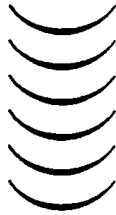


**I A M T H E  
A M E R I C A N  
N E G R O**



**D A V I S**



# The Book and the Author

*I Am The American Negro* is a collection of poetry written by Frank Marshall Davis since the appearance in September, 1935, of his first volume, *Black Man's Verse*, which drew high critical praise as excerpts from reviews, printed on the outside and inside back cover, indicate.

This volume offers a varied excursion into the realms of free verse. From the title poem, which is a poetic drama to be read and not acted, the subject matter goes into the grimly realistic and the lyrically passionate, ending in the section, "Ebony Under Granite" (continued from *Black Man's Verse*), inspired by the Greek Anthology.

*I Am The American Negro* belongs in the libraries of all literate persons, both black and white, who are interested in brilliant free verse and the reaction of a Midwestern Negro to the American scene.

The author, Frank Marshall Davis, is a former Kansan now living in Chicago where he is feature editor and a syndicated columnist for the Associated Negro Press.

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**\$1.50**

What critics said of  
**BLACK MAN'S VERSE**  
By Frank Marshall Davis

*"Black Man's Verse unites sardonic realism and mysticism, a union here of cause and effect, not at all strange to any reader knowing Sandberg. Mr. Davis is embittered by American life, and at times seems to escape from it in dreams of Mandy Lou's loveliness, and of vestiges from an earlier, exotic Africa . . . The book's contribution is in its realism."*

Sterling A. Brown, *Opportunity*



*"No Negro poet — nor any white poet — has sung with as great force of the intellectual and spiritual bleakness of the black island which exists in dominantly white America. His singing is in a minor chord like music at a synagogue or keening at a wake."*

Prof. C. E. Rogers, *Kansas Industrialist*



*"Throughout he has stamped his own individuality in lines and frequently his experimental moods have caught the essence of an originality surcharged with a vigour of well rounded expression."*

James O. Hopson, *Crisis*



*"Frank Marshall Davis . . . has an etcher's touch and an acid bite to his vignettes of life that any 'proletarian poet' or Marxian critic might well envy and emulate . . . His social analysis is as accurate as his social description is trenchant."*

Dr. Alain LeRoy Locke, *Race*, Summer, 1936

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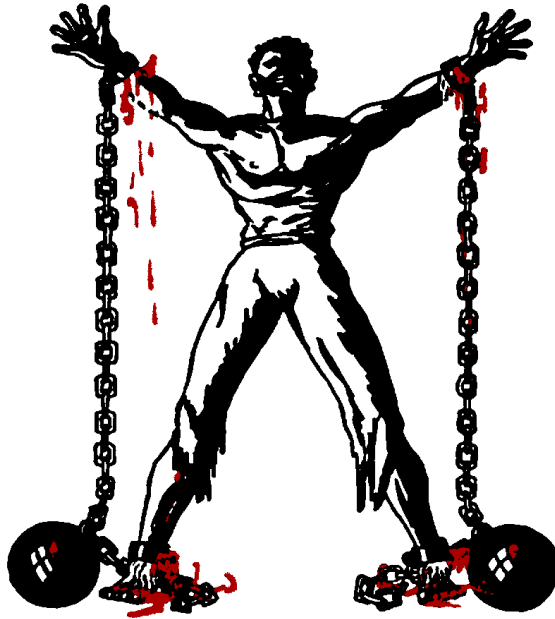


*I am the*  
**AMERICAN NEGRO**

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

*Black Man's Verse*

# I AM THE AMERICAN NEGRO



BY FRANK MARSHALL DAVIS

BLACK CAT PRESS • CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

1937



**Copyright 1937, The Black Cat Press**

**FIRST EDITION**

**Printed in the United States of America**

**To PROFESSOR C. E. ROGERS**  
*of Kansas State College, whose rare friendship*  
*is a valuable part of my few assets*



## *F O R E W A R N I N G*

*Fairy words . . . a Pollyanna mind*

*Do not roam these pages.*

*Inside*

*There are coarse victuals*

*A couch of rough boards*

*Companions who seldom smile*

*Yet*

*It is the soul's abode*

*Of a Negro dreamer*

*For being black*

*In my America*

*Is no rendezvous*

*With Venus . . .*

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T

*A few of the poems in this volume appeared originally in the Kansas Magazine. Others have not previously been published*

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## I AM THE AMERICAN NEGRO

*(A sequence to be imagined)*

*A very small, dark lad dressed in a linen robe of dazzling whiteness stands speaking on a busy corner. Passers-by gaze at him curiously. Some stop while others hurry on, but his voice carries his words evenly until he has finished.*

“Amid the colossal cacophonies  
the strident symphonies  
of your sprawling steel mills  
of your star-snatching skyscrapers  
of your bellowing freights and expresses  
of your rich-loamed farm lands  
of your lusty cities and your crawling towns  
amid your frenzied hallelujahs  
to a mighty masquerader  
to a robot of levers and wires  
you call either God or Progress  
I lift up my small voice . . . .  
I, a numerical nonentity  
in your already forgotten  
twelve million brown stepchildren . . . .  
Will you listen awhile?  
There is much I would say.”

\* \* \*

THE SCENE VANISHES.

*Now is shown the interior of a tall temple in semi-darkness. The dim figure of a giant of indeterminate brown, his*



*arms and legs shackled, is faintly seen, kneeling before an altar. There is heard the low monotony of a prayer. White faces peer through the dark windows showing increased satisfaction at every word.*

“Lord, have pity on me!  
From my soul’s depth I speak  
It is truth You hear  
Although my words have a strange sound—  
For I am the American Negro!  
I am a man apart . . . .”

*A mist falls over the faces at the windows. A strong white light plays on the kneeling giant’s features. The jangle of the shackles on his arms beats a tom-tom rhythm to the words that come first slowly and deliberately, and then more quickly from his mouth.*

“I, the American Negro, am a rainbow race, a kaleidoscopic breed found only in this land.  
In my veins runs the blood of Caucasian Europe and of the Indians of America for my slave women were tempting to their white masters and my men came to the New World with Cortes.  
In me is a monstrous union of many African tribes . . . tribes who were mortal enemies in the deep green jungles of the great dark continent.  
Yet I do not value my savage ancestry for my white folk tell me black Africa has given nothing to civilization . . . my historians sing of the golden glories of the ancient empires . . . of Mandingo,

Benin, Yoruba; of old Timbuctoo, Kana, Zimbabwe, Zegzeg, of the great king Abuade Izchia but I will neither listen nor believe for no white lips have phrased these words, and therefore they cannot be true.

My dream is to be physically white . . . so I straighten my kinks, bleach my skin and look down on those darker than I . . . For myself I build pale gods to serve . . . whatever white folk do I imitate.”

\* \* \*

*The voice of the giant grows louder. The jangle of his chains almost drowns out his words. He stops kneeling and stands erect, his head thrown back, blood trickling from his legs where the shackles dig into his flesh. Great drops of sweat glisten on his forehead. The white faces at the window reappear and smiles play on their features.*

“But most of all, dear Lord, I have no guts and I refuse to heed the law of self-preservation.

I cry . . . yet I will not heal those ills bringing tears to my eyes.

I will not support men and movements battling for my betterment.

I will not pool my dollars to fight in the courts atrocities committed against me or illegal laws denying rights guaranteed by the Constitution of my country.

I will not unite my resources to found businesses giving jobs to my people nor will I lend wholehearted support to enterprises run by men and women of my race.

I send my young to college and then I let them go  
forth as graduates into hotels as waiters and bell-  
hops, into railway stations as redcaps for I have  
no work they may do but teach or sell insurance.  
If I am lynched or shot or my women raped I will  
complain in low whispers to my black brothers  
and sisters . . . more I dare not do.  
I am afraid to protect myself against anything white.”

\* \* \*

*Great veins stand out in the giant's throat. His hands  
claw the air before him. His body rocks and sways. His hair  
mats against his forehead from the sweat that pours from  
his body and mixes with the small ooze of warm, red blood.*

“I grin, I dance, I sing. I am the minstrel man for white  
America!  
I am a hodge-podge of paradox, a crazy collection of  
inconsistencies.  
Seldom to myself and before no whites dare I confess  
these traits.  
Pity me, Lord, for there is none other like me . . .  
*I am the American Negro!*”

\* \* \*

*Suddenly the temple is brilliantly lighted. The giant—  
still chained, still erect—raises his arms above his head. His  
face changes constantly, chameleon-like, from milky white  
to inky black. Then the light fades and the giant stands still.  
As he speaks, the white listeners cease their smiles and,  
one by one, leave the windows. Only one or two remain.*

*His voice is low, deliberate . . . the tones firm and even  
. . . he drops wearily to the floor with his hands in an  
attitude of prayer before him.*

“And yet, Lord, with my weakness there is strength  
for who but I could carry these bonds and still exist?  
I have given America loyalty unequalled in man’s  
history.

From the loins of my brown women, sons have come  
forth to fight and die for a democracy that may  
lynch the survivors.

I have planted seed deep in the womb of the good  
earth and reaped only cotton . . . and mobs . . .  
and peonage.

I am the public martyr for America’s arena . . . I gave  
Crispus Attucks at the Boston Tea Party and today  
I am handed Scottsboro, in Alabama.

My country’s papers give me front page headlines  
for my murderers and one paragraph beside the  
want ad section for my men of letters and science.

“God the Father” and “Love thy Neighbor” shout my  
white brothers in Christ from behind the doors of  
their gaudy churches slammed shut and locked  
when I seek to enter

Writers sling buckets of ink to show the skin You gave  
me proves inferiority . . . purses bulge with cash  
exchanged for the mass privilege of systematic hate.

In courts down South I am fodder for chaingang and  
electric chair since any white convict has more say-  
so than my Doctors of Philosophy

Only my dollars know no color line . . . and sometimes  
even they are banned!”

*The forehead of the giant wrinkles in a frown. His eyes  
open, stare before him . . . his face looks puzzled . . .  
wonderment . . . incomprehension . . . hesitancy . . . amaze-  
ment . . . all these expressions pass across his countenance.  
His voice goes on . . . slowly . . . carefully.*

“Yet I cannot hate America for this land sprouts out  
of my bleached bones from Bunker Hill to St.  
Michel and in my veins flows the blood of these  
my brother races.

But I cannot love America for my back is sore from  
the welts of prejudice rubbed with the salt of seg-  
regation.

Lord, what shall I do?”

*Beside the giant there suddenly appears a form neither  
male nor female, neither black or white. It wears tattered  
clothing and holds its body with stately majesty. The new-  
comer speaks. The giant turns his head to listen. Fear passes  
first across his face . . . then as the newcomer goes on in  
a satin-soft voice the low hum of a mighty choir is heard  
in the distance . . . the sound gains momentum . . . the  
music can now be heard quite distinctly . . . yet the satin-  
soft voice of the speaker is heard above it all . . .*

CHOIR “Come on  
Black man

Grab your hat  
Let's get goin'  
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm  
mmmmmmMMMMMM”

VOICE “Fathered by Lincoln  
Mothered by a Civil War  
Born in the smoke and blood  
of Spottsylvania Courthouse,  
Bull Run, Gettysburg.  
Given the sharp daggers  
Of three Constitutional Amendments.  
Clothed in the greatest  
Civilization known to modern man  
Then set on the road to town . . .  
But today  
You lie sleeping  
Far, far outside the City Gates.”

CHOIR “Come on  
Black man  
Grab your hat  
Let's get goin'  
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm  
mmmmmmMMMMMM”

VOICE “Singer of hymns, warbler of the blues, picker of  
cotton, layer of railroad ties . . . poet and bone-  
crusher . . . big muscles and Ph.D's.  
America has seen you go to school at Howard,  
Atlanta, Tuskegee; at Harvard, Oxford, Berlin

and come out prattling of Plato and Einstein in sixty different jargons.

Poppies in France grow from your blood and flesh . . . San Juan hill knows the victorious tread of black feet . . . but here the story ends.

String 'em up in Alabama . . . burn 'em in the hot-seat in Georgia . . . give a cop a bonus for everyone he kills . . . kick 'em till they're down, mister, then kick 'em again for fallin' . . . they're black and they won't fight back."

**CHOIR** "Come on  
Black man  
Grab your hat  
Let's get goin'  
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm  
mmmmmmMMMMMM"

**VOICE** "Arm your Christ with a shotgun . . . hire six attorneys to work with Jehovah . . . teach your priests how to uppercut . . . if David had slung a prayer and a hymn Goliath would have chalked up another win.  
Sure, we all know there's one of you to nine of them so try to win sitting down . . . but if that won't work let 'em have it, buddy . . . you can't live forever anyhow!"

**CHOIR** "Come on  
Black man  
Grab your hat

Let's get goin'  
You can't live forever  
Anyhow!  
MMMMmmmmmmmmmm

mmmmmmMMMMMM"

\* \* \*

*The giant trembles from head to foot . . . his voice rumbles . . . roars . . . as he stands before this stranger . . .*

GIANT "Who are you? Who are you? I never saw you before . . ."

*The stranger fades into the deepening shadows . . . and as the figure disappears only a satin-smooth voice is heard.*

*The giant, strengthened by the stranger's words, tears the shackles from his arms. He takes a step forward, forgetting his legs are shackled too . . . He falls crouching on the floor . . . He beats the floor with each heavy, bleeding fist.*

GIANT "Who are you? Who are you?"

VOICE "I am experience!"

*The giant crawls to the edge of a window. With great agony he draws his body up closer . . . closer . . . closer to the sill . . . Finally he stands erect . . . weak . . . tottering . . . he peers through the window into the coming darkness . . . the low humming sound of the choir can still be heard.*



*There are no faces left at the windows.*

*The giant turns . . . looks at the emptiness around him . . . frowns in disgust . . . opens his mouth to speak when the temple falls in a crash . . . and the voice of the giant is stilled.*

*The low, satin-soft voice he heard is drowned out by the rolling tumble of loose, crashing stones . . . these stones that formed the temple of America's Social System end the life and problems of the Negro giant as they collapse.*

*Barely audible above the din there sounds the laughter of the gods . . .*

## DANCING GAL

Black and tan—yeah, black and tan  
Spewing the moans of a jigtime band  
What does your belly crave?

A brown-sugar brown  
Slim gal sways  
Pretzel twisting  
Beneath a yellow thumb  
Of steel-stiff light  
Amid a striped rain  
Of red-note, blue-note

Jazz-hot jazz  
Gazelle graceful  
Lovely as a lover's dream  
Silken skinned, stillwater soft  
Young girl breasts in gold encased  
Scant gold around her lower waist  
Red lips parted  
Dark eyes flashing  
She dances  
Dips, whirls, undulates  
Her body a living chord  
Set loud and sweet  
Against the bitter quiet  
Of drab and muted human shapes

I see a long lean god  
Standing in painted splendor

Motionless in the scented air  
Of Tanganyika  
I see a frozen idol  
Set free from a single stone  
Shielding with seven arms  
His world in Hindustan . . .  
Africa's madness, India's sadness  
Wedded in Chicago  
By a Midwest gal  
In a Jew's cafe . . .

Black and tan—yeah, black and tan  
Drenched in the jazz of a swingtime band  
Is this what your belly craves?

## FLOWERS OF DARKNESS

Slowly the night blooms, unfurling  
Flowers of darkness, covering  
The trellised sky, becoming  
A bouquet of blackness  
Unending  
Touched with sprigs  
Of pale and budding stars

Soft the night smell  
Among April trees  
Soft and richly rare  
Yet commonplace  
Perfume on a cosmic scale

I turn to you Mandy Lou  
I see the flowering night  
Cameo condensed  
Into the lone black rose  
Of your face  
The young woman-smell  
Of your poppy body  
Rises to my brain as opium  
Yet silently motionless  
I sit with twitching fingers  
Yea, even reverently  
Sit I  
With you and the blossoming night  
For what flower, plucked,  
Lingers long?

## THEY ALL HAD GRAND IDEAS

Alexander cried for new worlds to conquer and he was  
hustled into the stout toms without learning millions  
stood ready to split his skull in unknown China, Africa,  
America, Australia and the South Sea Islands

Christ went hoarse telling them to toss in their swords, give  
away their cash and put on a perpetual brother act . . .  
Judas sold him down the river for forty pieces of silver  
and they lynched him with nails sharp as any spear or  
dagger

Columbus located new real estate for the Big Dogs of Spain  
. . . France and England muscled in . . . today the United  
States holds up the Monroe Doctrine and dares any of  
the elderly mother nations to come over after more than  
what little they have left

Lenin and Trotzky fought for a Russia without czars and  
aristocracy . . . today both are in the city dump as Stalin  
and his crew strongarm the liberated peasants into ac-  
cepting state control and ownership

Napoleon licked 'em all until Waterloo . . . an actor slipped  
Lincoln the last curtain call —

They all had grand ideas

\* \* \*

Men dream and die to give way to other men with a  
different slant on the same idea

Mohamed for Christ, Kaiser Wilhelm for Hannibal,  
Einstein for Newton, Shaw for Shakespeare

Each caught the deathless butterfly of a grand idea in  
the silken mesh of his mind . . . held it for such a little  
while . . . then had to let it go

I pick no winner  
There isn't any

The world slushes on

The world where men struggle for victuals and shelter and  
safety today as when Adam strode Eden and Ab hid  
from the sabre-toothed tiger

The world where women want their men and babies and  
bank accounts or soft skins and trinkets hidden deep  
in a cave

What has it mattered? . . . what has anything mattered?

What has the world done but smash its dreamers?

These men with the grand ideas —

Do they dream in the sod of success?

Do their hopes spill over into the cool silent earth?

Or do they laugh at the new dreamers and say “Boy,  
you'll learn . . . I got that way once and see what  
happened?”

Tomorrow more dreamers

Yet nothing wins but the hungry waiting graves

Chisel these words on the tall tombstones and you get the  
whole story yesterday, today and forever —

“I had a grand idea—but it wouldn't keep . . . ”

## CHRIST IS A DIXIE NIGGER

You tell me Christ was born nearly twenty centuries ago  
in a little one horse town called Bethlehem . . . your  
artists paint a man as fair as another New White Hope  
Well, you got it all wrong . . . facts twisted as hell . . . see?

Let me tell you wise guys something  
I've got my own ideas . . . I've got a better Christ and a  
bigger Christ . . . one you can put your hands on today  
or tomorrow.

My Christ is a Dixie nigger black as midnight, black as the  
roof of a cave's mouth

My Christ is a black bastard . . . maybe Joe did tell the  
neighbors God bigged Mary . . . but he fooled nobody  
. . . they all knew Christ's father was Mr. Jim who owns  
the big plantation . . . and when Christ started bawling  
out back in the cabins Mr. Jim made all three git

You see, I know

Christ studied medicine up North in Chicago then came  
back to Mississippi a good physician with ideas for gettin'  
the races together . . . he lectured in the little rundown  
schoolhouses awaiting Rosenwald money . . . he talked  
of the brotherhood and equality of man and of a Con-  
stitution giving everybody a right to vote and some of  
the nigger listeners told their white folks . . . then they  
found how Christ healed a white woman other doctors  
gave up for lost . . . the two things together got him in  
the calaboose

They called him a Communist and a menace to the Existing  
Relationship Between Black and White in the South  
Sheriff and judge debated whether to open the hoosegow  
and tell reporters the mob stormed the jail or let the  
state lynch him on the gallows

Anyhow they got him

Maybe the rope was weak or Christ was too strong to die  
. . . I don't know

They cut him down and they patched him up . . . he hid  
in the swamps until he got well enough to get around  
again . . . then he lectured a little more . . . and faded out

Whether he went to heaven or Harlem or the white folks  
broke his neck and hid the corpse somewhere is a ques-  
tion they still ask —

See what I mean?

I don't want any of your stories about somebody running  
around too long ago to be anything but a highly public-  
ised memory

Your pink priests who whine about Pilate and Judas and  
Gethsemane I'd like to hogtie and dump into the stinking  
cells to write a New Testament around the Scottsboro  
Boys

Subdivide your million dollar temples into liquor taverns  
and high class whore-houses . . . my nigger Christ can't  
get past the door anyway

Remember this, you wise guys

Your tales about Jesus of Nazareth are no-go with me

I've got a dozen Christs in Dixie all bloody and black . . .



## WASHINGTON PARK, CHICAGO

The heat roars  
Like a tidal wave  
Over Chicago's Congo  
Inundating  
A rusty raft of a house  
On Dearborn Street  
A sleek schooner  
Of a brownstone mansion  
On South Parkway.  
Long foam fingers  
Of wet heat  
Clutch ebon throats  
Paw bronze thighs  
Tear into shreds  
Thin white sheets of coolness.  
High breakers of heat  
Split into dry mist —  
A harmless spray —  
As the tidal wave  
Dashes against strong rocks  
Of tall trees  
In Washington Park.

Upon the wrinkled green skin  
Of growing grass,  
Amid fat shrubs  
Squatting in lazy content,  
Beneath willow and oak

Watching like anxious mothers,  
Along the tangled yarn  
Of gray paths,  
Beside still pools  
The color of old ice  
In Washington Park  
The people go —  
When the heat  
Is an African python  
Crushing amid its coils  
The black carcass  
Of Chicago's Congo . . .

## II

Sun by day  
Moon and mazda by night  
Rinse kaleidoscopic faces  
Twirling slowly against the light;  
Faces of infants and con men  
Of turnip breasted virgins  
And worn out prostitutes  
Their bodies piled along the grass  
Or poured into wooden benches.  
Others walk up and down  
Up and down  
Then back,  
Men call to girls  
And to other men.  
Voices swing like monkeys  
Through a thick forest

Of continuous sound.  
Here one may be  
Surrounded and alone.

Along pretzel crooked roads  
Racehorse autos gallop  
In great herds  
Or stand in insolent silence  
Rubber feet among green blades of grass  
Sniffing in mechanical disdain  
At those who walk  
And barely dodge  
A mile a minute hoof.

The park shoulders  
Its people and cars  
On a verdant back  
And marches on  
To the steady boom  
Of the taut heat drum.

### III

In the wide pocket  
Of an aged bench  
Sleeps ragged Sam  
Covered with old newspaper.  
Above his face smiles Dolly Smythe  
Queen of the Burlesque Houses  
In her printed magnificence.  
Martha, the Love Murderess,

Is an unconscious pillow  
For his head.  
But Sam, remembering many,  
Has forgotten women;  
He dreams these nights  
Of steaks and chops three times a day  
Of a soft bed in a quiet room  
Then stirs his homeless bones  
And Dolly Smythe,  
Queen of the Burlesque Houses,  
Falls face down into the litter  
From Sam's nickle dinner  
Bummed off a peanut vender . . .

Until anyway eleven  
By a park policeman's watch  
They will sit  
This boy and gal,  
On the soft sweet sod  
Or a silent bench  
His head against  
Her warm thighs  
The brown full moon  
Of her face above.  
The heat that sniffs  
Like a curious cur  
About walled flats  
Is left behind —  
For them the fire  
Of two dry sticks

Rubbed together:  
And only they know  
Which is harder to bear . . .

A lanky Communist  
Tosses baited words  
To faces beneath him,  
Faces fish-mouthed  
In a sitting sea  
Of human forms.  
“Proletariat” . . . “Bourbon”  
“Workers” . . . “Starvation”  
“Equality” . . . “Comrades”  
Are flung at 'em  
By the glib fisherman  
On the angler's stand.  
And if now and then  
A fish lands the Red  
Will Stalin sniffle in his vodka?

\* \* \*

Does the Rev. Moses Wagner,  
Pastor of Golgotha Church,  
Come here to pick up chippies?  
When Inky White strolls here,  
Inky the broken down pug,  
Is it to hunt out pansies?  
Does Montell Duke,  
Poet and Ph. D.,  
Stride the winding paths

Gnawing an ice cream cone?

I don't know —

Lord, I don't know —

Ask me some other time . . .

#### IV

Impatient tomorrow

Jerks at the chains of Time;

The tiger heat

Crouches low and tense;

People leave

Or they remain;

Dried pea faces

A-rattle in a pod

And tender sprouts

For next season's harvesting . . .

I saw the night

Tuck Washington Park

Into her star-torn apron

And dodder on

As an aged woman

Gathers wood for the stove

From a fallen-in house.

I saw the sun

Sputter and mew—

A great yellow cat

Walking the backyard fence

Of a gray new day . . .

V

A white cloud hand  
Writes on the blue sky wall:  
“Men build skyscrapers  
Cleaving the air;  
Men boast of Progress  
Of steel thewed Science  
Of a million Inventions  
Advancing the human race;  
Of Edison, Marconi, Einstein, Darwin,  
Yet if the thin green grass  
The humble waving grass  
That crawls on its belly  
Should not return  
With its cool soft kiss  
Which one could make  
A duplicate?”

None reads but the park  
Inarticulate, strong;  
Holding Chicago's Congo  
To its soothing breast  
While the heat roars  
Like a tidal wave  
Dashed to harmless spray  
Against strong rocks  
Of tall trees . . .

## NOTE LEFT BY A SUICIDE

Tomorrow I shall die  
Suicide, the coroner will say  
Electric light of a heart switched off  
Yet to me only another death . . . nothing new . . . nothing  
new  
I have seen my dreams yanked from me, tossed to the  
earth, ground into thin dust  
I loved . . . the woman who bore my name passed into  
infinity bearing a son for another  
I offered the world my soul in words . . . rejection slips  
from editors buried my gift in the Potter's Field  
What have I left but flesh? . . . of what use are walls of a  
building when fire eats all else?  
Tomorrow I shall die . . .

Today I rose to the fortieth story of a skyscraper  
Through a window I gazed at two-legged ants of men crawl-  
ing about streets, busying themselves in anthills of steel  
and stone  
As a boy, I crushed anthills with one shoe . . . what did it  
matter but to the ants themselves? . . . did this universe  
stop? . . . if a greater shoe should stamp out Chicago what  
would it matter except to ants in other hills? . . . then  
what of the life and death of one ant?  
I looked again . . . yet I could not leap  
You say it takes strength to live  
I have seen Masks of Fear worn in hospitals, sickrooms,  
death cells of stout jails



I know man flees from the unknown mystery of Death  
I know from Terror comes strength to run  
I did not leap  
I lacked the greater strength to die  
For that I am ashamed

But tomorrow . . . surely, surely  
I shall dwell with billions who have swung on . . . today  
the poorest idiot among them wiser than Socrates, Espinoza, Kant, Einstein  
I shall not linger dreading the certain step of Death  
A year or a century . . . then curtains  
Food by day, sleep by night . . . will-o'-the-wisp dreams . . .  
if caught, a quest for more . . . it has always been  
They all wait tossed by chance into existence . . . for what?  
to be tossed again into oblivion?

You think Life . . . egotistic, hairy chested, strong armed  
. . . has conquered me?  
Go ahead, you . . . bare your back to his slave whip  
But not I  
I seek freedom . . . I go before Life cuts me, worn and useless, from his chains  
Now or later . . . for fifty years more what could I gain  
but new scars?  
So I go  
I am too brave to live!

## TO ONE WHO WOULD LEAVE ME

Not yet . . . not yet  
Unended is the Opera of Us  
This curtain . . . only a pause  
Time has new tunes  
Life is a husky scene-shifter  
Arranging new backdrops  
Soon the show goes on . . .

\* \* \*

With a ballet of smooth dancing words  
Amid a jargon of sharply silken sounds  
Behind steel strong lights  
Hoofing a crazy razzle-dazzle of mental jigs  
Before the sixty gods of Happiness  
We sang  
Sang a year and a day  
I played a stumbling Romeo  
To your dulcet Juliet  
Soon the show swings on  
The Great Author cannot  
Hustle in another cast . . .

\* \* \*

Sure, I understand  
Ask Bernhardt, ask Duse  
They both got that way  
Sure  
Life's not always sprayed with attar of roses

Sometimes Trouble comes around with a dun  
Or grief camps on the back stairs  
It's not easy then  
To smile like a Christ-kissed angel  
For the stuffed shirts  
In the orchestra seats  
Out front

\* \* \*

You won't really go, will you?  
I look into your brown eyes deep as high lakes clasped  
to the breast of unknown Africa hills  
I have reeled and rocked in shameful drunkenness  
from the scented wine of your red lips  
Circe's wand is less potent than the feel of your velvet  
flesh against me  
I am Midas with the wealth of your love  
Yet you are a woman  
And I cannot tell —  
You won't really go, will you?

\* \* \*

The orchestra clears its throat for speech  
Time beckons  
Life steps into the wings  
All unended is the Opera of Us  
Not yet . . . not yet  
Shall we take our places  
Or must we tell the sixty gods of Happiness  
"That's all there is . . . that's all there is  
Go out and get your money back . . .?"

## 'MANCIPATION DAY

Hallowed be the memory of Abraham Lincoln!  
He was a great man, he gave us our freedom!

In Chicago, Atlanta, Louisville, Memphis, Kansas City,  
Los Angeles, Miami, Boston a million kaleidoscopic  
people gather and lift high hosannas in memory of a  
misty Emancipation Day

(In hobo camps from Maine to California sprawl a thous-  
and bums recalling the hour gates closed behind them at  
Sing Sing, Joliet, Leavenworth, San Quentin)

In Birmingham they ride jim-crow cars to a nigger park  
guarded by white cops ready to shoot to kill if the black  
bastards annex the idea they're human and Citizens of  
Alabama . . . listening brown folk balloon with pride  
as sweet speeched speakers canonize Lincoln — the air  
reeks with the stench of burned brothers lynched in  
courthouse yards

In Gary, Indiana, from the hot bellies of steel mills come  
celebrants . . . tomorrow some will starve as their jobs  
are snatched and given to Jan Pidarski direct from Ellis  
Island . . . tomorrow others sweat gold for the gods of  
the steel corporation in whose shrines none may walk

Words splash like water over ebony skulls . . . see a people  
proud because white men died, another freed them when

impotent ancestors worked the plantation while Ole  
Massa fought their liberators

(In the hobo jungles let there be barbecues and long winded  
programs . . . let Convict 67895 and his comrades burst  
with pride . . . are they not the ones set free by the whims  
of the prison commission?)

Praise ye Warden Laws of Sing Sing  
And the New York Board of Pardons and Paroles:  
They gave us our freedom!)

## NOTES ON A SUMMER NIGHT

Past wood and water, over steel and stone  
Through the forty-room mansion of a millionaire  
Into the one-room cabin of a cotton picker  
Dark purple runners of darkness run —  
Today is another grain of sand  
And the shore is long and smooth . . .

Twenty brownskin babies suckle the wet teats of gin bottles  
at Mojo Mike's in Chicago  
Twenty gin guzzling gals gone to the dogs with a grin at  
two bucks a throw  
The hot air staggers under the heavy smell of beer and  
bourbon, dead tobacco and dripping sweat  
A five cent phonograph flings vermillion streamers of jazz  
through the atmosphere  
Outside a mazda-bandaged night limps slowly along Forty-  
seventh street in Chicago's Congo.  
(Do you remember, Mandy Lou,  
When shadows of oak leaves danced a slow mazurka  
Plucked by clouds from a banjo moon  
Near Kankakee?)

"Not now, anyhow" says the barber shop porter  
In a forty dollar suit ogling sheer frocked gals  
"Gimme a skinny chick  
When it's too hot to cover up nights  
They don't cut off no breeze  
It ain't like sleepin' wit' a furnace

An' yuh don' need brakes to keep from slidin'  
'Yuh wants a fat broad in wintah  
But kiss 'em goodbye in June  
I don't want no heavy mama —  
Not now, anyhow . . .”

I have seen nights like this piled bargain counter high  
with lust  
I have seen paunchy pimps loll in darkened doors while  
their painted women pulled in poor suckers  
I have heard the man-pack tear down a county jail and  
burn black Mose beside the Baptist Church  
I have watched a ghetto father fix it for his daughter who  
bedded without a license  
I saw them bring back Nicky Pottello . . . Nicky crammed  
dead into a culvert for crossing the Malorto Gang  
I have heard a hundred wives lying naked with their lovers  
as their husbands sought out other women  
And . . . Yes . . . Indeed  
I have heard America at the breakfast table froth for the  
blood of uncivilized Chinese bastards who dared kidnap  
the daughter of a Wall Street broker

Anxiously the moon clucks to a new brood of white moon-  
beams hatched in the Missouri River at Kansas City  
On Lake Michigan boats move like phosphorescent water  
spiders  
The tall tree of the Empire State Building holds ripe clusters  
of white lights above the groping fingers of New York's  
skyline

Butterfly cars flit along the gossamer highway between  
Denver and Colorado Springs  
A bluefire diamond night glitters through all the land  
“Christ” mutter ten thousand cops in a thousand snoring  
towns between Miami and Seattle “Five more hours t’  
daybreak” . . .

In the director’s chamber of the First National Bank in  
Cincinnati  
All is quiet  
In the shuttered room of one just passed  
There is silence  
Dollars and death have spilled their small talk —  
Only the star-white stars  
Whisper in lazy circles above Ohio . . .

Ninety thousand Negroes sleep in Atlanta  
Ninety thousand dreams spin in black heads  
Atlanta now is a bearded myth  
Of jim crow laws and hair trigger cops  
The Coast Line Railway to Jacksonville  
Is a lie in steel  
Maybe such never was —  
A Pollyanna moon croons a soft lullaby  
“Everything’s all right, honey  
Tomorrow will be different, don’t you know . . .”



## AWAKENING

Born in the pages of letters  
Nursed by strong sweet words  
Reared in the vast expanse of two wild minds  
Is Our Love . . .

Vigorous — Big Muscled  
Tender as a mother caring for her first born  
Soft as the fall of night  
Massive as the universe  
Eternal as life and death  
Blinding as the midday sun  
is Our Love

Now

In his steel arms he has taken us  
Welding two souls, two bodies  
Into a boundless one  
Inhabiting a sky world built for us  
By us

Vigorous, big muscled Love wraps our world in a blanket  
Only if vigorous, big muscled Love goes shall we leave . . .

Yet flesh has not touched flesh  
Our words . . . our only caresses  
Just our minds have kissed  
For Love has saved hot blood for the last  
For another beginning . . .

I know your lips have the honey from dreamed-of wild  
flowers

I know your fragrance surpasses Purple Hyacinths  
I know your eyes have the deep beauty of clear dark pools  
on mountain tops  
I know your hair is more radiant than a rainbow  
I know your body is more beautiful than an alabaster  
vase . . .  
Why wonder then,  
that my heart falters, breath leaves me  
when I think of you?

When we meet  
How shall we ever part?  
Can lip leave lip, breast quit breast, or thigh be torn from  
thigh?  
How can I take away the Me you own . . . which is a  
part of you?

I want the warm loveliness of you branded into my flesh  
. . . your kisses a song in my soul . . . hands-full of soft  
words . . . your breath on me like a spring zephyr . . .  
your hair a fountain bathing my face . . . let me lose  
myself in the ageless beauty of you . . . let our passion  
be incense burning on the altar to Very-Love . . .

We shall never quite part . . . the scars left by hot flesh on  
hot flesh will hurl us together at night with their throbbing  
even though we are separated by a million miles  
. . . our world will always be . . . for Our Love belongs  
to the Infinite . . .

## COME TO ME

Ah, beloved,  
Come to me—  
My throat is leather dry  
The flesh of my parted lips  
Lies taut and burning  
My heart pounds  
Like a thousand lashes

The kiss of your small hand  
Has soothed my brow  
Your warm breasts  
Girl-firm, woman-soft,  
Have pressed hard against me  
The fragrance of your body  
Has been incense to my soul  
Your wet mouth—  
A rose with burning dew—  
Has lain trembling  
Against my own  
While I drank  
Until  
No honey remained

I have had so very much of you  
But never enough . . .  
Never enough  
Always  
The feast of your love

Increases my hunger  
And I cannot end  
Either feast or hunger

Come to me  
Kiss me . . . hold me . . . kiss me  
Ah, sweet,  
You of the midnight hair  
Cascading  
About your face  
Like a blackened waterfall,  
Let me place my mouth  
In the smooth valley  
Between twin hills  
Of your barren bosom  
Let my lips clothe  
The flesh of you  
In a warm robe of kisses  
All unashamed  
You will lie  
Against my racing heart  
Eager life  
Careening joyously, madly,  
Through taut veins  
As we drink  
The perfumed wine  
Of our love

I know of you,  
Broken melodies of living;

Human harps strung, tuned, played  
Then snapped into silence  
All strings forever useless  
With so much music waiting  
With so few chords rendered  
And never the knowing  
When melodies will crash  
Into infinite nothingness.  
Soon we too will hush  
Stop  
Be stilled  
You, beloved,  
And I, your lover,  
But today  
You are very much you  
I am still I  
Worshipping  
At the temple  
Of your soul and body  
Today we live—  
Come to me,  
Beloved!

MODERN MAN — THE SUPERMAN  
*(A Song of Praise for Hearst, Hitler, Mussolini  
and the Munitions Makers)*

*Eight airplane motors,  
each keyed to a different  
pitch, are turned on and  
off to furnish musical ac-  
companiment within the  
range of an octave.*

Let us have war  
A pedigreed, civilized war  
With gas for the women  
Dumdums for the kiddies  
Shrapnel and bombs  
For Red Cross Hospitals  
And gold for the munitions makers

Heigh-ho!  
We have come a long way, don't you  
know;  
Only savages  
Savages and heathens  
Would use sharpened spears  
Flint tipped arrows flung from a bow  
Or cool silent knives  
Killing one at a time  
With a personal touch.  
In a day of big business  
Mass production  
Sanitary methods  
And "untouched by human hands"  
With millions of acres  
To seed the dead  
Tons of lead and steel  
For guns and bullets

A billion two-legged mammals  
To shoot and be shot  
(They'd die someday anyway)  
Politicians and moneyed men  
For masterly direction—  
In such a day  
War takes on  
A respectable dignity

Alexander was a neighborhood bully  
Cæsar was a piker  
Only Napoleon  
Had some pale glimmer  
Of the right idea  
And thank you Kaiser

\* \* \*

*Music of an organ sup-  
plants the airplane mo-  
tors only to be drowned  
out after a few bars by  
the whir of a dynamo, an  
occasional shriek from a  
factory whistle, and the  
approaching and receding  
gong of an ambulance.*

Don't you think—  
Mister Hearst  
Signor Mussolini  
Herr Hitler—  
It's time to change  
This Bible and God  
To a civilized  
Misconception?

Let us revere the machine which gives  
to us our life, our joy, our well-being,  
our progress  
In St. Judas Hospital . . . machine con-

structed, machine equipped . . . is  
born a child who may soon return  
the victim of other machines

Up and down in streets outside ma-  
chines run . . . they carry men and  
women to work at different machines  
for food and clothing more machines  
have made . . . they use their rubber  
legs and metal backs hauling men  
to murder with other machines call-  
ed guns . . . they crush blood and life  
in scornful vengeance from those not  
moving by steel and oil

Nearby a small boy hawks the daily  
press displaying smooth lies ma-  
chine printed to tighten the grip of  
those controlling machines at work

Come let us sing mechanical hallelu-  
jahs to a pile of levers and pulleys  
high as the Chrysler Tower

By such a God do we live and die  
Through orders of His priests do we  
kill in battle

And civilization marches onward  
For Jehovah is always just

\* \* \*

*The accompaniment  
again changes. A uni-  
formed marksman fires a  
loaded pistol at eight dif-  
ferently pitched bells,*

Give us another war  
Shaming antiquity  
Belittling the puny efforts



*each giving a strong metallic sound when hit. They are labelled "Jews," "Negroes," "Socialism," "Communism," "Tolerance," "Independence," "Free Speech," and "Individuality."*

Of ignorant ancestors  
Let us slaughter the unfit  
For science knows  
The fit will always survive

Have we sufficient rifles and howitzers?  
Will our poison gas  
Make death horrible enough?  
Can our dum dum bullets  
Shred the target's vital organs?  
Have big guns the range  
Of the largest hospitals?  
Do our bombing planes know  
Where the women and children will  
flee?

Then let's go!  
Let Modern Man, the Superman  
Make civilization safe  
For Hearst and Hitler  
Mussolini and the Munitions Makers!

*The bells break and fall  
to the ground as the song  
ends.*

## TWO WOMEN

As maid for Mrs. Harold Billingsworth  
Dahlia Green

supplemented the Petite Beauty Salon  
by curling her mistress' straight hair  
several times weekly.

Paydays

Dahlia went straightway  
to the Afro Beauty College  
to have her own moss unkinked.

At sixty both women  
from efforts to imitate  
the natural appearance of each  
above the ears

were forced to buy wigs  
from the salons.

Yet this was a triumph for civilization  
and American progress —

Think how they aided  
the entire hair industry!

## FOR ANY UNBORN NEGRO

Brush his

Lips lightly, Life!

Though this is home he's black.

Too soon he'll know that none loves him

But Death . . .

## “ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS!”

The religion of Sweet Jesus  
The spirit of Our Saviour  
March on  
With missionaries  
And civilization  
Into darkest Africa

Day by day  
Black folk learn  
Rather than with  
A heathen spear  
'Tis holier to die  
By a Christian gun . . .

## MIDSUMMER MORN

A tom-tom sun awakens day's jungle with heat beats  
The moon was a white war canoe moored to the night  
Morning stars scurry to cover like shaking hares fearful  
of the Great Yellow Hunter  
Last night's tall hunchback fishing in a pool of raven's  
breasts is a green elm tree  
Thin wings of grass pound helplessly against hard ground  
And the robins are no longer afraid . . .

*Ebony Under Granite*



## MOSES MITCHELL

It was in 1917  
That Moses Mitchell  
Left Natchez, Mississippi,  
To help make the world  
Safe for democracy  
Thereby gaining  
A distinguished service cross  
For conspicuous bravery  
In the Argonne Forest

Eighteen years later  
Back home in cotton country  
Moses' life was saved  
When the metal decoration  
Pinned inside his shirt pocket  
Stopped a leaden bullet  
Sheriff Pete Jones fired at the Negro  
Blonde Victoria Bates  
Swore assaulted her  
As she hoboed through to New Orleans  
From Scottsboro, Alabama,  
And in so doing kept herself  
From being picked up for vagrancy

How fortunate!  
Because he served his nation bravely  
Moses now was able  
To die upon the gallows . . .

## SAM JACKSON

The moon was a thick slab of yellow cheese between thin  
slices of toasted clouds

The night air spilled steak and coffee smells from a sack  
of odors hauled from the Elite Cafe

Beneath penniless Sam Jackson's window two dogs argued  
like nations over a morsel found in a garbage can

Strong Hunger slashed Sam's belly with eagle talons until  
he staggered wounded and sore to the street

Daily papers itemed: "An unidentified Negro was shot and  
instantly killed late last night by Officer Patrick Riley  
while trying to break into the rear of the Dew Drop  
Inn . . ."

## JONATHAN WOOD

Editors said  
Jonathan Wood  
Never found the path of words  
To his star high dreams  
At twenty five  
Even Life  
Sent him  
A rejection slip . . .

## CLEO AND SARAH GREELEY

At the age of sixteen  
Cleo Greeley  
More female than feminine  
Had learned to walk  
With a suggestive slither  
To her unhampered hams  
Firing the lusty lads  
Of both races  
In Charleston.  
At thirty  
Tired of peddling love  
At bargain prices  
Cleo went to Los Angeles  
Under another name  
And wed the woman-hungry pastor  
Of Big Bethel A.M.E. Church.  
Being thoroughly trained  
She kept him content at home  
Thus avoiding  
The forked tongue of scandal  
Which added respectability  
To their marriage  
And indirectly prosperity  
To the House of Worship.

Sarah was twenty-five  
A voluptuous Madonna  
Nursing the crimson child



Of her virginity  
When she mated  
With Oscar Simmons  
Who had just inherited  
The Excelsior Cafe.  
It was scarce six months  
For all her eyesome charms  
Before her husband  
Sick of inexperienced flesh  
Turned to the brazen buttocks  
Of the moral-less ladies  
Who patronized his restaurant  
Thus signaling the slinging  
Of sharp darts of pity  
By the town  
At Mrs. Oscar Simmons.

Cleo and Sarah  
Are both dead  
These five years —  
Who remembers either?

## BENJAMIN BLAKEY

Benjamin Blakey  
Did quite well for himself  
And the people of his town  
It isn't everybody  
Who leaves behind  
The showplace of his state—  
A six-story Odd Fellows Temple  
He built and managed—  
As well as control of the affairs  
Of big Sinai A. M. E. Church  
A son who finished Harvard  
A daughter with a Vassar degree  
A wife so well satisfied outwardly  
She never showed jealousy  
Of the six women  
The town whispered  
Her husband kept

Still  
Benjamin Blakey  
Would have died more content  
Had he ever learned  
From which of his mistresses  
He contracted  
That fatal social disease . . .

## NICODEMUS PERRY

Walking pensively along  
looking at the narrow sidewalk  
Saturday afternoon in Reelton, Alabama,  
thinking how his mother  
while a young girl  
working for Judge Stinson  
bore a child that died  
how his oldest sister  
was known to be intimate  
with the mayor's son  
and how only last night  
his youngest sister  
coming home alone  
was raped by three white men  
and the sheriff  
merely asked how much she got  
Nicodemus Perry  
was shot and fatally wounded  
by several corner loiterers  
who said something about "assault"  
as he bumped smack into  
a white woman.

## MRS. CLIFTON TOWNSEND

High yellow and snobbish  
Proud of her family and color  
Was Mrs. Clifton Townsend  
Of Nashville, Tennessee,  
For in her veins  
Flowed the blood of Senator Withers  
(Her maternal grandmother  
Was productively seduced)  
Thus this lady's marriage  
To Dr. Townsend  
Equally yellow and ancestored  
Had satisfied the families of both  
As did the birth  
Of their near-white daughter, Angeline,  
Who was trained to follow tradition  
And eventually mated legally  
With young Anthony Monroe  
(A secret descendant  
Of Governor Windsor)  
Who could pass for Nordic any evening.

It was not childbirth  
In her forty-second year  
That took the life  
Of Mrs. Clifton Townsend  
But shame at bearing  
Through inconsiderate Nature  
A penny-brown son . . .

## EDITOR RALPH WILLIAMSON

For twenty racing years  
As editor of  
The weekly News-Protest  
Ralph Williamson  
Had been a verbal swashbuckler  
Waging unending battle  
Against discrimination  
In courts and public places  
Jim crow both North and South  
Racial designations in  
Columns of white papers  
Fighting for an end  
To the color question  
And the treatment of black folk  
As Americans instead of Negroes  
Thereby building himself  
A national reputation  
As a great leader  
And a respectable bankroll.

Given a testimonial banquet  
Starting his twenty-first year  
For "service to the race"  
Ralph Williamson  
Died of shock that same night  
From the horrible dream  
Of a perfect nation  
Without prejudice or segregation

Racial complaint or color line  
Thus causing the weekly News-Protest  
Now with no excuse for being  
To pass into nothingness  
Hand in hand  
With the editor's  
Checking account and income . . .

## FRANK MARSHALL DAVIS: WRITER

“He is bitter  
A bitter bitter  
Cynic”  
They said  
“And his wine  
He brews from wormwood”

I was black and black I always was

From the ebony house of me I watched days swing into  
weeks to months to years

I hunted golden orchids where “All Men are Created Free  
and Equal”—and my skin lay raw and sore from the  
poison ivy of discrimination and the hidden brambles  
of jim crow

I say no sensitive Negro can spend his life in America with-  
out finding his cup holds vinegar and his meat is seas-  
oned with gall

A Mississippi manpack, mobbing bent, beat a tinpan bed-  
lam when I would pluck sweet airs from a Muse’s harp

I aimed my eyes at the holy doors of a white man’s church  
and I heard God’s Servant say “Niggers must be saved  
elsewhere”

While thousands cheered as the Governor of Georgia thun-  
dered “Stand pat on the Constitution” I saw the hungry  
mouths of six-guns daring his black folk to come to the  
polls and vote

I turned to what was called my own race . . . and I looked  
at a white man's drama acted by inky performers

I was a weaver of jagged words  
A warbler of garbled tunes  
A singer of savage songs  
I was bitter  
Yes  
Bitter and sorely sad  
For when I wrote  
I dipped my pen  
In the crazy heart  
Of mad America

Wormwood wine?  
Vinegar?  
Gall?  
A daily diet—  
But  
I did not die  
Of diabetes . . .



## COLOPHON

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