

POETRY

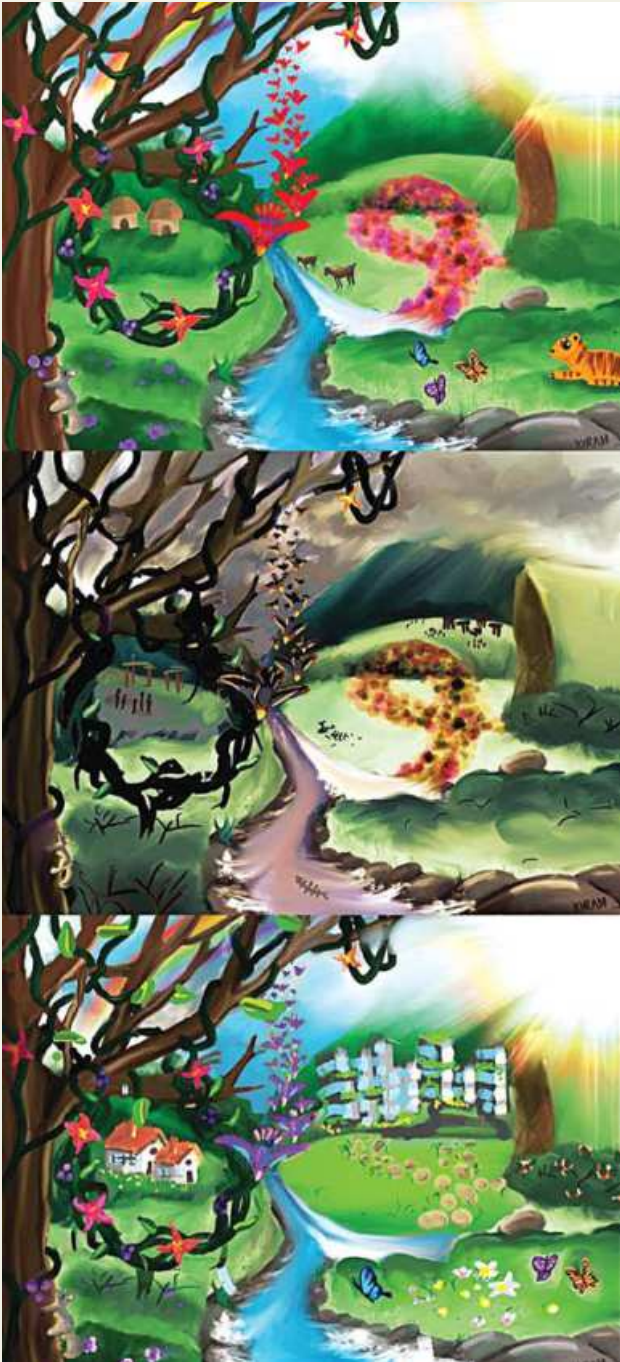


PHOTO COURTESY: KIRAN MAHBOOB

Symbols

AHMAR MAHBOOB

Symbols divide us; symbols unite us.
If your symbols match mine, perhaps we
can be allies;
If your symbols, I don't recognise, you
will be strange - at best.

Through symbols we make sense of the
world;
Through symbols we live our lives.

In language, sounds and scribbles are
symbols;
In religion, clothes and food become
symbols;
In culture, there is nothing that is not a
symbol;
In arts, in science, even in math, symbols
rule our worlds.

Symbols make our worlds, whether
human or not:
Where some use symbols in the here and
now,
We use symbols to escape place and time.

A clever use of symbols, and, lo,
We can go to the moon and come back.
A wise use of symbols, and, lo,
We can create a world just and fair.

A neglect of the symbols, and, lo,
We can fight and feed conflict.
A malicious use of symbols, and, lo
We can destroy our worlds.

Symbols are just symbols, they mean and
they don't mean:
A harmony in symbols is harmony in life;
A disarray in symbols is hell with no end
in sight.

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is Associate Professor at the Department of
Linguistics at the University of Sydney.

You Don't Even Know Earth

KAMAL CHOWDHURY

TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Look! Look outside
Behold the state of the world
Poles once propped up the powerful and
the proud
Now they have all gone now, destroyed by
a virus!

Oh humans, don't you see the human side
Don't you understand what life is all
about?
In honing your knife
You've lost your armor!

Now one can't recognize earth itself
The list of the dead keeps increasing
Neither the rich nor the poor
Know at this time who the real enemy is!

You can't be at war with the air
The whole world is now a battlefield
The sky has its limits and your terrain
Is not as boundless as you once thought it
to be!

Don't venture out; everything is
contaminated!
Stay home for sometime

Nature has turned hostile; the corona
reigns
And we must pay our debts!

Stay safe; stay in some house corner
Keep your country safe
Like your mother's face
Let earth live forever!

Only pray that our combined dreams
Will make these bad times disappear
Let the ones who have lost all recover
Let love live on forever!

Surely we won't lose; humanity must
triumph
We'll see better days coming
The green leaf outside
Will smile again on a sparkling new day!

Kamal Chowdhury is an award-winning poet
and the Chief Coordinator of the National
Implementation Committee for the Celebration
of the Birth Centenary of the Father of the
Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur
Rahman. Translated By Fakhrul Alam, who is
UGC Professor, University of Dhaka.



IN MEMORIAM the Harlem Renaissance

S M MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

Amid laughter, jokes and cheers, I hear
Mr. Jefferson's intellectual sneer. In "life,
liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,"
you bet! I put my money in the safety of
my pocket.

It is a truth self-evident in America
that *not* all men, certainly not the men
and women of "color," were created
equal by the author of the Declaration
of Independence who owned slaves.
Against such a backdrop six scores and
a year later W. E. B. Du Bois coined the
"double consciousness" of the African
Americans – the experience of looking
at one's skin (and soul) through the lens
of a segregated society hungover from
the Civil War and slavery, held to the
standards of a nation that looked back
(or black) in contempt.

In the 1920s, when the ink of
Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation
Proclamation had dried and
disintegrated, when the hooligans
of racial supremacy traded their
Ku Klux Klan white bedsheets for
police uniforms, when mongrels and
hungry hounds were unleashed upon
unarmed civilians, when, in the rural
backwaters and some urban epicenters,
mob lynchings were still pulling out
people's fingers and toes, skinning
them alive, and stringing them on trees
and setting them alight for the crime
of being born Black or being born at
all, it was high time when the Afro-
American consciousness turned the ink
of disintegration into an ink of rage to
blot across the pages of history. Listen to
Claude McKay, an African American poet
who, in 1921, wrote:

"Day dawned, and soon the mixed
crowds came to view / The ghastly
body swaying in the sun; / The women
thronged to look, but never a one /
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
/ And little lads, lynchings that were to be,
/ Danced round the dreadful thing in
fiendish glee."

The ink sparked the conscience of
the Black intellectuals who, severed off
the umbilical cord of history, went on
personal journeys to discover their racial
past festering in the fetus of Yankee
Imperialism. It was a time of revival and
of rebirth; it was time for the Harlem
Renaissance.

Post World War I. As the world was

shuffling off the Victorian pruderies
for the free and easy ways of the Jazz
Age, as the Euro-American (modernist)
literati and culturati rode the Parisian
"movable feast," scholars and artists
from all corners of the United States
turned Harlem, located in the upper
Manhattan area of New York City, into
the Black capital of America. Among
them were actors, musicians, dancers,
painters, sculptors, philosophers,
historians, folklorists, essayists and
novelists. The movement proper,
however, was arguably synonymous
with the wordsmiths, i.e. Claude McKay,
Gwendolyn Bennett, Zora Neale Hurston,
Countée Cullen, Langston Hughes, and
many more. In capturing the essence of
the African American experience, these
bards laid their souls bare, as if to ask
their tormentors, "Hath not the Afro-
Americans eyes?"

"Because my mouth / Is wide with
laughter, / You do not hear / My inner
cry? / Because my feet / Are gay with
dancing / You do not know / I die?" sang
Langston Hughes' "Minstrel Man."

What the masters have and the slaves
lack is power. Power corrupts because
it buys the monopoly on violence.
Being immune to justice is the epitome
of injustice. Fighting violence with
violence has a way of reshaping major
catastrophes into academic apostrophes,
like footnotes in miniature fonts
whispering: "Conditions apply." To rub
off emotions – make someone else feel
what one feels – one must turn the table
on violence itself.

"Hating you shall be a game / Played
with cool hands / And slim fingers,"
wrote Gwendolyn Bennett, "While
rekindled fires / In my eyes / Shall
wound you like swift arrows." Hatred
here is not the petty thirst for revenge,
but the personification of oppression
itself; it "wounds" but does not kill,
which the author uses not as an alibi to
prevent destruction but to reconstruct
the past she has lost: "Memory will lay
its hands / Upon your breast / And you
will understand / My hatred."

Hatred is a passion that unites like
none other. During the First World War,
the African American soldiers joined
arms and shoulders with their white
comrades in their shared hatred for

autocracy, hopes for democracy and
a better future but came home to be
appalled by signs such as 'For Whites
only', 'Negroes keep out', and 'Blacks
and dogs not allowed'. Pining for the
loss of innocence and lost illusions,
Countée Cullen and many others
penned epitaphs to the promises of
equality: 'Some are teething on a silver
spoon, / With stars strung for a rattle; /
I cut my teeth as the black raccoon – /
For implements of battle.' ("Saturday's
Child"). Expressing distinctly Afro-
American experience in Western
rhyme and meter schemes, constantly
experimenting with style and content,
poets from the Harlem Renaissance
could be viewed as the forerunners to
postcolonial and postmodern writers
and artists.

Hatred, however, is never enough.
The human spirit aches for love and
reconciliation – to weave the intricate
patterns of suffering and sorrow into
tapestries of harmony and happiness
through coexistence. Every Renaissance
worthy of the name launches a cosmic
osmosis that bleeds one heart into
another, blends minds together and
binds souls forever (or, at least, some day
in the foreseeable future). The Harlem
Renaissance, though unique, was no
different.

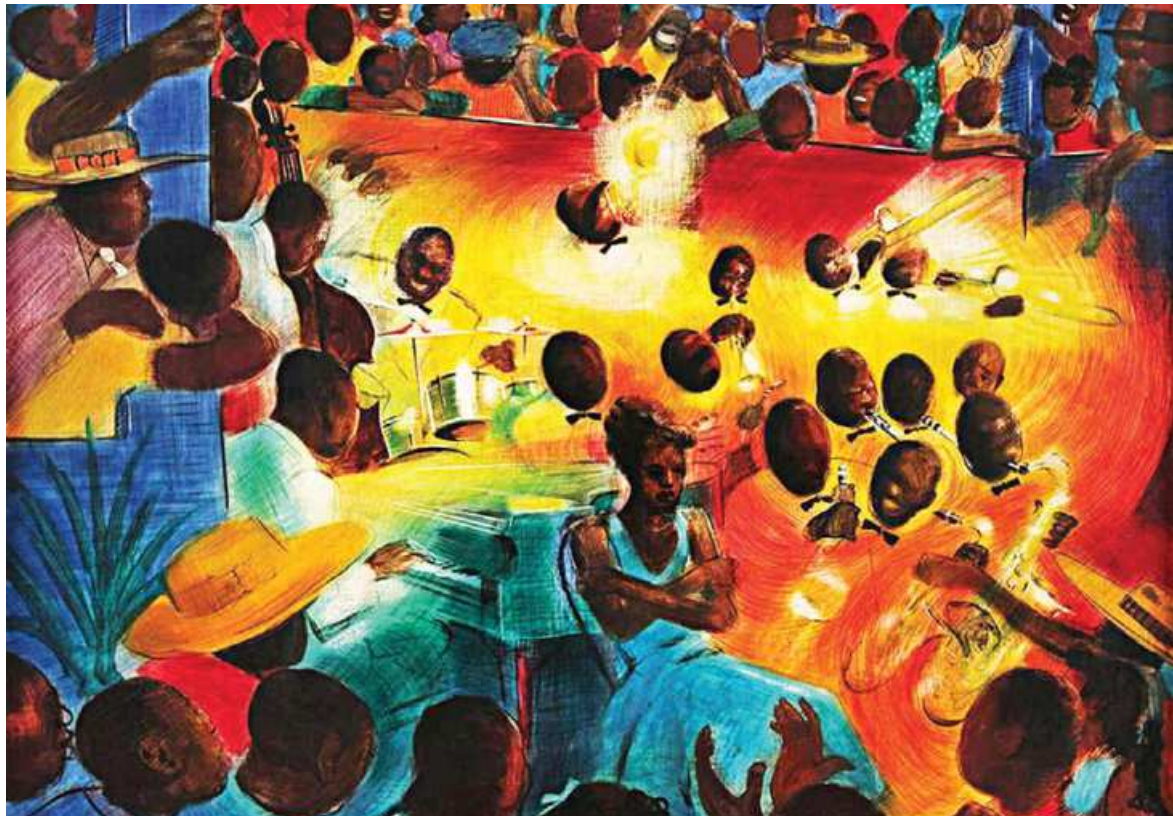
'I am the darker brother. / They
send me to eat in the kitchen / When
company comes, / But I laugh, / And
eat well, / And grow strong' It was a
custom among the slave owners to
send the slaves to the kitchen in the
back of the house, if not the barn with
domesticated animals, for their meals.
As Langston Hughes' description
suggests, the practice of demeaning
people with dark skin was still prevalent
in 1925, just like many of us even now
do not allow our household help to sit
on the sofa, sleep on the beds, drink
off our glasses or eat off our plates,
and use our restrooms, as if providing
domestic service is a contagious disease;
as if treating *them* with dignity would
metamorphose (some of) *us* into
Kafka's cockroach with an arched back,
coarse voice, and numerous arms and
legs wriggling uncontrollably.

What we pretend not to understand
is that *they* do our menial chores so

we wouldn't have to, just as the racist
Americans pretend not to know that the
richest civilization the world has ever
seen sucked the life out of countless
slaves. There is no '*us* versus *them*'; there
is only blood and flesh.

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

to come. Time moves at a glacial pace;
standstill is its climax. Forcing time to its
climax is to bend universal laws. It takes
ages, but the force it unleashes echoes
for eons. Almost from the beginning,
the history of the American dream
was the African American nightmare
which the pioneers of the Harlem
Renaissance were to grab by the horns.



Then." Hughes ends on a hopeful note,
"Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I
am / And be ashamed—" "I, too, am
America." Here is humanity reclaimed;
the "I" is the eye of America – the song of
self-reliance. America is not just cops and
criminals, Congress and constituents,
buyers and sellers, workers and bosses,
men and women, Blacks and Whites
– they are all parts and particles of the
monument of freedom. Take out a kernel
and the dominos tumble.

To forget the past is to disown the
future, for what happened in the days
bygone merely foreshadows what is yet

The "dream deferred" is a landmine. To
feel it, one must step on it – be jolted
awake. Though America is still steeped
in bigotry after centuries of struggle and
suffering, every little child, regardless of
the color of her skin, can at least dream
to rise to the very top, pursue life, liberty
and happiness, and perhaps, spare a
thought in memoriam the Harlem
Renaissance.

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