

Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit" (1937)⁶

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
 (Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,)
Black body swinging in the southern breeze,
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
 (The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,)
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh,
 (And the sudden smell of burning flesh.)

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.

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The "Harlem Renaissance" of the 1920s and 1930s produced an extraordinary group of black writers and artists. There were the novelists Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen, the painters Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglas, the poets Gwendolyn Bennett, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen, and many others. One of the most challenging of these voices was that of poet Langston Hughes, who speaks in these two poems of the social conditions of African Americans, the poor, the working people. Hughes captures the feeling of being "damn tired" of waiting for rescue from the political leadership of the country.

Two Poems by Langston Hughes (1934 and 1940)

"BALLAD OF ROOSEVELT" (1934)⁷

The pot was empty,
The cupboard was bare.
I said, Papa,
What's the matter here?
 I'm waitin' on Roosevelt, son,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt,
 Waitin' on Roosevelt, son.

The rent was due,
 And the lights was out.
 I said, Tell me, Mama,
 What's it all about?
 We're waitin' on Roosevelt, son,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt,
 Just waitin' on Roosevelt.

Sister got sick
 And the doctor wouldn't come
 Cause we couldn't pay him
 The proper sum—
 A-waitin' on Roosevelt,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt,
 A-waitin' on Roosevelt.

Then one day
 They put us out o' the house.
 Ma and Pa was
 Meek as a mouse
 Still waitin' on Roosevelt,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt.

But when they felt those
 Cold winds blow
 And didn't have no
 Place to go
 Pa said, I'm tired
 O' waitin' on Roosevelt,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt.
 Damn tired o' waitin' on Roosevelt.

I can't git a job
 And I can't git no grub.
 Backbone and navel's
 Doin' the belly-rub—
 A-waitin' on Roosevelt,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt.

And a lot o' other folks
What's hungry and cold
Done stopped believin'
What they been told
 By Roosevelt,
 Roosevelt, Roosevelt—

Cause the pot's still empty,
And the cupboard's still bare,
And you can't build a bungalow
Out o' air—
 Mr. Roosevelt, listen!
 What's the matter here?

“BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD” (1940)⁸

Landlord, landlord
My roof has sprung a leak
Don't you 'member I told you about it
Way last week?

Landlord, landlord,
These steps is broken down.
When you come up yourself
It's a wonder you don't fall down.

Ten Bucks you say I owe you?
Ten Bucks you say is due?
Well, that's Ten Bucks more'n I'll pay you
Till you fix this house up new.

What? You gonna get eviction orders?
You gonna cut off my heat?
You gonna take my furniture and
Throw it in the street?

Um-huh! You talking high and mighty.
Talk on—till you get through.
You ain't gonna be able to say a word
If I land my fist on you.