

Let America Be America Again

by Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem

The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Imperatives for Carrying On in the Aftermath by Natasha Trethewey

Do not hang your head or clench your fists
when even your friend, after hearing the story,
says: *My mother would never put up with that.*

Fight the urge to rattle off statistics: that,
more often, a woman who chooses to leave
is then murdered. The hundredth time

your father says, *But she hated violence,*

why would she marry a guy like that?—
don't waste your breath explaining, again,

how abusers wait, are patient, that they
don't beat you on the first date, sometimes
not even the first few years of a marriage.

Keep an impassive face whenever you hear
Stand by Your Man, and let go your rage
when you recall those words were advice

given your mother. Try to forget the first
trial, before she was dead, when the charge
was only *attempted murder*; don't belabor

the thinking or the sentence that allowed
her ex-husband's release a year later, or
the juror who said, *It's a domestic issue—*

they should work it out themselves. Just
breathe when, after you read your poems
about grief, a woman asks: *Do you think*

your mother was weak for men? Learn
to ignore subtext. Imagine a thought-
cloud above your head, dark and heavy

with the words you cannot say; let silence
rain down. Remember you were told
by your famous professor, that you should

write about something else, *unburden*
yourself of the death of your mother and
just pour your heart out in the poems.

Ask yourself what's in your heart, that
reliquary—blood locket and seed-bed—and
contend with what it means, the folk-saying

you learned from a Korean poet in Seoul:
that *one does not bury the mother's body*
in the ground but in the chest, or—like you—

you carry her corpse on your back.

Dear White America

by Danez Smith

with lines from Amiri Baraka & James Baldwin

I have left Earth in search of darker planets, a solar system that revolves too near a black hole. I have left a patch of dirt in my place & many of you won't know the difference; we are indeed the same color, one of us would eventually become the other. You may give it my name if it makes you feel better while running your hands through its soiled scalp. I have left Earth in search of a new God. I do not trust the God you have given us. My grandmother's hallelujah is only outdone by the fear she nurses every time the blood-fat summer swallows another child who used to sing in the choir. Take your God back, though his songs are beautiful, his miracles are inconsistent. I want the fate of Lazarus for Renisha, I want Chucky, Bo, Meech, Trayvon, Sean & Jonylah risen three days after their entombing, their ghost re-gifted flesh & blood, their flesh & blood re-gifted their children. I have left Earth, I am equal parts sick of your 'go back to Africa' as I am your 'I just don't see color' (neither did the poplar tree). We did not build your boats (though we did leave a trail of kin to guide us home). We did not build your prisons (though we did & we fill them too). We did not ask to be part of your America (though are we not America? Her joints brittle & dragging a ripped gown through Oakland?). I can't stand your ground. I am sick of calling your recklessness the law. *Each night, I count my brothers.* & in the morning, when some do not survive to be counted, *I count the holes they leave.* I reach for black folks & touch only air. Your master magic trick, America. Now he's breathing, now he don't. Abra-cadaver. White bread voodoo. This systemic sorcery you claim not to practice, but have no problem benefitting from. I tried, white people. I tried to love you, but you spent my brother's funeral making plans for brunch, talking too loud next to his bones. You interrupted my black veiled mourning with some mess about an article you read on BuzzFeed. You took one look at the river, plump with the body of boy after boy after boy & asked 'why does it always have to be about race?' Because you made it so! Because you put an asterisk on my sister's gorgeous face! Because you call her pretty (for a black girl)! Because black girls go missing without so much as a whisper of *where?! Because there is no Amber Alert for the Amber Skinned Girls! Because our heroes always end up shot or shootin-up! Because we didn't invent the bullet! Because crack was not our recipe! Because Jordan boomed. Because Emmitt whistled. Because Huey P. spoke. Because Martin preached. Because black boys can always be too loud to live. Because this land is scared of the Black mind. Because they have sold the Black body & appropriated Soul. Because it's taken my father's time, my mother's time, my uncle's time, my brother's & my sister's time, my niece's & my nephew's time ... how much time do you want for your progress?* I have left Earth to find a land where my kin can be safe. I will not rest until black people ain't but people the same color as the good, wet earth, until that means something, until our existence isn't up for debate, until it is honored & blessed & loved & left alone, until then I bid you well, I bid you war, I bid you our lives to gamble with no more. I have left Earth & I am touching everything you beg your telescopes to show you. I am giving the stars their right names. & this life, this new story & history you cannot own or ruin

This, if only this one, is ours.

Demolition Day

by Jane Wong

I saw a crane lift a train. It took the wheels
in its teeth and shook it like a rug.

Truth be told, my failure has been causing me
a lot of grief lately. Just yesterday, a man

bumped into me on purpose. He said,
I'm sorry, did I bump into you?

Conversation is the beginning of all disaster.
How I wish I had a haystack to disappear into then,

a whole hill slumped before me. My legs over
the precipice, becoming a plant to crawl upon.

Or a ring of water at the bottom of a vase,
expanding infinitely—a monsterhead

of lilac perfume. I grow lonelier by the day,
the day lowers in another part of town,

in train cars converted into restaurants,
clinking through the empty night.

Song

by Brigit Pegeen Kelly

Listen: there was a goat's head hanging by ropes in a tree.
All night it hung there and sang. And those who heard it
Felt a hurt in their hearts and thought they were hearing
The song of a night bird. They sat up in their beds, and then
They lay back down again. In the night wind, the goat's head
Swayed back and forth, and from far off it shone faintly
The way the moonlight shone on the train track miles away
Beside which the goat's headless body lay. Some boys
Had hacked its head off. It was harder work than they had imagined.
The goat cried like a man and struggled hard. But they
Finished the job. They hung the bleeding head by the school
And then ran off into the darkness that seems to hide everything.
The head hung in the tree. The body lay by the tracks.
The head called to the body. The body to the head.
They missed each other. The missing grew large between them,
Until it pulled the heart right out of the body, until
The drawn heart flew toward the head, flew as a bird flies
Back to its cage and the familiar perch from which it trills.
Then the heart sang in the head, softly at first and then louder,
Sang long and low until the morning light came up over
The school and over the tree, and then the singing stopped....
The goat had belonged to a small girl. She named
The goat Broken Thorn Sweet Blackberry, named it after
The night's bush of stars, because the goat's silky hair
Was dark as well water, because it had eyes like wild fruit.
The girl lived near a high railroad track. At night
She heard the trains passing, the sweet sound of the train's horn

Pouring softly over her bed, and each morning she woke
To give the bleating goat his pail of warm milk. She sang
Him songs about girls with ropes and cooks in boats.
She brushed him with a stiff brush. She dreamed daily
That he grew bigger, and he did. She thought her dreaming
Made it so. But one night the girl didn't hear the train's horn,
And the next morning she woke to an empty yard. The goat
Was gone. Everything looked strange. It was as if a storm
Had passed through while she slept, wind and stones, rain
Stripping the branches of fruit. She knew that someone
Had stolen the goat and that he had come to harm. She called
To him. All morning and into the afternoon, she called
And called. She walked and walked. In her chest a bad feeling
Like the feeling of the stones gouging the soft undersides
Of her bare feet. Then somebody found the goat's body
By the high tracks, the flies already filling their soft bottles
At the goat's torn neck. Then somebody found the head
Hanging in a tree by the school. They hurried to take
These things away so that the girl would not see them.
They hurried to raise money to buy the girl another goat.
They hurried to find the boys who had done this, to hear
Them say it was a joke, a joke, it was nothing but a joke....
But listen: here is the point. The boys thought to have
Their fun and be done with it. It was harder work than they
Had imagined, this silly sacrifice, but they finished the job,
Whistling as they washed their large hands in the dark.
What they didn't know was that the goat's head was already
Singing behind them in the tree. What they didn't know
Was that the goat's head would go on singing, just for them,
Long after the ropes were down, and that they would learn to listen,
Pail after pail, stroke after patient stroke. They would
Wake in the night thinking they heard the wind in the trees
Or a night bird, but their hearts beating harder. There
Would be a whistle, a hum, a high murmur, and, at last, a song,
The low song a lost boy sings remembering his mother's call.
Not a cruel song, no, no, not cruel at all. This song
Is sweet. It is sweet. The heart dies of this sweetness.

Home

by Warsan Shire

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark.

you only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.

your neighbours running faster
than you, the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind
the old tin factory is
holding a gun bigger than his body,
you only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

no one would leave home unless home
chased you, fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.

it's not something you ever thought about
doing, and so when you did -
you carried the anthem under your breath,
waiting until the airport toilet
to tear up the passport and swallow,
each mouthful of paper making it clear that
you would not be going back.

you have to understand,
no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land.

who would choose to spend days
and nights in the stomach of a truck
unless the miles travelled
meant something more than journey.

no one would choose to crawl under fences,
be beaten until your shadow leaves you,
raped, then drowned, forced to the bottom of
the boat because you are darker, be sold,
starved, shot at the border like a sick animal,
be pitied, lose your name, lose your family,
make a refugee camp a home for a year or two or ten,
stripped and searched, find prison everywhere
and if you survive
and you are greeted on the other side
with
go home blacks, refugees
dirty immigrants, asylum seekers
sucking our country dry of milk,
dark, with their hands out
smell strange, savage -
look what they've done to their own countries,
what will they do to ours?

the dirty looks in the street

softer than a limb torn off,
the indignity of everyday life
more tender than fourteen men who
look like your father, between
your legs, insults easier to swallow
than rubble, than your child's body
in pieces - for now, forget about pride
your survival is more important.

i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore
unless home tells you to
leave what you could not behind,
even if it was human.

no one leaves home until home
is a damp voice in your ear saying
leave, run now, i don't know what
i've become.

All They Want Is My Money My Pussy My Blood **by Morgan Parker**

I am free with the following conditions.
Give it up gimme gimme.
Okay so I'm Black in America right and I walk into a bar.
I drink a lot of wine and kiss a Black man on his beard.
I do whatever I want because I could die any minute.
I don't mean YOLO I mean they are hunting me.
I know my pussy is real good because they said so.
I say to my friend I am broke as a joke.
I am Starvin' Like Marvin Gaye.
I'm so hungry I could get it on.
There's far too many of me dying.
The present is not so different.
Everybody looks like everybody I worked with.
Everybody looks like everybody I've kissed.
Men champion men and animals.
Everybody thinks I'm going to die.
At the museum I tell the school group about Black art.
I tell them the word contemporary.
I have a nose ring I forget about.
I have a brother and he is also Black.
I am a little modern to the fault.
I say this painting is contemporary like you and me.

They ask me about slavery. They say Martin Luther King.
At school they learned that Black people happened.
The present is not so different.
I'm looking into their Black faces.
They do not understand that they exist.
I'm Black in America and I walk
into a bar and drink a lot of wine, kiss a white man on his beard.
There is no indictment.
I could die any minute of depression.
I just want to have sex most of the time.
I just want my student loans to disappear.
I just want to understand my savings account.
What is happening to my five dollar one cent.
I am free with the following conditions.
What is happening to my brother.
What if I do something wrong.
My blood is so hot and wet right now.
I know they want it.
I do everything right just incase.
I don't want to give away my money but here I am.
It's so stupid I have to say here I am.
They like to be on top.
I am being set up.
I am a tree and some fruits are good and some are bad.

Poem about My Rights

by June Jordan

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
my head about this poem about why I can't
go out without changing my clothes my shoes
my body posture my gender identity my age
my status as a woman alone in the evening/
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/
the point being that I can't do what I want
to do with my own body because I am the wrong
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and
suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/
or far into the woods and I wanted to go
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking
about children or thinking about the world/all of it
disclosed by the stars and the silence:
I could not go and I could not think and I could not
stay there
alone
as I need to be
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own

body and
who in the hell set things up
like this
and in France they say if the guy penetrates
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me
and if after stabbing him if after screams if
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing
a hammer to his head if even after that if he
and his buddies fuck me after that
then I consented and there was
no rape because finally you understand finally
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was
wrong again to be me being me where I was/wrong
to be who I am
which is exactly like South Africa
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland
and if
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to
self-immolation of the villages and if after that
we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they
claim my consent:
Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about
and according to the *Times* this week
back in 1966 the C.I.A. decided that they had this problem
and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they
killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba
and before that it was my father on the campus
of my Ivy League school and my father afraid
to walk into the cafeteria because he said he
was wrong the wrong age the wrong skin the wrong
gender identity and he was paying my tuition and
before that
it was my father saying I was wrong saying that
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a
boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and
that I should have had straighter hair and that
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should
just be one/a boy and before that
it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for
my nose and braces for my teeth and telling me
to let the books loose to let them loose in other
words

I am very familiar with the problems of the C.I.A.
and the problems of South Africa and the problems
of Exxon Corporation and the problems of white
America in general and the problems of the teachers
and the preachers and the F.B.I. and the social
workers and my particular Mom and Dad/I am very
familiar with the problems because the problems
turn out to be
me

I am the history of rape

I am the history of the rejection of who I am

I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of
myself

I am the history of battery assault and limitless
armies against whatever I want to do with my mind
and my body and my soul and

whether it's about walking out at night

or whether it's about the love that I feel or

whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or

the sanctity of my national boundaries

or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity

of each and every desire

that I know from my personal and idiosyncratic

and indisputably single and singular heart

I have been raped

be-

cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age

the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the

wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic

the wrong sartorial I

I have been the meaning of rape

I have been the problem everyone seeks to

eliminate by forced

penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/

but let this be unmistakable this poem

is not consent I do not consent

to my mother to my father to the teachers to

the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy

to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon

idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in

cars

I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name

My name is my own my own my own

and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this

but I can tell you that from now on my resistance

my simple and daily and nightly self-determination

may very well cost you your life

Good Bones by Maggie Smith

Life is short, though I keep this from my children.
Life is short, and I've shortened mine
in a thousand delicious, ill-advised ways,
a thousand deliciously ill-advised ways
I'll keep from my children. The world is at least
fifty percent terrible, and that's a conservative
estimate, though I keep this from my children.
For every bird there is a stone thrown at a bird.
For every loved child, a child broken, bagged,
sunk in a lake. Life is short and the world
is at least half terrible, and for every kind
stranger, there is one who would break you,
though I keep this from my children. I am trying
to sell them the world. Any decent realtor,
walking you through a real shithole, chirps on
about good bones: This place could be beautiful,
right? You could make this place beautiful.

Do not go gentle into that good night by Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.