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.
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,
Niggories 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 dispossessed 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.
“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 sas
siness 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.

Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" from And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.
“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
death 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.

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.