JUST GIVE ME A COOL DRINK OF WATER 'FORE I DIIIE

Maya Angelou



RANDOM HOUSE

Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie

THE POETRY OF

Maya Angelou

RANDOM HOUSE  *NEW YORK*

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Published in the United States by
Random House, Inc., New York,
and simultaneously in Canada
by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

The following poems were first published in
The Poetry of Maya Angelou *and are reprinted*
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"They Went Home," "The Gamut,"
"To a Man," "No Loser, No Weeper,"
"When You Come to Me, "Remembering,"
"In a Time," "Tears," "The Detached,"
"To a Husband," "Accident," "Let's
Majeste" or the "Ego and I,"
"On Diverse Deviations," "Mourning Grace,"
"Sounds Like Pearls," "When I Think
About Myself," "Letter to an Aspiring
Junkie," "Miss Scarlett, Mr. Rhett & Other
Latter-Day Saints," "Faces," "To a Freedom
Fighter," "Riot: 60's," "No No No No,"
"Black Ode," "My Guilt," "The Calling of
Names," "On Working White Liberals,"
"Sepia Fashion Show," "The Thirteens
(Black)," "The Thirteens (White),"
"Harlem Hopscotch."

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 70-156964
eISBN: 978-0-307-83327-3

Random House Website address:
http://www.randomhouse.com/

v3.1

To AMBER SAM

and the ZORRO MAN

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PART ONE

Where Love Is a Scream of Anguish

They Went Home

ıey went home and told their wives,
that never once in all their lives,
had they known a girl like me,
ıt … They went home.

ıey said my house was licking clean,
no word I spoke was ever mean,
I had an air of mystery,
ıt … They went home.

y praises were on all men’s lips,
they liked my smile, my wit, my hips,
they’d spend one night, or two or three.
ıt …

The Gamut

ft you day, be velvet soft,
My true love approaches,
ok you bright, you dusty sun,
Array your golden coaches.

Soft you wind, be soft as silk
y true love is speaking.
Hold you birds, your silver throats,
s golden voice I'm seeking.

me you death, in haste, do come
My shroud of black be weaving,
iiet my heart, be deathly quiet,
My true love is leaving.

A Zorro Man

ere
the wombed room
k purple drapes
ish a light as subtle
your hands before
ve-making

ere
the covered lens
atch a
toral image of
ur general inhabitation
ng and like a
e dawn in winter

ere
is clean mirror
aps me unwilling
a gone time
nen I was love
d you were booted and brave
d trembling for me.

To a Man

y man is
ack Golden Amber
ıanging.
arm mouths of Brandy Fine
ıutious sunlight on a patterned rug
ɔughing laughter, rocked on a whorl of French tobacco
ˈaceful turns on woolen stilts
cretive?
cat's eye.
uthern. Plump and tender with navy bean sullenness
ıd did I say "Tender"?
ıe gentleness
big cat stalks through stubborn bush
ıd did I mention "Amber"?
ıe heatless fire consuming itself.
gain. Anew. Into ever neverlessness.
y man is Amber
ıanging
ways into itself
ew. Now New.
ill itself.
ill.

Late October

ırefully
e leaves of autumn
rinkle down the tinny
und of little dyings
.d skies sated
ruddy sunsets
roseate dawns
il ceaselessly in
bweb greys and turn
black
r comfort.

ıly lovers
e the fall
signal end to endings
gruffish gesture alerting
ose who will not be alarmed
at we begin to stop
order simply
begin
ain.

No Loser, No Weeper

hate to lose something,”
then she bent her head
ven a dime, I wish I was dead.
:an’t explain it. No more to be said.
:pt I hate to lose something.”

lost a doll once and cried for a week.
.e could open her eyes, and do all but speak.
)elieve she was took, by some doll-snatching-sneak
ell you, I hate to lose something.”

watch of mine once, got up and walked away.
had twelve numbers on it and for the time of day.
l never forget it and all I can say
I really hate to lose something.”

low if I felt that way bout a watch and a toy,
hat you think I feel bout my lover-boy?
ain’t threatening you madam, but he is my evening’s joy.
ıd I mean I really hate to lose something.”

When You Come to Me

When you come to me, unbidden,
ckoning me
To long-ago rooms,
here memories lie.

Offering me, as to a child, an attic,
atherings of days too few.
Baubles of stolen kisses.
inkets of borrowed loves.
Trunks of secret words,

I CRY.

Remembering

ft grey ghosts crawl up my sleeve
peer into my eyes
ile I within deny their threats
d answer them with lies.

ushlike memories perform
itual on my lips
ie in stolid hopelessness
d they lay my soul in strips.

In a Time

a time of secret wooing
›day prepares tomorrow's ruin
ft knows not what right is doing
y heart is torn asunder.

a time of furtive sighs
veet hellos and sad goodbyes
alf-truths told and entire lies
y conscience echoes thunder

a time when kingdoms come
y is brief as summer's fun
appiness, its race has run
ıen pain stalks in to plunder.

Tears

ars
ıe crystal rags
scous tatters
a worn-through soul

oans
ep swan song
ue farewell
a dying dream.

The Detached

e die,
elcoming Bluebeards to our darkening closets,
ranglers to our outstretched necks.
Stranglers, who neither care nor
care to know that
DEATH IS INTERNAL.

e pray,
voring sweet the teethed lies,
llying the grounds before alien gods
Gods, who neither know nor
wish to know that
HELL IS INTERNAL.

e love,
ıbbing the nakednesses with gloved hands
verting our mouths in tongued kisses,
Kisses that neither touch nor
care to touch if
LOVE IS INTERNAL.

To a Husband

›ur voice at times a fist
Tight in your throat
bs ceaselessly at phantoms
In the room,
›ur hand a carved and
skimming boat
›es down the Nile
To point out Pharoah's tomb.

›u're Africa to me
At brightest dawn.
ıe Congo's green and
Copper's brackish hue,
continent to build
With Black Man's brawn.
it at home and see it all
Through you.

Accident

night
when you spread your pallet
magic,
I escaped.
ting apart,
I saw you grim and unkempt.
ur vulgar-ness
not of living
ur demands
not from need.

night
as you sprinkled your brain-dust
rainbows,
I had no eyes.
eing all
aw the colors fade
d change.
The blood, red dulled
rough the dyes,
d the naked
ack-White truth.

Let's Majeste

it a throne upon the times
ıen Kings are rare and
ɔnsorts
de into the grease of scullery maids.

gaily wave a crown of light
stride the royal chair) that blinds
e commoners who genuflect and cross their fingers.

ıe years will lie beside me
the queenly bed.
ıd coupled we'll await
e ages' dust to cake my lids again.

ıd when the rousing kiss is given,
ıy must it always be a fairy, and
ly just a Prince?

After

› sound falls
›m the moaning sky
› scowl wrinkles
e evening pool
The stars lean down
A stony brilliance
While birds fly

ıe market leers
empty shelves
reets bare bosoms
scanty cars
This bed yawns
beneath the weight
of our absent selves.

The Mothering Blackness

.e came home running
back to the mothering blackness
deep in the smothering blackness
nite tears icicle gold plains of her face
She came home running

.e came down creeping
here to the black arms waiting
now to the warm heart waiting
ne of alien dreams befrost her rich brown face
She came down creeping

.e came home blameless
black yet as Hagar's daughter
tall as was Sheba's daughter
reats of northern winds die on the desert's face
She came home blameless

On Diverse Deviations

hen love is a shimmering curtain
fore a door of chance
at leads to a world in question
herein the macabrous dance
bones that rattle in silence
blinded eyes and rolls
thick lips thin, denying
thousand powdered moles,
here touch to touch is feel
d life a weary whore

I would be carried off, not gently
To a shore,
Where love is the scream of anguish
And no curtain drapes the door.

Mourning Grace

today, I follow death
down its trackless wastes,
lt my tongue on hardened tears
r my precious dear times waste
ce
ong that promised cave in a headlong
adlong
ste,
ill you
ve
e
ace
mourn for
e?

How I Can Lie to You

w thread my voice
th lies
lightness
rce within
y mirror eyes
e cold disguise
sad and wise
cisions.

Sounds Like Pearls

unds
Like pearls
ll off your tongue
To grace this eager ebon ear.

ubt and fear,
Ungainly things,
ith blushings
Disappear.

PART TWO

Just Before the World Ends

When I Think About Myself

hen I think about myself,
ılmost laugh myself to death,
y life has been one great big joke,
dance that's walked
song that's spoke,
augh so hard I almost choke
hen I think about myself.

xty years in these folks' world
ıe child I works for calls me girl
ay "Yes ma'am" for working's sake.
ɔo proud to bend
ɔo poor to break,
augh until my stomach ache,
hen I think about myself.

y folks can make me split my side,
aughed so hard I nearly died,
ıe tales they tell, sound just like lying,
ıey grow the fruit,
ıt eat the rind,
augh until I start to crying,
hen I think about my folks.

On a Bright Day, Next Week

ı a bright day, next week
st before the bomb falls
st before the world ends,
Just before I die

l my tears will powder
ack in dust like ashes
ack like Buddha's belly
Black and hot and dry

ıen will mercy tumble
lling down in godheads
lling on the children
Falling from the sky

Letter to an Aspiring Junkie

t me hip you to the streets,
n,
n't nothing happening.
aybe some tomorrows gone up in smoke,
ggedy preachers, telling a joke
lonely, son-less old ladies' maids.

)thing happening,
)thing shakin', Jim.
slough of young cats riding that
ld, white horse,
grey old monkey on their back, of course
)es rodeo tricks.

) haps, man.
) haps.
worn-out pimp, with a space-age conk,
tting up some fool for a game of tonk,
poker or
t 'em dead and alive.

ıe streets?
imb into the streets man, like you climb
to the ass end of a lion.
ıen it's fine.
s a bug-a-loo and a shing-a-ling,
rican dreams on a buck-and-a-wing and a prayer.
ıat's the streets man,
)thing happening.

Miss Scarlett, Mr. Rhett and Other Latter-Day Saints

ovitiates sing Ave
fore the whipping posts,
iss-crossing their breasts and
ar-stained robes
the yielding dark.

nimated by the human sacrifice
olgotha in black-face)
iests glow purely white on the
r-relief of a plantation shrine.

Sing)
ou are gone but not forgotten
ail, Scarlett. Requiescat in pace.

od-Makers smear brushes in
ood/gall
etch frescoes on your
ilinged tomb.

Sing)
osanna, King Kotton.

adowed couplings of infidels
mpt stigmata from the nipples
your true-believers.

hant Maternoster)
allowed Little Eva.

inisters make novena with the
arred bones of four

ry small
ry black
ry young children

ıtone DIXIE)

ıd guard the relics
your intact hymen
ily putting to death,
to eternity,
ıe stud, his seed,
s seed
s seed.

Sing)
allelujah, pure Scarlett
essed Rhett, the Martyr.

Times-Square-Shoeshine-Composition

n the best that ever done it
ow pow)
that's my title and I won it
(pow pow)
ain't lying, I'm the best
ow pow)
Come and put me to the test
(pow pow)

l clean 'em til they squeak
ow pow)
In the middle of next week,
(pow pow)
l shine 'em til they whine
ow pow)
Till they call me master mine
(pow pow)

r a quarter and a dime
ow pow)
You can get the dee luxe shine
(pow pow)
y you wanta pay a quarter?
ow pow)
Then you give that to your daughter
(pow pow)

ain't playing dozens mister
ow pow)

You can give it to your sister

(pow pow)

ıy way you want to read it
ow pow)

Maybe it’s your momma need it.

(pow pow)

y I’m like a greedy bigot,
ow pow)

I’m a cap’tilist, can you dig it?

(pow pow)

Faces

ces and more remember
en reject
e brown caramel days of youth
ject the sun-sucked tit of
ildhood mornings.
ke a muzzle of war in the trust frozen eyes
of a favored doll

eathe, Brother
d displace a moment's hate with organized love.
poet screams "CHRIST WAITS AT THE SUBWAY!"
t who sees?

To a Freedom Fighter

ou drink a bitter draught.
ip the tears your eyes fight to hold
cup of lees, of henbane steeped in chaff.
our breast is hot,
our anger black and cold,
rough evening's rest, you dream
ear the moans, you die a thousands' death.
hen cane straps flog the body
rk and lean, you feel the blow,
ear it in your breath.

Riot: 60's

ır
JR FRIEND CHARLIE pawnshop
ıs a glorious blaze
ıeard the flames lick
en eat the trays
zircons
ɔunted in red gold alloys

ıster clothes and stolen furs
ırned in the attic
dios and teevees
ackled with static
ugged in
ly to a racial outlet

me
ought the FRIENDLY FINANCE FURNITURE CO.
ırned higher
hen a leopard print sofa with gold legs
hich makes into a bed)
ught fire
admiring groan from the waiting horde
bsentee landlord
u got that shit"

ghting: a hundred Watts
troit, Newark and New York
reeching nerves, exploding minds
es tied to
oliceman's whistle
welfare worker's doorbell
ıger.

ɔspitality, southern-style
rn pone grits and you-all smile
ıole blocks novae
and new stars
ɔlicemen caught in their
and new cars
ıugga chugga chigga
t me one nigga
ɔtin' n burnin'
won't git far

atermelons, summer ripe
ey neck bones and boiling tripe
permarket roastin like the
ɔon-day sun
tional guard nervous with his shiny gun
ɔse the motor quicker
re's my nigga picka
oot him in the belly
oot him while he run.

We Saw Beyond Our Seeming

e saw beyond our seeming
These days of bloodied screaming

children dying bloated
Out where the lilies floated

men all noosed and dangling
Within the temples strangling

ır guilt grey fungus growing
We knew and lied our knowing

eafened and unwilling
We aided in the killing

ıd now our souls lie broken
Dry tablets without token.

Black Ode

ur beauty is a thunder
d I am set a wandering—a wandering
afened
wn twilight tin-can alleys
d moist sounds
Oo wee Baby, Look what you could get if your name
was Willie”
, to dip your words like snuff.

laughter, black and streaming
d I am come a being—a being
unded
Baptist, aisles, so moaning
d moist sounds
less her heart. Take your bed and walk.
You been heavy burdened”
, to lick your love like tears.

No No No No

)
e two legg'd beasts
at walk like men
ay stink finger in their crusty asses
nile crackling babies
napalm coats
etch mouths to receive
rning tears
splitting tongues
T GIVE ME A COOL DRINK OF WATER 'FORE I DIIIE

)
e gap legg'd whore
the eastern shore
ticing Europe to COME
her
d turns her pigeon shit back to me
me
ho stoked the coal that drove the ships
nich brought her over the sinuous cemetery
my many brothers

)
e cocktailed after noons
what can I do.
my white layed pink world
e let your men cram my mouth
th their black throbbing hate
d I swallowed after
e let your mammies
eal from my kitchens
was always half-amused)
e chuckled the chins of

ur topsy-haired pickaninnies.
hat more can I do?
l never be black like you.
ALLELUJAH)

e red-shoed priests riding
lanquined
barefoot children country.
e plastered saints gazing down
neficently
kneeling mothers
cking undigested beans
m yesterday's shit.

ave waited
es curled, hat rolled
art and genitals
hand
the back porches
forever
the kitchens and fields
rejections
the cold marble steps
America's White Out-House
the drop seats of buses
d the open flies of war

more
e dream that you
ll cease haunting me
wn in fetid swamps of fear
d will turn to embrace your own
manity
nich I AM

› more
ıe hope that
e razored insults
ıich mercury slide over your tongue
ll be forgotten
d you will learn the words of love
other Brother Father Sister Lover Friend

y hopes
ing slowly
se petals falling
neath an autumn red moon
ll not adorn your unmarked graves

y dreams
ing quietly
dark pool under the trees
ll not carry your name
a forgetful shore
ıd what a pity

hat a pity
ıat pity has folded in upon itself
old man's mouth
ıose teeth are gone
d I have no pity.

My Guilt

y guilt is “slavery’s chains,” too long
e clang of iron falls down the years.
ıis brother’s sold. This sister’s gone
bitter wax, lining my ears.
y guilt made music with the tears.

y crime is “heroes, dead and gone”
ad Vesey, Turner, Gabriel,
ad Malcolm, Marcus, Martin King.
ıey fought too hard, they loved too well.
y crime is I’m alive to tell.

y sin is “hanging from a tree”
lo not scream, it makes me proud.
ake to dying like a man.
lo it to impress the crowd.
y sin lies in not screaming loud.

The Calling of Names

e went to being called a Colored man
ter answering to “hey nigger,”
ow that’s a big jump,
yway you figger,

Hey, Baby, Watch my smoke.

om colored man to Negro
ith the N in caps,
as like saying Japanese
stead of saying Japs.

I mean, during the war.

ıe next big step
as a change for true,
om Negro in caps
being a Jew.

Now, Sing Yiddish Mama.

ght, Yellow, Brown
d Dark brown skin,
ere o.k. colors to
scribe him then,

He was a Bouquet of Roses.

e changed his seasons
e an almanac,
ow you’ll get hurt
you don’t call him “Black.”

Nigguh, I ain’t playin’ this time.

On Working White Liberals

lon't ask the Foreign Legion
· anyone to win my freedom
· to fight my battle better than I can,

ıough there's one thing that I cry for
›elieve enough to die for
ıat is every man's responsibility to man.

n afraid they'll have to prove first
at they'll watch the Black man move first
ıen follow him with faith to kingdom come,
ıis rocky road is not paved for us,
, I'll believe in Liberal's aid for us
hen I see a white man load a Black man's gun.

Sepia Fashion Show

ıeir hair, pomaded, faces jaded
ınes protruding, hip-wise,
ıe models strutted, backed and butted,
ıen stuck their mouths out, lip-wise.

ıey'd nasty manners, held like banners,
ıile they looked down their nose-wise,
l see 'em in hell, before they'd sell
e one thing they're wearing, clothes-wise.

ıe Black Bourgeois, who all say "yah"
hen yeah is what they're meaning
ould look around, both up and down
fore they set out preening.

ıdeed" they swear, "that's what I'll wear
hen I go country-clubbing,"
l remind them please, look at those knees
u got a Miss Ann's scrubbing.

The Thirteens (Black)

ɔur Momma took to shouting
ɔur Poppa's gone to war,
ɔur sister's in the streets
ɔur brother's in the bar,
ıe thirteens. Right On.

ɔur cousin's taking smack
ɔur Uncle's in the joint,
ɔur buddy's in the gutter
.ooting for his point
ıe thirteens. Right on.

ıd you, you make me sorry
ɔu out here by yourself,
l call you something dirty,
ıt there just ain't nothing left,
pt
ıe thirteens. Right On.

The Thirteens (White)

›ur Momma kissed the chauffeur,
›ur Poppa balled the cook,
›ur sister did the dirty,
the middle of the book,
ıe thirteens. Right On.

›ur daughter wears a jock strap,
›ur son he wears a bra
›ur brother jonesed your cousin
the back seat of the car.
ıe thirteens. Right On.

›ur money thinks you're something
ıt if I'd learned to curse,
l tell you what your name is
ıt there just ain't nothing worse
an
ıe thirteens. Right On.

Harlem Hopscotch

ıe foot down, then hop! It's hot.
Good things for the ones that's got.
ıother jump, now to the left.
Everybody for hisself.

the air, now both feet down.
Since you black, don't stick around.
ɔod is gone, the rent is due,
Curse and cry and then jump two.

l the people out of work,
Hold for three, then twist and jerk.
oss the line, they count you out.
That's what hopping's all about.

ɔth feet flat, the game is done.
ıey think I lost. I think I won.

Also by Maya Angelou

ıd Still I Rise
ıther Together in My Name
ıe Heart of a Woman
Know Why the Caged Bird Sings
ı Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well
ıgin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas
.aker, Why Don't You Sing?
l God's Children Need Traveling Shoes
Shall Not Be Moved
ı the Pulse of Morning
ouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now
ıe Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou
:enomenal Woman
Brave and Startling Truth

About the Author

Maya Angelou, author of the best-selling *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, and *The Heart of a Woman*, has also written five collections of poetry: *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie*; *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*; *And Still I Rise*; *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing*?; and *I Shall Not Be Moved*; as well as *On the Pulse of Morning*, which was read by her at the inauguration of President William Jefferson Clinton on January 20, 1993. In theater, she produced, directed, and starred in *Cabaret for Freedom* in collaboration with Godfrey Cambridge at New York's Village Gate, starred in Genet's *The Blacks* at the St. Mark's Playhouse, and adapted Sophocles ' *Ajax*, which premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles in 1974. She wrote the original screenplay and musical score for the film *Georgia, Georgia* and wrote and produced a ten-part TV series on African traditions in American life. In the sixties, at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and in 1975 she received the *Ladies' Home Journal* Woman of the Year Award in communications. She has received numerous honorary degrees and was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year and by President Gerald R. Ford to the American Revolution Bicentennial Advisory Council. She is on the board of trustees of the American Film Institute. One of the few female members of the Directors Guild, Angelou is the author of the television screenplays *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and *The Sisters*. Most recently, she wrote the lyrics for the musical *King: Drum Major for Love* and was both host and writer for the series of documentaries *Maya Angelou's America: A Journey of the Heart*, along with Guy Johnson. Angelou is currently Reynolds Professor at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.