

William Waring Cuney

Storefront church



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for Adeline:
ragtime poems
blues poems
ballad poems
and
gospel poems

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Darkness hides His throne

My God is so high,
you can not get over Him.

My God is so low,
you can not get under Him.

My God is so wide,
you can not get around Him.

He can not be measured,
He can not be known.

Darkness covers His pavillion,
darkness hides His throne.

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Roll, Jordan, roll

Will the river be chilly,
will the river be cold,
will the river freeze my soul?

Roll, Jordan, roll

Oh brother,
when my face is a looking-glass
some morning -

Oh sister,
when my room is a public hall
some evening -

Roll, Jordan, roll

Oh sister,
will you bow down your head for me
some morning?

Oh brother,
will you say a last prayer for me
some evening?

Will the river freeze my soul?

Will the river be chilly,
will the river be cold,
will the river freeze my soul?

Guitar music

It takes two hearts
to make guitar music.

First,
the heart of the guitar-maker,
a workman at his bench -
a saw, a plane, a chisel,
sandpaper, varnish.

Second,
the heart of the guitar-player,
the sad-gay heart
of a singer of songs.

Two hearts,
to make guitar music.

My Jesus

Conception

Jesus' mother never had no man.
God came to her one day and said:
Mary, child, kiss my hand.

Crucifixion

Oh my, oh yes, up on the cross
with a wound in His side,
oh my, oh yes, up on the cross -
that is how Jesus died.

Resurrection

Way before the break of day
angels rolled the rock away.
So early in the morning,
so early in the morning,
way before the break of day.
Angels rolled the rock away.

No images

She does not know
her beauty,
she thinks her brown body
has no glory.

If she could dance
naked
under palm trees
and see her image in the river,
she would know.

But there are no palm trees
on the street,
and dish water gives back
no images.

Down-home boy

I'm a down-home boy
trying to get ahead.
It seems like I go
backwards instead.

Been in Chicago
over a year.
Had nothing down home,
not much here.

A measly job,
a greedy boss -
that's how come
I left Waycross.

Those Great Lake winds
blow all around:
I'm a light-coat man
in a heavy-coat town.

Carry me back

Carry me back to old Virginia.
Magnolia blossoms fill the air.
Carry me back to old Virginia:
the only way you'll get me there.

Nineteen-twenty-nine

Some folks hollered hard times
in nineteen-twenty-nine.
In nineteen-twenty-eight
say I was way behind.

Some folks hollered hard times
because hard times were new.
Hard times is all I ever had,
why should I lie to you?

Some folks hollered hard times.
What is it all about?
Things were bad for me when
those hard times started out.

Lazarus

The shoes that Lazarus wears
have heels for heels
the shoes that Lazarus wears
have heels for toes.
Who can follow the footprints
Lazarus leaves,
or, the lonesome road where poor
Lazarus goes?

Hard-time blues

Went down home 'bout a year ago
things so bad, Lord, my heart was sore.
Folks had nothing was a sin and shame
every-body said hard time was the blame.
Great-God-a-mighty folks feeling bad
lost every thing they ever had.

Sun was shining fourteen days and no rain
hoeing and planting was all in vain.
Hard hard times, Lord, all around
meal barrels empty crops burnt to the ground.
Great-God-a-mighty folks feeling bad
lost every thing they ever had.

Skinny looking children bellies poking out
that old pellagra without a doubt.
Old folks hanging 'round the cabin door
ain't seen times this hard before.
Great-God-a-mighty folks feeling bad
lost every thing they ever had.

I went to the Boss at the Commissary store
folks all starving please don't close your door
want more food a little more time to pay
Boss Man laughed and walked away.
Great-God-a-mighty folks feeling bad
lost every thing they ever had.

Landlord coming 'round when the rent is due
you ain't got the money take your home from you
take your mule and horse even take your cow
get offa my land you ain't no good no how.
Great-God-a-mighty folks feeling bad
lost every thing they ever had.

Let me tell you blues singers something

Let me tell you blues singers something,
one thing maybe that you do not know.
Let me tell you blues singers something,
one thing maybe that you do not know.
The songs of the Lord will take you down any
kind of lonely old road you may have to go.

Saturday night talk

Sometimes I wonder,
I really do,
about the kids
and you.

Sometimes I wonder,
the way things are,
if I will come out
ahead of Pa.

The one thing
Pa always said:
'Want to own this land
before I'm dead'.

The day he died
I can't forget,
he left a good name
a farm in debt.

Sometimes I wonder,
I really do,
if other folks
wonder, too.

Storefront church

Brothers and sisters,
by way of the love of the Lord -
we sang a song this evening
about the blind man
who stood on the road and cried
'Lord, show me the way to go home'.

Brothers and sisters,
by way of the love of the Lord -
I want to say this evening:
unless we accept the love of the Lord
unless we accept Jesus Christ
to heal our sins
to guide us in this wicked world -
we are like the blind man
who stood on the road crying
'Lord, show me the way to go home'.

Brothers and sisters,
by way of the love of the Lord -
thank God, the Father!
Praise Jesus, the Son!

Bessie Smith

Oh, Tennessee road,
late at night -
where do you die
if your face ain't white?

Prayer for a visitor

Lord -
this white man
here this evening -
may he be blessed by Thee.

Lord -
this white man
in our midst tonight -
may he see the light.

Lord -
this white man
here in our church -
if he is a policeman
come to listen about
the sit-ins, and the sit-downs,
the meetings, and the picket lines -
Lord,
You tell him
that we have just begun.

Lord -
this white man
here this evening -
if he is a detective
come to find out
what we are about,
what our next move will be -
Lord, You tell him
that we do not know.

Pharaoh
rules so hard in the land
that God let Pharaoh feel
the strength of God's hand.

Lord -
this white man
here this evening -
may he be blessed by Thee.

Amen.

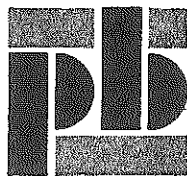
Say Amen

Hear me talking
say Amen
hear me preaching
say Amen
there will be a day
of reckoning
say Amen
there will be a
Day of Reckoning
say Amen
hear me preaching
say Amen
hear me talking
say Amen

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- 19 Sebastian Clarke. Sun song
- 20 Robert Hayden. The night-blooming cereus
- 21 Eseoghene Barrett. The conflicting eye
- 22 Frank John. Light a fire
- 23 Waring Cuney. Storefront church

William Waring Cuney



was born in Washington, D.C., on 6 May 1906.

After attending the public schools and Howard University in his native town he went to Lincoln (Pennsylvania) where he became a member of the University Glee Club and eventually decided to make singing his career.

To this end, he first went to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and later to Rome.

His twin brother also trained for a musical career (piano, in his case) but neither ever performed professionally: Waring switched to writing (he never mentions any other work) and Wright to typography: until his recent retirement he taught printing and especially the linotype machine at Armstrong High in Washington – a school which counts Duke Ellington among its famous graduates – and he printed the annual poetry keepsakes with which Georgia Douglas Johnson kept in touch with the world.

Waring Cuney's poem 'No images' (written when he was eighteen)

won a prize in the Opportunity poetry contest in 1926:

it is indeed one of the most complete expressions of the basic philosophy of the Harlem Renaissance, but through its frequent inclusion in anthologies and its translation (into more languages than even the work of Langston Hughes has ever achieved) it earned Waring Cuney the reputation of being a 'one poem poet'. This is far from being just, for Waring still continues to write his charming 'anecdotes' and little 'observations'.

Some of the poems of the middle and late 'thirties were recorded by Josh White as 'Southern exposure' in 1941 – others were set to music by Al Haig and later by Nina Simone. A large selection of Cuney's work appeared as Puzzles in 1960 in a very limited edition for a Dutch bibliophile society: a beautiful book, with eight two-colour woodcuts by Ru van Rossem, marred only by a very silly introduction (not by the author).

During the second world war, Cuney served in the South Pacific as a technical sergeant in the army: his three and a half years of active service earned him three bronze battle stars.

Ever since, he has lived in the Bronx district of New York, where after 1962 he withdrew so completely from society that even formerly close friends like Langston Hughes were at a loss to know whether he was still alive or not.

His silence was broken ten years later, with an indignant note to Black World, slapping the wrists of John Oliver Killens who had called Waring's early religious verse 'irreverent'.

Somehow, Waring Cuney always had an 'underground' reputation, kept alive despite his long silence by the indomitable presence of 'No images' (now no longer given to anthologies by itself alone) and although, in coupling Cuney's name with that of Aimé Césaire, Don Lee erred on the same side as I did in the Puzzles introduction (where I called our man 'a major poet') one can but sympathize with his description of Waring Cuney as a 'poet who knew, and said it'.