**[ROBERT FROST](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)**

**The Gift Outright**

The land was ours before we were the land’s.

She was our land more than a hundred years

Before we were her people. She was ours

In Massachusetts, in Virginia,

But we were England’s, still colonials,

Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,

Possessed by what we now no more possessed.

Something we were withholding made us weak

Until we found out that it was ourselves

We were withholding from our land of living,

And forthwith found salvation in surrender.

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright

(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)

To the land vaguely realizing westward,

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,

Such as she was, such as she would become.

[**ROBERT FROST**](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)

**Home Burial**

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs

Before she saw him. She was starting down,

Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.

She took a doubtful step and then undid it

To raise herself and look again. He spoke

Advancing toward her: ‘What is it you see

From up there always—for I want to know.’

She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,

And her face changed from terrified to dull.

He said to gain time: ‘What is it you see,’

Mounting until she cowered under him.

‘I will find out now—you must tell me, dear.’

She, in her place, refused him any help

With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.

She let him look, sure that he wouldn’t see,

Blind creature; and awhile he didn’t see.

But at last he murmured, ‘Oh,’ and again, ‘Oh.’

‘What is it—what?’ she said.

                                          ‘Just that I see.’

‘You don’t,’ she challenged. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘The wonder is I didn’t see at once.

I never noticed it from here before.

I must be wonted to it—that’s the reason.

The little graveyard where my people are!

So small the window frames the whole of it.

Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,

Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight

On the sidehill. We haven’t to mind *those*.

But I understand: it is not the stones,

But the child’s mound—’

                             ‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm

That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs;

And turned on him with such a daunting look,

He said twice over before he knew himself:

‘Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?’

‘Not you! Oh, where’s my hat? Oh, I don’t need it!

I must get out of here. I must get air.

I don’t know rightly whether any man can.’

‘Amy! Don’t go to someone else this time.

Listen to me. I won’t come down the stairs.’

He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.

‘There’s something I should like to ask you, dear.’

‘You don’t know how to ask it.’

                                              ‘Help me, then.’

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

‘My words are nearly always an offense.

I don’t know how to speak of anything

So as to please you. But I might be taught

I should suppose. I can’t say I see how.

A man must partly give up being a man

With women-folk. We could have some arrangement

By which I’d bind myself to keep hands off

Anything special you’re a-mind to name.

Though I don’t like such things ’twixt those that love.

Two that don’t love can’t live together without them.

But two that do can’t live together with them.’

She moved the latch a little. ‘Don’t—don’t go.

Don’t carry it to someone else this time.

Tell me about it if it’s something human.

Let me into your grief. I’m not so much

Unlike other folks as your standing there

Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.

I do think, though, you overdo it a little.

What was it brought you up to think it the thing

To take your mother-loss of a first child

So inconsolably—in the face of love.

You’d think his memory might be satisfied—’

‘There you go sneering now!’

                                           ‘I’m not, I’m not!

You make me angry. I’ll come down to you.

God, what a woman! And it’s come to this,

A man can’t speak of his own child that’s dead.’

‘You can’t because you don't know how to speak.

If you had any feelings, you that dug

With your own hand—how could you?—his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,

Making the gravel leap and leap in air,

Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly

And roll back down the mound beside the hole.

I thought, Who is that man? I didn’t know you.

And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs

To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.

Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice

Out in the kitchen, and I don’t know why,

But I went near to see with my own eyes.

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes

Of the fresh earth from your own baby’s grave

And talk about your everyday concerns.

You had stood the spade up against the wall

Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.’

‘I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.

I’m cursed. God, if I don’t believe I’m cursed.’

‘I can repeat the very words you were saying:

“Three foggy mornings and one rainy day

Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.”

Think of it, talk like that at such a time!

What had how long it takes a birch to rot

To do with what was in the darkened parlor?

You *couldn’t* care! The nearest friends can go

With anyone to death, comes so far short

They might as well not try to go at all.

No, from the time when one is sick to death,

One is alone, and he dies more alone.

Friends make pretense of following to the grave,

But before one is in it, their minds are turned

And making the best of their way back to life

And living people, and things they understand.

But the world’s evil. I won’t have grief so

If I can change it. Oh, I won’t, I won’t!’

‘There, you have said it all and you feel better.

You won’t go now. You’re crying. Close the door.

The heart’s gone out of it: why keep it up.

Amy! There’s someone coming down the road!’

‘*You*—oh, you think the talk is all. I must go—

Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you—’

‘If—you—do!’ She was opening the door wider.

‘Where do you mean to go?  First tell me that.

I’ll follow and bring you back by force.  I *will!*—’

[**ROBERT FROST**](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)

**Fire and Ice**

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I’ve tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire.

But if it had to perish twice,

I think I know enough of hate

To say that for destruction ice

Is also great

And would suffice.

[**CARL SANDBURG**](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/carl-sandburg)

**Chicago**

Hog Butcher for the World,

   Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,

   Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;

   Stormy, husky, brawling,

   City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them, for I have seen your painted women under the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is: On the faces of women and children I have seen the marks of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city, and I give them back the sneer and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness,

   Bareheaded,

   Shoveling,

   Wrecking,

   Planning,

   Building, breaking, rebuilding,

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,

Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs,

Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle,

Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the people,

                   Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation.

Source: *Poetry* (Poetry Foundation, 1914)

[**LANGSTON HUGHES**](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/langston-hughes)

**The Negro Speaks of Rivers**

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.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, 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.

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes.*Copyright © 2002 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates, Inc.

**Gwendolyn Brooks**

**We Real Cool**

**[https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/75640]**

The Pool Players.  
        Seven at the Golden Shovel.

            We real cool. We

            Left school. We

            Lurk late. We

            Strike straight. We

            Sing sin. We

            Thin gin. We

            Jazz June. We

            Die soon.

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**Gwendolyn Brooks**

***A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon***

From the first it had been like a  
Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.  
A wildness cut up, and tied in little bunches,  
Like the four-line stanzas of the ballads she had never quite  
Understood—the ballads they had set her to, in school.  
  
Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"  
Of the ballad. Pursued  
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.  
The Happiness-Ever-After.  
That was worth anything.  
It was good to be a "maid mild."  
That made the breath go fast.  
  
Her bacon burned. She  
Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and  
Drew more strips from the meat case. The eggs and sour-milk biscuits  
Did well. She set out a jar  
Of her new quince preserve.  
  
. . . But there was something about the matter of the Dark Villain.  
He should have been older, perhaps.  
The hacking down of a villain was more fun to think about  
When his menace possessed undisputed breadth, undisputed height,  
And a harsh kind of vice.  
And best of all, when history was cluttered  
With the bones of many eaten knights and princesses.  
  
The fun was disturbed, then all but nullified  
When the Dark Villain was a blackish child  
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,  
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder  
Of its infant softness.  
  
That boy must have been surprised! For  
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed to be wise.  
And the Fine Prince—and that other—so tall, so broad, so  
Grown! Perhaps the boy had never guessed  
That the trouble with grown-ups was that under the magnificent shell of adulthood, just under,  
Waited the baby full of tantrums.  
It occurred to her that there may have been something  
Ridiculous in the picture of the Fine Prince  
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and  
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain, was impressing her,  
Confronting her more and more as this first day after the trial  
And acquittal wore on) rushing  
With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)  
That little foe.  
So much had happened, she could not remember now what that foe had done  
Against her, or if anything had been done.  
The one thing in the world that she did know and knew  
With terrifying clarity was that her composition  
Had disintegrated. That, although the pattern prevailed,   
The breaks were everywhere. That she could think  
Of no thread capable of the necessary  
Sew-work.  
  
She made the babies sit in their places at the table.  
Then, before calling Him, she hurried  
To the mirror with her comb and lipstick. It was necessary  
To be more beautiful than ever.  
The beautiful wife.  
For sometimes she fancied he looked at her as though  
Measuring her. As if he considered, Had she been worth It?  
Had *she* been worth the blood, the cramped cries, the little stirring bravado,  
The gradual dulling of those Negro eyes,  
The sudden, overwhelming *little-boyness*in that barn?  
Whatever she might feel or half-feel, the lipstick necessity was something apart. He must never conclude  
That she had not been worth It.  
  
He sat down, the Fine Prince, and  
Began buttering a biscuit. He looked at his hands.  
He twisted in his chair, he scratched his nose.  
He glanced again, almost secretly, at his hands.  
More papers were in from the North, he mumbled. More maddening headlines.  
With their pepper-words, "bestiality," and "barbarism," and  
"Shocking."  
The half-sneers he had mastered for the trial worked across  
His sweet and pretty face.  
  
What he'd like to do, he explained, was kill them all.  
The time lost. The unwanted fame.  
Still, it had been fun to show those intruders  
A thing or two. To show that snappy-eyed mother,  
That sassy, Northern, brown-black—  
  
Nothing could stop Mississippi.  
He knew that. Big fella  
Knew that.  
And, what was so good, Mississippi knew that.  
Nothing and nothing could stop Mississippi.  
They could send in their petitions, and scar  
Their newspapers with bleeding headlines. Their governors  
Could appeal to Washington . . .  
  
"What I want," the older baby said, "is 'lasses on my jam."  
Whereupon the younger baby  
Picked up the molasses pitcher and threw  
The molasses in his brother's face. Instantly  
The Fine Prince leaned across the table and slapped  
The small and smiling criminal.  
  
She did not speak. When the Hand  
Came down and away, and she could look at her child,  
At her baby-child,  
She could think only of blood.  
Surely her baby's cheek  
Had disappeared, and in its place, surely,  
Hung a heaviness, a lengthening red, a red that had no end.  
She shook her had. It was not true, of course.  
It was not true at all. The  
Child's face was as always, the  
Color of the paste in her paste-jar.  
  
She left the table, to the tune of the children's lamentations, which were shriller  
Than ever. She  
Looked out of a window. She said not a word. *That*  
Was one of the new Somethings—  
The fear,  
Tying her as with iron.  
  
Suddenly she felt his hands upon her. He had followed her  
To the window. The children were whimpering now.  
Such bits of tots. And she, their mother,  
Could not protect them. She looked at her shoulders, still  
Gripped in the claim of his hands. She tried, but could not resist the idea  
That a red ooze was seeping, spreading darkly, thickly, slowly,  
Over her white shoulders, her own shoulders,  
And over all of Earth and Mars.  
  
He whispered something to her, did the Fine Prince, something  
About love, something about love and night and intention.  
She heard no hoof-beat of the horse and saw no flash of the shining steel.  
  
He pulled her face around to meet  
His, and there it was, close close,  
For the first time in all those days and nights.  
His mouth, wet and red,  
So very, very, very red,  
Closed over hers.  
  
Then a sickness heaved within her. The courtroom Coca-Cola,  
The courtroom beer and hate and sweat and drone,  
Pushed like a wall against her. She wanted to bear it.  
But his mouth would not go away and neither would the  
Decapitated exclamation points in that Other Woman's eyes.  
  
She did not scream.  
She stood there.  
But a hatred for him burst into glorious flower,  
And its perfume enclasped them—big,  
Bigger than all magnolias.  
  
The last bleak news of the ballad.  
The rest of the rugged music.  
The last quatrain.

***The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till***

Till’s mother is a pretty-faced thing;

the tint of pulled taffy

sits in a red room,  
           drinking black coffee.  
She kisses her killed boy.  
           And she is sorry.  
Chaos in windy grays  
           through a red prairie.