He's my ace-boy, 
Gone away. 
Wake up and live! 
He used to say.

Squares 
Who couldn't dig him, 
Plant him now— 
Out where it makes 
No diff' no how.

125th Street

Face like a chocolate bar 
full of nuts and sweet. 
Face like a jack-o'-lantern, 
candle inside. 
Face like slice of melon, 
grin that wide.

Theme for English B

The instructor said, 

Go home and write 
a page tonight. 
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple? 

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem. 
I went to school there, then Durham, then here 
to this college on the hill above Harlem. 
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem, 
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas, 
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y, 
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator up 
to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me 
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what

I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you: 
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page. 
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who? 
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present, 
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach. 
I guess being colored doesn't make me not like 
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write? 
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be 
a part of you, instructor. 
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you. 
That's American. 
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me. 
Nor do I often want to be a part of you. 
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you, 
I guess you learn from me— 
although you're older—and white— 
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

Boogie: 1 A.M.

Good evening, daddy! 
I know you've heard 
The boogie-woogie rumble 
Of a dream deferred 
Trilling the treble 
And twining the bass 
Into midnight ruffles 
Of cut-gut lace.

Nightmare Boogie

I had a dream 
and I could see 
a million faces 
black as me!

4. At the southern edge of Harlem. 
5. Like Winston-Salem, a city in North Carolina. 
6. City College of the City University of New York (CCNY).
The Bitter River

(Dedicated to the memory of Charlie Lang and Ernest Green, each fourteen years old when lynched together beneath the Shubuta Bridge over the Chicassawby River in Mississippi, October 12th, 1942.)

There is a bitter river
Flowing through the South.
Too long has the taste of its water
Been in my mouth.
There is a bitter river
Dark with filth and mud.
Too long has its evil poison
Poisoned my blood.
I've drunk of the bitter river
And its gall coats the red of my tongue,
Mixed with the blood of the lynched boys
From its iron bridge hung,
Mixed with the hopes that are drowned there
In the snake-like hiss of its stream
Where I drank of the bitter river
That strangled my dream:
The book studied—but useless,
Tools handled—but unused,
Knowledge acquired but thrown away,
Ambition battered and bruised.
Oh, water of the bitter river
With your taste of blood and clay,
You reflect no stars by night,
No sun by day.

The bitter river reflects no stars—
It gives back only the glint of steel bars
And dark bitter faces behind steel bars:
The Scottsboro boys* behind steel bars,
Lewis Jones* behind steel bars,
The voteless share-cropper behind steel bars,
The labor leader behind steel bars,
The soldier thrown from a Jim Crow† bus behind steel bars,
The 15¢ muggers behind steel bars,
The girl who sells her body behind steel bars,
And my grandfather's back with its ladder of scars,
Long ago, long ago—the whip and steel bars—
The bitter river reflects no stars.

"Wait, be patient," you say.
"Your folks will have a better day."
But the swirl of the bitter river
Takes your words away.
"Work, education, patience
Will bring a better day."
The swirl of the bitter river
Carries your "patience" away.
"Disrupter! Agitator!
Trouble maker!" you say.
The swirl of the bitter river
Sweeps your lies away.
I did not ask for this river
Nor the taste of its bitter brew.
I was given its water
As a gift from you.
Yours has been the power
To force my back to the wall
And make me drink of the bitter cup
Mixed with blood and gall.

You have lynched my comrades
Where the iron bridge crosses the stream,
Underpaid me for my labor,
And spit in the face of my dream.
You forced me to the bitter river
With the hiss of its snake-like song—
Now your words no longer have meaning—
I have drunk at the river too long:
Dreamer of dreams to be broken,
Builder of hopes to be smashed,
Loser from an empty pocket
Of meagre cash,
Bitter bearer of burdens
And singer of weary song.
I've drunk at the bitter river
With its filth and its mud too long.
Tired now of the bitter river,
Tired now of the pat on the back,
Tired now of the steel bars
Because my face is black,
I'm tired of segregation,
Tired of filth and mud,
I've drunk of the bitter river
And it's turned to steel in my blood.

Oh, tragic bitter river
Where the lynched boys hung,
The gall of your bitter water
Coats my tongue.
The blood of your bitter water
For me gives back no stars.
I'm tired of the bitter river:
Tired of the bars!

* New African American teenagers who, after nearly being lynched, were tried and imprisoned in 1931 for the supposed rape of two white women.
† The Supreme Court overturned the decision, but the State of Alabama continued to prosecute members of the group.
* British novelist (1897–1939), imprisoned for his involvement in the Communist Party
* Discriminatory laws enforcing racial segregation in the south between 1877 and the 1950s.
The Negro Speaks of Rivers

(To W. E. B. DuBois)¹

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human
blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep,
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it,²
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to
New Orleans,³ and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the
sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

1921, 1926

1. African American writer and civil rights leader
2. The Nile River was the site of ancient Egyptian
civilization. The Euphrates River was the cradle of
ancient Babylonian civilization. The Congo, in
West-Central Africa, is named after the Congo
kingdom (fourteenth to sixteenth centuries).
3. President Lincoln's decision to end slavery
stemmed from a visit to New Orleans.

The Weary Blues

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.

Down on Lenox Avenue⁴ the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway... He did a lazy sway...
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.

O Blues! Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues! Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied—
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

1925, 1926

4. Major street in Harlem; now Malcolm X Boulevard.