To suffer and to love!
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Sparrow

A LITTLE bird, with plumage brown,
Beside my window flutters down,
A moment chirps its little strain,
Ten taps upon my window-pane,
And chirps again, and hops along,
To call my notice to its song;
But I work on, nor heed its lay,
Till, in neglect, it flies away.
So birds of peace and hope and love
Come fluttering earthward from above,
To settle on life's window-sills,
And ease our load of earthly ills;

But we, in traffic's rush and din
Too deep engaged to let them in,
With deadened heart and sense plod on,
Nor know our loss till they are gone.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *When Malindy Sings*

G'WAY an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy --
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?
Ef you practise twell you're gray,
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'
Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to be big woods
When Malindy sings.
You ain't got de nachel o'gans
Fu' to make de soun' come right,
You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's
Fu' to make it sweet an' light.
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,
An' I'm tellin' you fu' true,
When hit comes to raal right singin',
'T ain't no easy thing to do.
Easy 'nough fu' folks to hollah,
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
When dey ain't no one kin sence it,
An' de chune comes in, in spots;
But fu' real melojous music,
Dat jes' strikes yo' hea't and clings,
Jes' you stan' an' listen wif me
When Malindy sings.
Ain't you nevah hyeahd Malindy?
Blessed soul, tek up de cross!
Look hyeah, ain't you jokin', honey?
Well, you don't know whut you los'.
Y' ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin',
Robins, la'ks, an' all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an' hides dey faces
When Malindy sings.
Fiddlin' man jes' stop his fiddlin',
Lay his fiddle on de she'f;
Mockin'-bird quit tryin' to whistle,
'Cause he jes' so shamed hisse'f.
Folks a-playin' on de banjo
Draps dey fingahs on de strings--
Bless yo' soul--fu'gits to move em,
When Malindy sings.
She jes' spreads huh mouf and hollahs,
"Come to Jesus," twell you hyeah

Sinnahs' tremblin' steps and voices,
Timid-lak a-drawin' neah;
Den she tu'ns to "Rock of Ages,"
Simply to de cross she clings,
An' you fin' yo' teahs a-drappin'
When Malindy sings.
Who dat says dat humble praises
Wif de Master nevah counts?
Heish yo' mouf, I hyeah dat music,
Ez hit rises up an' mounts--
Floatin' by de hills an' valleys,
Way above dis buryin' sod,
Ez hit makes its way in glory
To de very gates of God!
Oh, hit's sweetah dan de music
Of an edicated band;
An' hit's dearah dan de battle's
Song o' triumph in de lan'.
It seems holier dan evenin'
When de solemn chu'ch bell rings,
Ez I sit an' ca'mly listen
While Malindy sings.
Towsah, stop dat ba'kin', hyeah me!
Mandy, mek dat chile keep still;
Don't you hyeah de echoes callin'
F'om de valley to de hill?
Let me listen, I can hyeah it,
Th'oo de bresh of angels' wings,
Sof' an' sweet, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,"
Ez Malindy sings.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Life's Tragedy

It may be misery not to sing at all
And to go silent through the brimming day.
It may be sorrow never to be loved,
But deeper griefs than these beset the way.
To have come near to sing the perfect song
And only by a half-tone lost the key,
There is the potent sorrow, there the grief,
The pale, sad staring of life's tragedy.
To have just missed the perfect love,
Not the hot passion of untempered youth,
But that which lays aside its vanity
And gives thee, for thy trusting worship, truth—
This, this it is to be accursed indeed;
For if we mortals love, or if we sing,
We count our joys not by the things we have,

But by what kept us from the perfect thing.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Ships that Pass in the Night

Out in the sky the great dark clouds are massing;
I look far out into the pregnant night,
Where I can hear a solemn booming gun
And catch the gleaming of a random light,
That tells me that the ship I seek is passing, passing.
My tearful eyes my soul's deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,
And but its ghost doth reach that vessel, passing, passing.
O Earth, O Sky, O Ocean, both surpassing,
O heart of mine, O soul that dreads the dark!
Is there no hope for me? Is there no way
That I may sight and check that speeding bark
Which out of sight and sound is passing, passing?

Paul Laurence Dunbar

Sympathy

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!
I know why the caged bird beats his wing
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!
I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!
Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *The Haunted Oak*

Pray why are you so bare, so bare,
Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
Runs a shudder over me?
My leaves were green as the best, I trow,
And sap ran free in my veins,
But I saw in the moonlight dim and weird
A guiltless victim's pains.
I bent me down to hear his sigh;
I shook with his gurgling moan,
And I trembled sore when they rode away,
And left him here alone.
They 'd charged him with the old, old crime,
And set him fast in jail:
Oh, why does the dog howl all night long,
And why does the night wind wail?
He prayed his prayer and he swore his oath,
And he raised his hand to the sky;
But the beat of hoofs smote on his ear,
And the steady tread drew nigh.
Who is it rides by night, by night,
Over the moonlit road?
And what is the spur that keeps the pace,
What is the galling goad?
And now they beat at the prison door,
"Ho, keeper, do not stay!
We are friends of him whom you hold within,
And we fain would take him away
"From those who ride fast on our heels
With mind to do him wrong;
They have no care for his innocence,
And the rope they bear is long."
They have fooled the jailer with lying words,
They have fooled the man with lies;
The bolts unbar, the locks are drawn,
And the great door open flies.
Now they have taken him from the jail,
And hard and fast they ride,
And the leader laughs low down in his throat,
As they halt my trunk beside.
Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,
And the doctor one of white,

And the minister, with his oldest son,
Was curiously bedight.
Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?
'Tis but a little space,
And the time will come when these shall dread
The mem'ry of your face.
I feel the rope against my bark,
And the weight of him in my grain,
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.
And never more shall leaves come forth
On a bough that bears the ban;
I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,
From the curse of a guiltless man.
And ever the judge rides by, rides by,
And goes to hunt the deer,
And ever another rides his soul
In the guise of a mortal fear.
And ever the man he rides me hard,
And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
On the trunk of a haunted tree.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Pool

By the pool that I see in my dreams, dear love,
I have sat with you time and again;
And listened beneath the dank leaves, dear love,
To the sibilant sound of the rain.
And the pool, it is silvery bright, dear love,
And as pure as the heart of a maid,
As sparkling and dimpling, it darkles and shines
In the depths of the heart of the glade.
But, oh, I 've a wish in my soul, dear love,
(The wish of a dreamer, it seems,)
That I might wash free of my sins, dear love,
In the pool that I see in my dreams.
Paul Laurence Dunbar

The Right to Die

I have no fancy for that ancient cant
That makes us masters of our destinies,
And not our lives, to hold or give them up
As will directs; I cannot, will not think
That men, the subtle worms, who plot and plan

And scheme and calculate with such shrewd wit,
Are such great blund'ring fools as not to know
When they have lived enough. Men court not death
When there are sweets still left in life to taste.
Nor will a brave man choose to live when he,
Full deeply drunk of life, has reached the dregs,
And knows that now but bitterness remains.
He is the coward who, outfaced in this,
Fears the false goblins of another life.
I honor him who being much harassed
Drinks of sweet courage until drunk of it,—
Then seizing Death, reluctant, by the hand,
Leaps with him, fearless, to eternal peace!

Paul Laurence Dunbar

 *An Old Memory*

Thou arrant robber, Death!
Couldst thou not find
Some lesser one than he
To rob of breath,—
Some poorer mind
Thy prey to be?
His mind was like the sky,—
As pure and free;
His heart was broad and open
As the sea.
His soul shone purely through his face,
And Love made him her dwelling place.
Not less the scholar than the friend,
Not less a friend than man;
The manly life did shorter end
Because so broad it ran.
Weep not for him, unhappy Muse!
His merits found a grander use
Some other-where. God wisely sees
The place that needs his qualities.
Weep not for him, for when Death lowers
O'er youth's ambrosia-scented bowers
He only plucks the choicest flowers. in the sky the great dark clouds are massing;
I look far out into the pregnant night,
Where I can hear a solemn booming gun
And catch the gleaming of a random light,
That tells me that the ship I seek is passing, passing.
My tearful eyes my soul's deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,

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Paul Laurence Dunbar

