

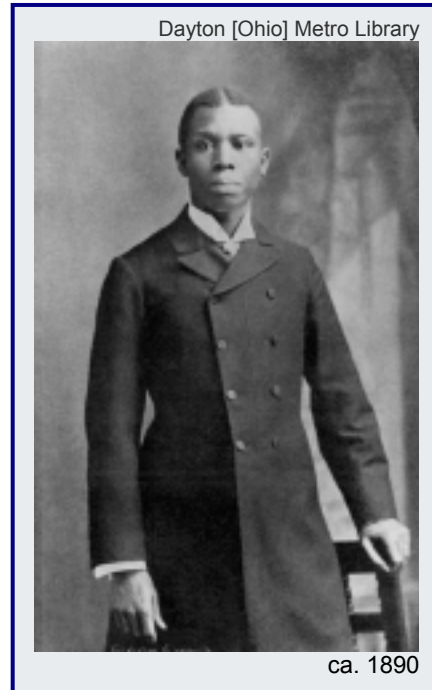
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Four Poems from *Lyrics of Lowly Life*

1896

“We Wear the Mask”
“Ode to Ethiopia”
“The Banjo Song”
“The Colored Soldiers”

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___ We Wear the Mask ___

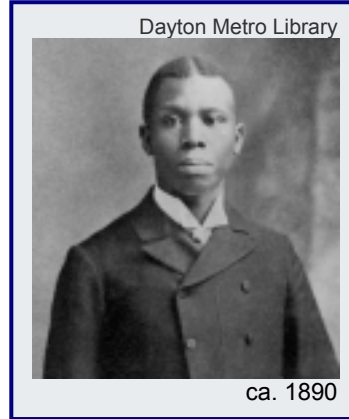
We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

Ode to Ethiopia

Paul Laurence Dunbar
1895



O MOTHER RACE! to thee I bring
This pledge of faith unwavering,
This tribute to thy glory.
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,
When Slavery crushed thee with its heel,
With thy dear blood all gory.

Sad days were those—ah, sad indeed!
But through the land the fruitful seed
Of better times was growing.
The plant of freedom upward sprung,
And spread its leaves so fresh and young—
Its blossoms now are blowing.

On every hand in this fair land,
Proud Ethiope's swarthy children stand
Beside their fairer neighbor;
The forests flee before their stroke,
Their hammers ring, their forges smoke,—
They stir in honest labour.

They tread the fields where honour calls;
Their voices sound through senate halls
In majesty and power.
To right they cling; the hymns they sing
Up to the skies in beauty ring,
And bolder grow each hour.

Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul;
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll
In characters of fire.
High 'mid the clouds of Fame's bright sky
Thy banner's blazoned folds now fly,
And truth shall lift them higher.

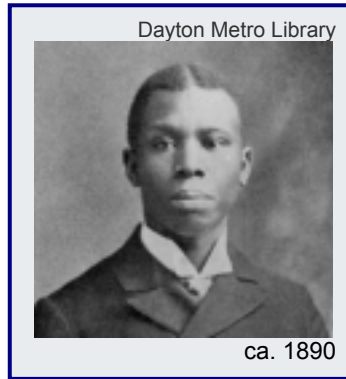
Thou hast the right to noble pride,
Whose spotless robes were purified
By blood's severe baptism.
Upon thy brow the cross was laid,
And labour's painful sweat-beads made
A consecrating chrism.

No other race, or white or black,
When bound as thou wert, to the rack,
So seldom stooped to grieving;
No other race, when free again,
Forgot the past and proved them men
So noble in forgiving.

Go on and up! Our souls and eyes
Shall follow thy continuous rise;
Our ears shall list thy story
From bards who from thy root shall spring,
And proudly tune their lyres to sing
Of Ethiopia's glory.

The Banjo Song

Paul Laurence Dunbar
1895



Oh, dere's lots o' keer an' trouble
In dis world to swaller down;
An' ol' Sorrer's purty lively
In her way o' gittin' roun'.
Yet dere's times when I furgit 'em
Aches an' pains an' troubles all,—
An' it's when I tek at ebenin'
My ol' banjo f'om de wall.

'Bout de time dat night is fallin'
An' my daily wu'k is done,
An' above de shady hilltops
I kin see de settin' sun;
When de quiet, restful shadders
Is beginnin' jes' to fall,—
Den I take de little banjo
F'om its place upon de wall.

Den my fam'ly gadders roun' me
In de fadin' o' de light,
Ez I strike de strings to try 'em
Ef dey all is tuned er-right.
An' it seems we're so nigh heaben
We kin hyeah de angels sing
When de music o' dat banjo
Sets my cabin all er-ring.

An' my wife an' all de othahs,—
Male an' female, small an' big,—
Even up to gray-haired granny,
Seem jes' boun' to do a jig;
'Twell I change de style o' music,
Change de movement an' de time,
An' de ringin' little banjo
Plays an ol' hea't-feelin' hime.

An' somehow my th'oat gits choky,
An' a lump keeps tryin' to rise
Lak it wan'ed to ketch de water
Dat was flowin' to my eyes;
An' I feel dat I could sorter
Knock de socks clean off o' sin
Ez I hyeah my po' ol' granny
Wif huh tremblin' voice jine in.

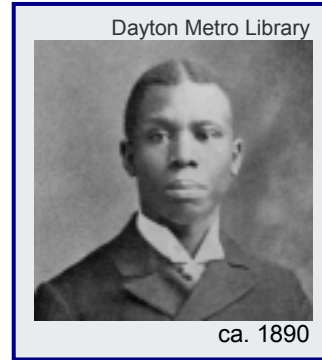
Den we all th'ow in our voices
Fu' to he'p de chune out too,
Like a big camp-meetin' choiry
Tryin' to sing a mou'nah th'oo.
An' our th'oahts let out de music,
Sweet an' solemn, loud an' free,
'Twell de rafters o' my cabin
Echo wif de melody.

Oh, de music o' de banjo,
Quick an' deb'lish, solemn, slow,
Is de greates' joy an' solace
Dat a weary slave kin know!
So jes' let me hyeah it ringin',
Dough de chune be po' an' rough,
It's a pleasure; an' de pleasures
O' dis life is few enough.

Now, de blessed little angels
Up in heaben, we are told,
Don't do nothin' all dere lifetime
'Ceptin' play on ha'ps o' gold.
Now I think heaben'd be mo' homelike
Ef we'd hyeah some music fall
F'om a real ol'-fashioned banjo,
Like dat one upon de wall.

The Colored Soldiers

Paul Laurence Dunbar
1895



If the muse were mine to tempt it
And my feeble voice were strong,
If my tongue were trained to measures,
I would sing a stirring song.
I would sing a song heroic
Of those noble sons of Ham,
Of the gallant colored soldiers
Who fought for Uncle Sam!

In the early days you scorned them,
And with many a flip and flout,
Said "These battles are the white man's
And the whites will fight them out."
Up the hills you fought and faltered,
In the vales you strove and bled,
While your ears still heard the thunder
Of the foes' increasing tread.

Then distress fell on the nation
And the flag was drooping low;
Should the dust pollute your banner?
No! the nation shouted, No!
So when War, in savage triumph,
Spread abroad his funeral pall—
Then you called the colored soldiers,
And they answered to your call.

And like hounds unleashed and eager
For the life blood of the prey,
Sprung they forth and bore them bravely
In the thickest of the fray.
And where'er the fight was hottest,
Where the bullets fastest fell,
There they pressed unblanched and fearless.
At the very mouth of hell.

Ah, they rallied to the standard
To uphold it by their might;
None were stronger in the labors,
None were braver in the fight.
From the blazing breach of Wagner
To the plains of Olustee,
They were foremost in the fight
Of the battles of the free.

And at Pillow! God have mercy
On the deeds committed there,
And the souls of those poor victims
Sent to Thee without a prayer.
Let the fullness of Thy pity
O'er the hot wrought spirits sway,
Of the gallant colored soldiers
Who fell fighting on that day!

Yes, the Blacks enjoy their freedom,
And they won it dearly, too;
For the life blood of their thousands
Did the southern fields bedew.
In the darkness of their bondage,
In their depths of slavery's night,
Their muskets flashed the dawning,
And they fought their way to light.

They were comrades then and brothers,
Are they more or less to-day?
They were good to stop a bullet
And to front the fearful fray.
They were citizens and soldiers,
When rebellion raised its head;
And the traits that made them worthy,—
Ah! those virtues are not dead.

They have shared your nightly vigils,
They have shared your daily toil;
And their blood with yours commingling
Has enriched the Southern soil.
They have slept and marched and suffered
'Neath the same dark skies as you,
They have met as fierce a foeman,
And have been as brave and true.

And their deeds shall find a record,
In the registry of Fame;
For their blood has cleansed completely
Every blot of Slavery's shame.
So all honor and all glory
To those noble Sons of Ham—
The gallant colored soldiers,
Who fought for Uncle Sam!