

## Black History Month Poems

### "I, Too" by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

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

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

## “Caged Bird” by Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” from *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Copyright © 1983 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Source: *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House Inc., 1994)

## “Primer For Blacks” by Gwendolyn Brooks

Blackness  
is a title,  
is a preoccupation,  
is a commitment Blacks  
are to comprehend—  
and in which you are  
to perceive your Glory.

The conscious shout  
of all that is white is  
“It’s Great to be white.”  
The conscious shout  
of the slack in Black is  
“It’s Great to be white.”  
Thus all that is white  
has white strength and yours.

The word Black  
has geographic power,  
pulls everybody in:  
Blacks here—  
Blacks there—  
Blacks wherever they may be.  
And remember, you Blacks, what they told you—  
remember your Education:  
“one Drop—one Drop  
maketh a brand new Black.”  
    Oh mighty Drop.  
\_\_\_\_\_And because they have given us kindly  
so many more of our people

Blackness  
stretches over the land.  
Blackness—  
the Black of it,  
the rust-red of it,  
the milk and cream of it,  
the tan and yellow-tan of it,  
the deep-brown middle-brown high-brown of it,  
the “olive” and ochre of it—  
Blackness  
marches on.

The huge, the pungent object of our prime out-  
ride  
is to Comprehend,  
to salute and to Love the fact that we are Black,  
which is our “ultimate Reality,”  
which is the lone ground  
from which our meaningful metamorphosis,  
from which our prosperous staccato,  
group or individual, can rise.

Self-shriveled Blacks.  
Begin with gaunt and marvelous concession:  
YOU are our costume and our fundamental bone.

    All of you—  
    you COLORED ones,  
    you NEGRO ones,  
those of you who proudly cry  
    “I’m half INDIan”—  
those of you who proudly screech  
    “I’VE got the blood of George WASHington in  
MY veins”  
    ALL of you—  
        you proper Blacks,  
    you half-Blacks,  
    you wish-I-weren’t Blacks,  
    Niggeroes and Niggerenes.

You.

## “For My People” by Margaret Walker

For my people everywhere singing their slave songs  
repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their  
blues  
and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an  
unknown god, bending their knees humbly to an  
unseen power;

For my people lending their strength to the years, to  
the  
gone years and the now years and the maybe years,  
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending  
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching  
dragging along never gaining never reaping never  
knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of  
Alabama  
backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor  
and jail and soldier and school and mama and  
cooking  
and playhouse and concert and store and hair and  
Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to  
learn  
to know the reasons why and the answers to and the  
people who and the places where and the days when,  
in  
memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we  
were black and poor and small and different and  
nobody  
cared and nobody wondered and nobody  
understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things  
to  
be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and  
play and drink their wine and religion and success, to  
marry their playmates and bear children and then die  
of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and  
Lenox  
Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New  
Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy

people filling the cabarets and taverns and other  
people’s pockets and needing bread and shoes and  
milk and  
land and money and something—something all our  
own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time  
being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when  
burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied, and  
shackled  
and tangled among ourselves by the unseen  
creatures  
who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering  
in  
the dark of churches and schools and clubs  
and societies, associations and councils and  
committees and  
conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived  
and  
devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,  
preyed on by facile force of state and fad and  
novelty, by  
false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a  
better way  
from confusion, from hypocrisy and  
misunderstanding,  
trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people,  
all the faces, all the adams and eves and their  
countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a  
bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second  
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people  
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of  
healing and a strength of final clenching be the  
pulsing  
in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs  
be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men  
now  
rise and take control.

Margaret Walker, “For My People” from *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1989 by Margaret Walker. Reprinted by permission of University of Georgia Press.

Source: *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (University of Georgia Press, 1989)

## “Nina’s Blues” by Cornelius Eady

Your body, hard vowels  
In a soft dress, is still.

What you can't know  
is that after you died  
All the black poets  
In New York City  
Took a deep breath,  
And breathed you out;  
Dark corners of small clubs,  
The silence you left twitching

On the floors of the gigs  
You turned your back on,  
The balled-up fists of notes  
Flung, angry from a keyboard.

You won't be able to hear us  
Try to etch what rose  
Off your eyes, from your throat.

Out you bleed, not as sweet, or sweaty,  
Through our dark fingertips.  
We drum *rest*  
We drum *thank you*  
We drum *stay*.

## won't you celebrate with me? by Lucille Clifton

won't you celebrate with me  
what i have shaped into  
a kind of life? i had no model.  
born in babylon  
both nonwhite and woman  
what did i see to be except myself?  
i made it up  
here on this bridge between  
starshine and clay,  
my one hand holding tight  
my other hand; come celebrate  
with me that everyday  
something has tried to kill me  
and has failed.

Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me" from *Book of Light*. Copyright © 1993 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press.

Source: *Book of Light* (Copper Canyon Press, 1993)

## “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

## "Black Is Beautiful" by Sharon D. Brown-Rogers

Black is

Black is as beautiful as a bed of milky white clouds.

Black is as beautiful as soft as a newborn baby hair.

Black is as beautiful as standing up for what is right.

Black is as beautiful as trying on grandmother's classy hats.

Black is as beautiful as you and I saying Hi!

Black is as beautiful as two sisters walking hand in hand.

Black is as beautiful as wading in a pond on a hot summer day.

Black is as beautiful as you holding your baby for the very first time.

Black is as beautiful as saying I miss you.

Black is as beautiful as going fishing with your dad.

Black is as beautiful as calling your mother on her birthday.

Black is as beautiful as two brothers playing basketball.

Black is as beautiful braiding your sister's hair.

Black is as beautiful as grandpa taking you to the park.

Black is as beautiful as the sweet sound of a saxophone playing.

Black is as beautiful as eating mom's never fail caramel cake.

Black is as beautiful as the bright rising sun.

Black is as beautiful as a simple kiss placed on the forehead.

Black is as beautiful as lilies on Easter morning.

Black is as beautiful as saying I love you.

Black is me and I AM BEAUTIFUL.

Source: <https://www.familyfriendpoems.com/poem/black-is-beautiful>

## “Short Speech to My Friends” by Amiri Baraka

A political art, let it be  
tenderness, low strings the fingers  
touch, or the width of autumn  
climbing wider avenues, among the virtue  
and dignity of knowing what city  
you're in, who to talk to, what clothes  
—even what buttons—to wear. I address

/ the society  
the image, of  
common utopia.

/ The perversity  
of separation, isolation,

after so many years of trying to enter their kingdoms,  
now they suffer in tears, these others, saxophones whining  
through the wooden doors of their less than gracious homes.  
The poor have become our creators. The black. The thoroughly  
ignorant.

Let the combination of morality  
and inhumanity  
begin.

2.

Is power, the enemy? (Destroyer  
of dawns, cool flesh of valentines, among  
the radios, pauses, drunks  
of the 19th century. I see it,  
as any man's single history. All the possible heroes  
dead from heat exhaustion

at the beach  
or hiding for years from cameras

only to die cheaply in the pages  
of our daily lie.

One hero  
has pretensions toward literature  
one toward the cultivation of errors, arrogance,  
and constantly changing disguises, as trucker, boxer,  
valet, barkeep, in the aging taverns of memory. Making love

to those speedy heroines of masturbation or kicking literal evil  
continually down filmy public stairs.

A compromise  
would be silence. To shut up, even such risk  
as the proper placement  
of verbs and nouns. To freeze the spit  
in mid-air, as it aims itself  
at some valiant intellectual's face.

There would be someone  
who would understand, for whatever  
fancy reason. Dead, lying, Roi, as your children  
cane up, would also rise. As George Armstrong Custer  
these 100 years, has never made  
a mistake.

"Short Speech to My Friends" from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), reprinted in *S O S: POEMS, 1961-2013* © 2014 by The Estate of Amiri Baraka; collection edited by Paul Vangelisti; recorded with the permission of the publisher, Grove Press, an imprint of Grove Atlantic, Inc. Previously published in *Transbluesency: The Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones (1961-1995)* by Marsilio Publishers, 1995.  
Source: *S O S: Poems, 1961-2013* (Grove/Atlantic Inc., 2015)

## "Green-Thumb Boy" by Marilyn Nelson

*Dr. L. H. Pammel*

Hybridization, cross-breeding, evolution:  
He takes to new theories  
like a puppy takes to ice cream.  
We whisper that our Green-Thumb Boy  
is the black Mendel, that Darwin  
would have made good use of Carver's eyes.  
So clear his gift for observation:  
the best collector I've ever known.  
I think we have an entirely new species  
of *Pseudocercospora*.  
And always in his threadbare lapel  
a flower. Even in January.  
I've never asked how.

We had doubts  
about giving him a class to teach,  
but he's done a bang-up job  
with the greenhouse. His students  
see the light of genius  
through the dusky window of his skin.  
Just yesterday, that new boy,  
what's-his-name, from Arkansas,  
tried to raise a ruckus when Carver  
put his dinner tray down.  
He cleared his throat, stared, rattled  
his own tray, scraped his chair legs  
in a rush to move away. Carver  
ate on in silence. Then the boys  
at the table the new boy had moved to  
cleared their throats, rattled their trays  
and scraped their chair legs as they got up  
and moved to Carver's table.

Something about the  
man does that, raises the best  
in you. I've never asked what.  
I guess I'll put his name next to mine  
on that article I'm sending out.

Marilyn Nelson, "Green-Thumb Boy" from *Carver*. Copyright © 2001 by Marilyn Nelson. Reprinted by permission of Highlights for Children/Boyd's Mills Press. Source: *Carver: A Life in Poems* (Front Street, 2001)