

THE
MASK IN
THE
MIRROR
A CHAMBER OPERA

LIBRETTO

composer / librettist RICHARD THOMPSON

THE SANAA OPERA PROJECT | STEPHEN TUCKER conductor

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THE MASK IN THE MIRROR

THE COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE OF PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR
AND ALICE RUTH MOORE

A CHAMBER OPERA IN THREE ACTS
WORDS AND MUSIC BY RICHARD THOMPSON

PROLOGUE

NARRATOR

THIS IS A TRUE STORY, A TRAGIC STORY OF A BLACK POET, PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, THE SON OF FREED SLAVES. HE ROSE FROM POVERTY TO FAME, HERE AND ABROAD. NURTURED BY HIS MOTHER, HE FOUGHT HIS DEMONS, THROUGHOUT HIS SHORT LIFE. HE LOVED AND LOST, AND, PERHAPS, ALSO LOST HIS SOUL.

PAUL

G'WAY AN' QUIT DAT NOISE MISS. LUCY--
PUT THAT MUSIC BOOK AWAY;
WHAT'S DE USE TO KEEP ON TRYIN'?
EF YOU PRACTICE TWELL YOU'RE GRAY,
YOU CAIN'T STA'T NO NOTES A-FLYIN
LAK DE ONES DAT RANTS AND RINGS,
F'OM DE KITCHEN TO THE BIG WOODS
WHEN MALINDY SINGS.

YOU AIN'T GOT THE NACHEL O'GANS
FU' TO MAKE DE SOUN' COME RIGHT,
YOU AIN'T GOT THE TU'NS AN' TWISTIN'S
FU TO MAKE IT SWEET AN' LIGHT.

TELL YOU ONE THING NOW, MISS LUCY,
AN' I'M TELLIN YOU FU' TRUE,
WHEN HIT COMES TO RAAL RIGHT SINGIN'
'TAIN'T NO EASY THING TO DO.

ALICE

DUNBAR, OUR FIRST LITERARY GENIUS,
FAMED AND CELEBRATED ACROSS OUR NATION.
DARE I SPEAK TO HIM?
I STRUGGLE SO WITH MY OWN WRITING!
I AM AS YET UNKNOWN, NOT HIS EQUAL.
DARE I SPEAK TO HIM?
WOULD HE READ MY WORK,
TAKE AN INT'REST, PERHAPS? PER-HAPS, PERHAPS.
BUT LATER, NOT NOW!

ACT 1

Scene 1 (*There are two desks on stage, one is Paul's, the other, Alice's. The side with Paul is lit, Alice's side is in darkness. Paul's desk is the focal point of his study. Alice's desk is similarly situated. Paul enters, holding a magazine and a photograph of Alice Ruth Moore. He paces around his study, deeply in thought. After speaking the following, he goes to his writing desk and prepares to write a letter.*)

PAUL (*Spoken*)

Alice Ruth Moore publishes a short story. Didn't I see her at my recent poetry reading? Yes, hesitant, shy but radiant, standing at the back. I should write to her. She seems to have some talent. She is so beautiful to behold! She is so beautiful! I should meet her, get to know her. Who knows where it might lead? We have literature in common. That's a bond that may lead to a sweet romantic dalliance!

DEAR ALICE, MY DEAR MISS MOORE,
YOU WILL PARDON MY BOLDNESS
IN ADDRESSING YOU, I HOPE,
AND LET MY INTEREST IN YOUR WORK
BE MY EXCUSE.
I AM DRAWN TO WRITE TO YOU
BECAUSE WE ARE BOTH WORKING
ALONG THE SAME LINES.
ALSO, A SKETCH OF YOURS SO INTERESTED ME,
THAT I WAS ANXIOUS TO KNOW MORE OF YOU
AND YOUR WORK.

Paul's side of stage is now in darkness. Alice is at home in New Orleans. She is holding a small bundle of letters from Paul Dunbar. She walks around her desk, thinking what to do. It is spring, 1895.

ALICE (*Spoken*)

He writes me these ardent letters. He loves my photograph. Do I care? Should I care? I don't even know him! He is the best writer of his generation, successful too... Perhaps I should care. Maybe he won't bore me, like the others... Perhaps we should be like two young stars, burning brightly, lighting up the heavens with our novels, poems and romance.

YOUR LETTER WAS HANDED ME
AT A SINGULARLY INOPPORTUNE MOMENT:
THE HOUSE WAS ON FIRE!
LATER, I FOUND IT LAID ON MY DESK
AND READ IT.
YOUR DAINY LITTLE VERSES
HAVE BEEN RUNNING IN MY HEAD
EVER SINCE I READ THEM!

(Paul paces around his room in Dayton, preoccupied.)

PAUL (*Spoken*)

She sends me her photograph, which I adore, but taunts me with indifference and silence! Weeks, countless months go by. I cannot stand it. I am maddened with suspicion, jealousy and desire. I shall declare my love in a forthright manner. Better rejected forever than driven to utter distraction!

(Paul looks around for writing materials, reads Alice's letter, looks at her photograph. He starts to write with some difficulty, discarding pages.)

DEAR MISS MOORE,
I AM SITTING HERE WITH YOUR PICTURE BEFORE ME
AND MY HEART IS THROBBING
FASTER THAN MY PEN GOES.
I LOVE YOU AND HAVE LOVED YOU
SINCE THE FIRST TIME I SAW YOUR PICTURE.
YOU WERE THE SUDDEN REALIZATION
OF AN IDEAL.
ISN'T THERE SOME HELP FOR ME?
I LOVE YOU! I LOVE YOU!

YOU ARE AN INSPIRATION, ALICE.
MAY I CALL YOU THAT, JUST THIS TIME?
MAY GOD GRANT YOU TO ME!

Act 1, Scene 2

(It is 1896. Literary critic Dean Howells reads his recent review of Dunbar's latest book of poetry (MAJORS AND MINORS) to his friends at his gentleman's club. Paul is upstage, sitting at his desk, motionless while Howells sings.)

HOWELLS

THERE HAS COME TO MY ATTENTION
A LITTLE BOOK OF VERSE,
DATELESS, PLACELESS
AND WITHOUT A PUBLISHER,
WHICH GREATLY INTERESTS ME.
I OPENED THE VOLUME AND SAW THE FACE OF A NEGRO,
WITH THE RACE TRAITS STRONGLY ACCENTED;
THE BLACK SKIN, THE WOOLLY HAIR,
THE THICK OUT-ROLLING LIPS
AND THE SOFT, MILD EYES,
OF THE PURE, AFRICAN TYPE.

(Howells examines the book in more detail. He fusses with his glasses, reads and leafs through the volume.)

I WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THE POET
ABOUT TWENTY YEARS OLD.
HE WOULD HAVE BEEN WORTH,
APART FROM HIS LITERARY GIFT,
FIFTEEN HUNDRED DOLLARS
UNDER THE AUCTIONEER'S HAMMER!

IT IS IN THE PLANTATION POEMS
THAT WE FEEL OURSELVES
IN THE PRESENCE OF A MAN
WITH AUTHORITY.
MR. DUNBAR OPENS VISTAS INTO THE SIMPLE,
SENSUOUS, JOYFUL NATURE OF HIS RACE.
HE HAS BROUGHT US NEARER
TO THE PRIMITIVE HUMAN NATURE
IN HIS RACE THAN ANYONE ELSE.
MR. DUNBAR WRITES LITERARY ENGLISH

WHEN HE IS LEAST HIMSELF

PAUL (*Spoken*)

(As if he had been listening to Howells' presentation.)

I write English as well as any man! As well as any man! Am I to write only dialect poetry?
Never! I will not be denied the recognition I deserve. I will gain my rightful
place in the world of literature.

*(Paul visibly distraught, struggling to regain composure, pens a response in a notebook to Howells' review.
Paul comes downstage as he sings. He begins in a conciliatory, almost obsequious tone.)*

DEAR MR. HOWELLS,
LET ME THANK YOU FROM THE VERY DEPTHS OF MY HEART.
I FEEL I AM A POOR, INSIGNIFICANT, HELPLESS BOY,
SUDDENLY KNIGHTED BY YOUR WISE WORDS.
IT HAS TAKEN TIME FOR ME TO RECOVER
FROM THE SHOCK OF DELIGHTFUL SURPRISE.

(Paul loses his calculated smile and grows very serious.)

LET THE WORLD PRAISE MY POETRY IN A BROKEN TONGUE
WHILE MY DEEPEST THOUGHTS ARE DISMISSED.
TO BE PRAISED AND DAMNED,
BOTH AT ONCE!
IS THERE NOT SOMETHING WORTHY IN ME?
NOT MERELY THE NOVELTY
OF A BLACK FACE BLESSED
WITH THE POWER TO RHYME!
THEY'D RATHER SEE THE MASK
THAN THE HUMAN FACE BELOW.
I AM MOCKED BY A PROMISE
WHICH TURNS TO A BURDEN
TOO OLD AND HEAVY FOR MY HEART TO BEAR.

WE WEAR THE MASK THAT GRINS AND LIES,
IT HIDES OUR CHEEKS AND SHADES OUR EYES,-
THIS DEBT WE PAY TO HUMAN GUILE;
WITH TORN AND BLEEDING HEARTS WE SMILE,
AND MOUTH WITH MYRIAD SUBTLITIES.

WHY SHOULD THE WORLD BE OVER-WISE,
IN COUNTING ALL OUR TEARS AND SIGHS?
NAY, LET THEM ONLY SEE US, WHILE

WE WEAR THE MASK.

WE SMILE, BUT, OH GREAT CHRIST, OUR CRIES
TO THEE FROM TORTURED SOULS ARISE.
WE SING, BUT OH THE CLAY IS VILE
BENEATH OUR FEET, AND LONG THE MILE;
BUT LET THE WORLD DREAM OTHERWISE,
WE WEAR THE MASK!

Act 1, Scene 3

(It is February, 1897. Paul's friend Victoria is throwing a farewell party for him in her Brooklyn home. A string quartet is playing in the background. Paul is going to London for a year. This is the first meeting of Paul and Alice. Both are nervous and excited.)

PAUL

TELL ME, IS ALICE GOING TO BE HERE?
DID SHE ANSWER YOUR INVITATION?
I MUST SEE HER BEFORE I GO TO LONDON!

VICTORIA

I DON'T KNOW. SHE DIDN'T REPLY.
-SO MANY SWEETHEARTS!
WHAT MAKES THIS LITTLE CREOLE SO SPECIAL?
WAS I NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU?
DID YOU ROMANCE HER THE WAY
YOU ROMANCED ME?

PAUL

DO NOT MOCK ME, NOR HER!
THIS PASSION IS REAL! I TELL YOU!

VICTORIA

THE PASSION YOU FEEL IS FOR YOUR WORK AND,

PERHAPS, FOR YOUR MOTHER.
NO FLESH AND BLOOD WOMAN COULD EVER TAKE POETRY'S PLACE!

(Paul is visibly shaken by Victoria's outburst. He adjusts his collar nervously and begins to back away. Dancing couples also interrupt them.)

ALICE

YOU MUST BE VICTORIA.

VICTORIA

YOU MUST BE ALICE.
I AM GLAD THAT YOU COULD COME AT SUCH SHORT NOTICE.

ALICE

I SIMPLY HAD TO MEET PAUL.
I WOULDN'T MISS IT FOR ANYTHING!

VICTORIA *(sarcastically)*

FOR ANYTHING?

ALICE *(not noticing Victoria's tone)*

YES, HE HAS BEEN WRITING TO ME.
WE HAVE BEEN WRITING TO EACH OTHER
SUCH INTENSE LETTERS.

VICTORIA *(sneering)*

REALLY, THAT'S JUST LIKE HIM!

ALICE

BESIDES, HE OFFERED TO HELP ME IN MY CAREER.

PAUL DUNBAR LIKES MY WRITING.
TOGETHER WE CAN.....OH! IS IT PAUL OVER THERE?
(Alice sees Paul in the next room and runs toward him, completely forgetting about Victoria.)

PAUL
(Very dramatically)

ALICE!

ALICE
(Matching his dramatic style)

PAUL!

(Paul and Alice grasp each other's hands affectionately.)

PAUL

MY HEART'S DESIRE!
YOU ARE JUST AS I EXPECTED!
FINALLY, I MEET YOU,
BEFORE I SAIL TO ENGLAND,
THEY SO LOVE AND DEMAND MY POETRY!

ALICE

AND AT LAST WE MEET, DEAR PAUL,
MY STRENGTH, MY FAMOUS POET!

(Aside)
PAUL SHALL BE MY HUSBAND!
I CARE NOT FOR THE RUMOURS!
THEY SAY HE DRINKS TOO MUCH.
THEY SAY HE LOVES MANY OTHER WOMEN!
I CARE NOT, FOR PAUL SHALL BE
MY HUSBAND!
WE SHALL BE REDEEMED BY LOVE!
LOVE ME, AS I LOVE YOU, PAUL

(They walk together, arm in arm.)

PAUL

I HAVE LOVED YOU
SINCE THE FIRST TIME I SAW YOU.
TOMORROW, I SAIL TO ENGLAND.
MAKE MY LIFE COMPLETE,
SAY YOU WILL MARRY ME!

(Paul takes the ring off his own finger and places it on the third finger of her right hand.)

THIS WAS MY MOTHER'S.
TAKE IT AS A SYMBOL OF OUR LOVE.

ALICE

PAUL, YOUR MOTHER'S RING AS A SYMBOL OF OUR LOVE?

(Hesitates)

IF THIS IS WHAT YOU WANT,
SO BE IT!
I LOVE YOU AND WILL LEARN TO LOVE YOU.
I WILL LEARN TO LOVE
THE SHADOWS AND NIGHT
OF YOUR SOUL!
THE SHADOWS AND NIGHT
OF YOUR SOUL!

(Aside)

YES, I AM TO WED
THE POET LAUREATE
OF THE NEGRO RACE.
I CARE NOT FOR DOUBT AND RUMOR.

(To Paul)

WE SHALL HAVE BABIES!
OUR LOVE SHALL KNOW NO END!
BUT FOR NOW,
OUR ENGAGEMENT SHALL BE A SECRET!

(Alice gives Paul a passionate, but controlled kiss. They part, leaving the stage in opposite directions.)

Act 1, Scene 4

(Alice is confronted by Patsy, her mother. They are alone together in a room in Patsy's house, which is obviously more modest than Victoria's.)

PATSY

WHO IS THIS MAN THAT YOU SAY YOU LOVE?
WHO DRINKS AND COURTS MANY WOMEN.
WHO SINGS A BROKEN JINGLE,
IN A TONGUE BETRAYED BY LIQUOR.
IS SUCH A LOVE TO LAST?
OR, IS IT AN IDEA,
A MERE REFLECTION OF ONE'S DESIRE?
YOU GIVE YOURSELF TO FAME
AND LOSE YOURSELF IN SHAME
YOUR UNWED MOTHER LOOKS ON IN PAIN
WHILE MY FALSE LITTLE CREOLE LOOKS FOR GAIN.
WHO IS THIS MAN THAT YOU SAY YOU LOVE?
WHO LOVES AND SEDUCES COUNTLESS WOMEN.

ALICE

WITH MY CHOICE, I MAKE MY LIFE.
I SEE MY CHOICE BETTER THAN YOURS!
I AM TO HIS IMAGE WEDDED,
AS HE IS TO MINE!
MY PASSION GROWS,
AS DOES HIS.
WE ARE THE PERFECT
REFLECTION OF EACH OTHER'S SOUL!
HE IS THE POET LAUREATE OF THE NEGRO RACE.
AS WE BOTH LIVE AND WRITE,
SO DO WE MIRROR TRUTH.
I KNOW THE DEPTH OF MY LOVE AND HIS.
OUR PASSIONS FEED OUR LOVE.

ALICE AND PATSY TOGETHER

(PATSY)

WHO IS THIS MAN YOU SAY YOU LOVE?
WHO DRINKS AND COURTS MANY WOMEN
AND COURTS SO MANY WOMEN.
YOUR PASSIONS FEED YOUR LOVE.

(ALICE)

WE ARE THE PERFECT
REFLECTION OF EACH OTHER'S SOUL!
OUR PASSIONS FEED OUR LOVE.

Act 1, Scene 5

(Alice is an elementary schoolteacher in Brooklyn. She is engaged in a heated argument with Miss Lyons, the new African-American headmistress. They are in Miss Lyons' office.)

ALICE

NO, NEVER, NO; THIS CAN NEVER BE, NEVER BE!

MISS LYONS

MY DEAR MISS MOORE,
YOU DO FORGET YOURSELF.

ALICE

I HATE TO WORK UNDER NEGRO WOMEN
AND MY HEART SINKS AT THE PROSPECT!

MISS LYONS

YOU WOULD INSULT ME FOR BEING
WHO AND WHAT I AM.
TOO DARK FOR YOU TO RESPECT!

ALICE

YES, YOU AND THE OTHER INKSPOTS HERE
I DETEST YOU ALL.

MISS LYONS

YOU ARE DECEIVED BY YOUR FAIR BEAUTY.

YOU HAVE LOST YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR,
WITH ALL THIS CREOLE NONSENSE!
YOU ARE NO CREOLE.
IT'S ALL A STUPID LIE!
YOU FEEL SUPERIOR
BUT YOU DESPISE YOURSELF TOO!
YOU ARE CONFUSED
ABOUT YOUR IDENTITY!
YOU CAN'T TELL TRUTH FROM FICTION ANYMORE.
HERE IN THIS SCHOOL I GUIDE AND LEAD.
YOU MUST FOLLOW MY WISHES.

ALICE

NO! NOT SO!
NEVER WILL I ACCEPT THE OTHERS;
THE DARK, DARK, DARK OTHERS, OTHERS OF MY RACE,
WHOM I DO SO DESPISE!
I HAVE SUFFERED, I HAVE SUFFERED
I HAVE SUFFERED ENOUGH AT THE HANDS
OF MY DARK BRETHERN.

(Alice begins to sob, wipes the away her tears, then regains her composure.)

SURELY YOU SEE, I AM DESTINED
FOR GREATER THINGS!

MISS LYONS

YOU WILL FIND YOUR GREATER THINGS
BEYOND THE BOUNDS OF THIS SCHOOL!

ALICE

NEVER WILL I HEED YOU!
I WILL WORK FOR SOMEONE WHITE.

(Alice approaches Miss Lyons in a confrontational manner.)

I CAN ALWAYS GET ALONG WITH WHITE PEOPLE.
I SEE NOT THE CHAINS OF HISTORY,
THIS TERRIBLE DARK LEGACY
WHICH WOULD ENGULF ME.

NEVER! I AM FREE TO LIVE,
TO CREATE MY OWN DESTINY!

MISS LYONS

ARE YOU NOT ASHAMED,
TO BE SO FILLED WITH VENOM,
TO FEEL SUCH HATRED,
FOR YOUR OWN RACE,
THE SKIN YOU CANNOT BEAR TO SEE,
BUT THROUGH A VEIL
OF PAIN AND LIES?

ALICE

ENOUGH! ENOUGH! I CAN HEAR NO MORE!
AND HERE IS MY LETTER OF RESIGNATION!

(Alice leaves Miss Lyons office angrily and slams the door.)

Act 1, Scene 6

(Paul has returned to his London apartment with a lady admirer, Sarah, after one of his poetry readings. He walks towards his desk, as she sings.)

SARAH

MY DEAR PAUL, YOU READ WITH SUCH PASSION.
YOUR VOICE, IT TOUCHES MY SOUL.
IT IS SO INTENSE AND MUSICAL.
A NEGRO WRITER OF SUCH TALENT.
YOU HAVE NO EQUAL IN YOUR RACE,
OF THAT, I AM SURE.
I FEEL THIS STRANGE ATTRACTION...

PAUL

YES, I DO ALSO.
THIS STRANGE ATTRACTION FOR ONE SO NOBLE AND FAIR.
MY POETRY IS A PATH TO YOUR HEART,

A PATH I WOULD TREAD SO HAPPILY.

(Paul stands up seals an envelope and places it back on his writing desk, walks to the cabinet and pours two drinks.)

LET US DRINK TO OUR PASSION FOR WORDS!

SARAH

IS OUR LOVE ONLY TO BE SPOKEN?
WORDS ALONE CANNOT FULFILL MY HEART.
PERHAPS YOU KNOW OF LOVE ONLY
IN A POET'S VISION, NOT IN REAL LIFE?

(Paul advances toward her. She runs off playfully, allowing him to catch her. They embrace.)

PAUL

LOVE ME AS I AM
FULL OF FRAILTY, TO BE SEDUCED
BY FEMININE GRACE AND CHARM.

PAUL AND SARAH

LOVE ME AS I AM,
FULL OF FRAILTY, TO BE SEDUCED
BY FEMININE GRACE AND CHARM,
BY ONE SO RARE AND GIFTED.

PAUL *(aside)*

I INDULGE MY WEAKNESS;
AS A GENIUS, IT IS MY RIGHT.
ALICE WILL FORGIVE ME.
SHE IS MY STRENGTH,
WHEN I AM NOT MASTER OF MYSELF.

SARAH

PAUL, DO YOU COMPOSE LINES?

OR DO YOU PINE FOR ALICE?
MY DARLING POET,
SO TRAGICALLY CONFLICTED.
TO FIND YOUR SOUL,
YOU CHOOSE TO LOSE IT
IN THE ARMS OF SO MANY!
SO BE IT!
I CANNOT SEE ANY FUTURE FOR US!
OUR LOVE IS ONLY FOR NOW.

(Sarah releases Paul's hand and steps back.)

PAUL

(Paul seems caught up in his own thoughts)

SO BE IT!
I CANNOT SEE ANY FUTURE FOR US.
OUR LOVE JUST CANNOT ENDURE.

(Paul suddenly completely disengages physically and emotionally from Sarah. He goes to his desk and begins to write. Sarah stares in disbelief and grows increasingly angry.)

SOON I SHALL RETURN TO AMERICA.

(Sarah moves towards the door, leaves the apartment and slams the door. Paul remains completely unperturbed.)

DEAR ALICE,
THE ENGLISH LOVE ME HERE,
PERHAPS A LITTLE TOO MUCH.
I HAVE SUFFERED ANOTHER SEVERE TEMPTATION.
YES, THEY DO LOVE ME,
I SEE NO COLOR LINE HERE.
THEY TREAT ME AS IF I WERE WHITE!
I MUST TELL YOU HOWEVER,
IF YOU WERE EVER UNFAITHFUL,
I WOULD DIE FROM GRIEF!

(Paul stops writing and muses. He has a violent coughing fit and pours another drink to quell the spasm.)

MY LUNGS DO TORMENT ME SO.
IS THERE NO END TO MY TORMENT?

End of Act 1

ACT II

Scene 1

(Paul has returned from London and is giving a series of poetry recitals in the U.S. He is about to continue a poetry recital in an assembly hall somewhere in Boston. He is standing behind a lectern. The lights are dimmed and he is waiting for silence before he begins reading. His expression is serious.)

PAUL *(Spoken)*

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

(Paul finishes his poem. He closes his poetry book and stares at the audience. There is an awkward silence followed by polite subdued applause.

There is nervous coughing and movement in the audience while Paul turns several pages in his poetry book.)

(Alice is backstage with a representative. from Dodd and Mead, Dunbar's publisher.)

SALES REP.

YOU MUST BE MISS ALICE RUTH MOORE. I REPRESENT DODD AND
MEAD, MR. DUNBAR'S PUBLISHER. HOW IS HE?
WE HAVE BEEN GETTING REPORTS:
MISSED POETRY READINGS,
READING WHILE INTOXICATED.
WE ARE CONCERNED...

ALICE *(cutting him off)*

I'M SURE THOSE REPORTS ARE EXAGGERATED.
PAUL WORKS SO HARD.

YOU KNOW YOURSELF HOW MUCH HE WRITES.
IT COMES AT A COST.
HE'S NOT WELL; HE NEEDS TO REST.

PAUL (*Paul reads a dialect poem to his audience*)

OH, IT'S SWEETAH DAN DE MUSIC
OF AN EDICATED BAND;
AN' HIT'S DEARAH DAN DE BATTLE'S
SONG O' TRIUMPH IN DE LAN'.
IT SEEMS HOLIER DAN EVENIN'
WHEN DE SOLEMN CHU'CH BELL RINGS
EZ I SIT AN' CA'MLY LISTEN,
WHEN MALINDY SINGS.

TOWSAY, STOP THAT BA'KIN', HYEAH ME!
MANDY, MEK DAT CHILE KEEP STILL;
DON'T YOU HEAH DE ECHOES CALLIN'
F'OM DE VALLEY TO DE HILL?
LET ME LISTEN, I CAN HYEAH IT,
TH'OO DE BRESH OF ANGELS' WINGS,
SOF' AN SWEET,
SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT,"
EZ MALINDY SINGS.

(There is loud applause. Paul bows, then walks briskly backstage towards Alice.)

PAUL

ALL THEY WANT TO HEAR IS DIALECT, DIALECT!
I WISH I HAD NEVER WRITTEN THOSE DAMN THINGS.

(Paul pounds his fist on an end table, which has a decanter and a glass on it.)

THEY ARE STRANGLING ME!

SALES REP.

LET'S FACE IT, MR. DUNBAR,
THE PLANTATION POEMS BOUGHT YOUR HOUSE IN WASHINGTON
AND THAT NICE SUIT YOU ARE WEARING.
NOBODY CARES ABOUT SOME BLACK BYRON OR LONGFELLOW.

PAUL (*scarcely containing his anger*)

A BLACK BYRON OR LONGFELLOW?
I HAVE MY OWN IDENTITY, YOU FOOL!
ALL MY WORK DESERVES ATTENTION, NOT JUST THE DIALECT POEMS!

(Enraged, Paul starts coughing violently and reaches for the bottle of whisky. Alice exchanges a nervous concerned look with the sales rep.)

ALICE

YOU MUST FORGIVE PAUL.
HE IS NOT HIMSELF TODAY!

SALES REP.

YES, QUITE SO! (*turning towards Paul*)
YOU SEE PAUL,
THAT'S WHAT YOUR AMERICAN AUDIENCE WANTS
WELL. I THINK I SHOULD LEAVE NOW.
IT WAS NICE MEETING YOU, MISTER DUNBAR.

ALICE

YOU FIGHT TOO MANY BATTLES, TOO MANY.

Act 2, Scene 2

Paul enters a bar in Harlem, surrounded by friends. It is his first visit since his return from London. It is 1897.

DRINKING BUDDY

PAUL, YOU'RE BACK FROM LONDON ALREADY!

PAUL

YES, TO CELEBRATE MY LATEST BOOK PUBLISHED BOOK.
BARTENDER, A ROUND OF DRINKS FOR EV'RYONE!

DRINKING BUDDY

I THOUGHT YOU SAID THEY LOVED YOU IN ENGLAND?

PAUL

YES, UNTIL IT WAS TIME TO CELEBRATE
QUEEN VICTORIA'S JUBILEE.
THEY LOST INT'REST IN ME.
EVEN I CAN'T COMPETE WITH THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND.
AND MY AGENT, WELL, HE WAS LESS THAN HONEST
I HAD TO COME HOME;
I WAS HOMESICK!
ENOUGH OF THE ENGLISH!
LONDON IS A GREAT CITY
BUT NEW YORK IS EVEN GREATER.
I CAN'T WRITE FOR THE ENGLISH,
I BELONG HERE!
BESIDES, YOU ALL LOVE MY POEMS.

DRINKING BUDDY

GIVE US A POEM!

PAUL

LATER, LATER. LET'S HAVE ANOTHER DRINK

*(The bartender pours another round of drinks. Paul toasts his buddy.
Paul's other friends get their drinks and gradually move away to their tables, leaving Paul at the bar with
Buddy. The house piano player stands, bows towards Dunbar, then starts a ragtime piece.)*

DRINKING BUDDY

YAS-SAH! I'M JES' FINE HEAH!

WELL, PAUL, YOU'RE SLUMMIN' WITH US POOR FOLK!
YOU WON'T FIND ANY STUCK-UP POETS HERE!

PAUL

THAT'S JUST FINE.
MY DADDY WAS LIKE YOU;
HE LIKED HIS DRINK TOO!
I AIN'T NO DIFFERENT.

(Paul and Buddy continue drinking. They toast and hug each other.)

I LIKE THE GIRLS HERE.
TOO MUCH Highbrow, YOU KNOW,
GIVES ME A HEADACHE.
I COME HERE TO FIND
THE REST OF ME;
THE PART THE WORLD
WOULD RATHER NOT SEE.

(Enter a woman, seductively dressed. . She recognizes Paul and walks over to him.)

WOMAN

LOOK, IT IS MY SWEETHEART PAUL,
THE BLACK FOLKS' POET.
WHAT YOU LOOKING FOR TONIGHT, HONEY?
LET ME GIVE YOU THE GOOD TIME
YOU'RE LOOKING FOR!
DANCE WITH ME, PAUL
DEEP DOWN, YOU'RE ONE OF US.
THERE'S NO DENYIN' IT.
IT'S IN YOUR BLOOD.
IT'S IN YOUR BLOOD.

(to piano player)

SAY, DO YOU REMEMBER THAT LITTLE DITTY OF PAUL'S I LIKE?

(Piano player gives a four-bar intro.)

PAUL, BUDDY, AND WOMAN

SEEN MY LADY LAS' NIGHT,
JUMP BACK, HONEY, JUMP BACK. *(all three sing this refrain,)*
HEL' HUH HAN AN' SQUEEZE IT TIGHT
JUMP BACK, HONEY, JUMP BACK.
HYEAD HUH SIGH A LITTLE SIGH,

SEEN A LIGHT GLEAM F'OM HUH EYE'
AN' A SMILE GO FLITTIN' BY—
JUMP BACK, HONEY, JUMP BACK.

PUT MY AHM AROUN' HUH WAIS'
JUMP BACK, HONEY, JUMP BACK.
RAISED HUH LIPS AN' TOOK A TASE,
JUMP BACK, HONEY, JUMP BACK.
LOVE ME, HONEY, LOVE ME TRUE?

LOVE ME WELL EZ I LOVE YOU?
(Paul and woman together)
AN' SHE ANSWE'D, "COSE I DO"—
JUMP BACK, HONEY, JUMP BACK.

(They dance to ragtime piece, being played in the bar.)

Act 2, Scene 3

(Alice is in her room in her friend's apartment in Brooklyn. She is anxious and annoyed. She is getting ready for bed and is combing her hair.)

ALICE

ISN'T HE SATISFIED WITH HIS SUCCES?
WHY MUST HE DESTROY HIS HEALTH
AND REPUTATION WITH HIS DRINKING?
HIS LUNGS ARE WEAK ALREADY.
HE COUGHS MORE AND MORE.
ALCOHOL IS NO CURE.
AT THIS RATE HE WILL NOT LIVE
TO ENJOY HIS TALENT.
WHERE IS PAUL,
MY DARLING HUSBAND TO BE?
IS HE DRINKING IN SOME VULGAR BAR?
THE POET LAUREATE OF THE NEGRO RACE.

(Spoken)

I can see the newspaper headline:

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR
FOUND DRUNK, HIS WATCH, HIS MONEY STOLEN!
I AM TO MARRY A GENIUS
AND A SKIRT-CHASING DRUNK,
POSSESSED BY EITHER VANITY OR DEPRESSION.

IS THAT YOU, PAUL?
I EXPECTED YOU HERE HOURS AGO!
YOU COME HERE LATE, DRUNK, SMELLING OF DRINK
AND CHEAP PERFUME!
WHO IS SHE, WHO IS SHE?
SOME BAR ROOM WHORE!
WHY DO YOU PREFER HER TO ME?
WHY MUST YOU DRINK IN THESE AWFUL BARS?

PAUL

(In an affected cheerful manner, disregarding Alice's tone)

WHY ALICE, MY DEAR ALICE,
YOU AWAIT YOUR DARLING HUSBAND TO BE!

(Paul adjusts his clothes, smiles awkwardly, obviously drunk.)

ALICE

YOUR CONDITION,- IT'S A DISGRACE!
WHY DO YOU SO TARNISH YOUR IMAGE?

PAUL

DO YOU AWAIT TO SCOLD ME,
OR SATISFY A LOVER'S PASSIONS?

ALICE

HAVE YOU NO DECENCY?
PAUL, YOU ARE DRUNK!
YOU DARE COME TO ME

IN THIS BEASTLY CONDITION!
YOU CANNOT! THIS CANNOT BE!
THE CULTURED POET
DRUNK AND SAVAGE!

PAUL

YOU SOUND LIKE MY MOTHER,
CHASTISING MY FATHER.
THAT IS NOT WHAT I WANT
OR EXPECT FROM YOU.
I AM PAUL DUNBAR, THE GREAT POET
AND I, I LIKE TO DRINK. THAT'S ALL.
EV'RYONE KNOWS IT
I CAN'T HELP IT;
MY DADDY WAS THE SAME WAY.

ALICE

YOUR DADDY WASN'T A FAMOUS POET.
WELL, WELL, THE GREAT PROUD POET
IS HAUNTED BY CHILHOOD MISERY,
AND THE MEM'RIES OF YOUR CRAZY DRUNKEN FATHER.
WHO IS PAUL DUNBAR?
DO YOU EVEN KNOW?
WHO IS THIS MAN
THAT I AM TO MARRY?
ARE YOU A POET,
OR A BAR ROOM DRUNK?
I LOVE THE POET, NOT THIS!

PAUL

WHO IS THIS MAN?
WHY, HE IS MATHILDE'S UGLY LITTLE BLACK BOY,
WHO IS NOW THE MOST FAMOUS POET IN AMERICA!
COME TO ME, ALICE,
LET ME KISS YOU.
I NEED YOUR LOVE.

ALICE

IS IT REALLY LOVE YOU ARE LOOKING FOR?
WHERE IS THE ROMANCE?
TELL ME, PAUL.

PAUL

ONLY YOU CAN SAVE ME, ALICE!

ALICE

YOU MUST LEARN TO SAVE YOURSELF FROM YOUR DEMONS.
PAUL, YOU ARE HORRIBLY DRUNK.
NO, NOT HERE.
WE ARE THE GUESTS OF OUR FRIEND, SALLY.
GO TO YOUR ROOM.
PAUL, NO!

PAUL

TOO MUCH Highbrow GIVES ME A HEADACHE.
(Paul turns angrily towards Alice.)

ALICE

NO. NO!

(Paul attacks Alice and rapes her. The lights go out amid her cries.)

Act 2, Scene 4

(The stage is set as in Act 1. It is about two weeks after the rape. Paul is at his home in Washington D.C. He is in his study, reading aloud a letter he is writing to Alice.)

PAUL

IN MY BESTIAL LUST
I HAVE HURT YOU SO.
MY HEART CRIES OUT TO YOU, ALICE,

ALICE MY DARLING!
I WISH I HAD DIED BEFORE IT HAPPENED.
I WOULD RATHER TAKE MY OWN LIFE,
THAN HURT YOU!
I WORSHIP AT YOUR FEET, DEAR ALICE.
FORGIVE ME! TRY TO LOVE AND BELIEVE IN ME AGAIN.
I SHALL DEVOTE MYSELF TO YOUR HAPPINESS.
LET NOT THIS ONE DAMNED NIGHT OF FOLLY
DESTROY OUR FUTURE BLISS.
I AM CLEANSED AND REDEEMED BY MY SUFFERING.

ALICE

YOU, REDEEMED BY YOUR SUFFERING?
I AM THE ONE BRUISED AND BANDAGED ,
WHO HAD TO SEE A DOCTOR,
RECEIVE TREATMENT, MEDICINE!

PAUL

I KNOW I HAVE DONE WRONG, DREADFUL WRONG!
I HAVE DISHONORED YOU
AND I CANNOT FORGIVE MYSELF.
I HAVE NO EXCUSE.
MY HEART BLEEDS FOR WHAT I HAVE DONE.
ONLY LET MY LOVE SOMEHOW CONDONE MY WEAKNESS.
AS YOU CAN SEE, I NEED YOU.
I AM WEAK WITHOUT YOU.
ALICE, LET US BE MAN AND WIFE
AND RIGHT THIS TERRIBLE WRONG!

(Paul takes a jewelry box out of his pocket and looks at it with great admiration.)

TAKE THIS RING. IT IS A RUBY WITH DIAMONDS,
A SYMBOL OF OUR DIVINE LOVE!
YOU CANNOT REFUSE YOUR TENDER LOVER!

ALICE

(Alice is reflecting by herself on recent events. The lights go out on Paul's half of the stage.)

HOW CAN I MARRY YOU?
HOW CAN I STILL LOVE YOU?
HOW CAN I EMBRACE ALL THAT YOU ARE,

YOUR BRILLIANCE AND YOUR DARK TROUBLED SELF?
OUR FRIENDS WILL KNOW WHAT HAPPENED.
HOW CAN I STAND THE SHAME, THE GOSSIP?
WHO ELSE WOULD MARRY ME?
I CAN'T FACE THE WORLD, HUMILIATED.
HOW CAN I WORK, WRITE, PUBLISH, DISGRACED BY YOU?

(Alice's tone changes from anguish to resolve.)

THIS DAMNED NIGHT OF FOLLY,
HAS BEEN ORDAINED BY GOD!
IT IS A DIVINE TEST.
MY LOVE HAS COME OUT OF IT,
LIKE A PHOENIX FROM THE FLAMES,
STRENGTHENED, PURIFIED, BEAUTIFIED.
I AM AS A WIFE TO YOU,
CONSTANT AND FAITHFUL.
I SHALL BE WED TO PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR.
WE SHALL TAKE OUR LOFTY PLACE
BEFORE THE EYES OF THE WORLD.
LOVE ME AS I LOVE YOU.
I CARE NOT FOR THE PAIN OF OUR PAST,
BUT SEE ONLY OUR GLORIOUS FUTURE.

PAUL AND ALICE

(The whole stage is lit. Paul sings, facing and beckoning Alice, with arms outstretched.)

WE SHALL TAKE OUR LOFTY PLACE
BEFORE THE EYES OF THE WORLD.
LOVE ME AS I LOVE YOU.
I CARE NOT FOR THE PAIN OF OUR PAST,
BUT SEE ONLY OUR GLORIOUS FUTURE.

End of Act 2

ACT III

Scene 2

(Married Life in Washington, D.C. Paul reads to Alice a dialect poem he has been working on. He looks up from his desk and reads to her.)

PAUL

DELY'S BROWN AS BROWN KIN BE
SHE AIN'T NO MULATTER;
SHE'S PURE CULLUD-DON'T YOU SEE
DAT'S JUS WHAT'S THE MATTAH?

DAT'S DE WHY I LOVE HER SO,
D'AIN'T NO MIX ABOUT HUH,

SOON'S YOU SE HUH FACE YOU KNOW
D'AIN'T NO CHANST TO DOUBT HUH.

ALICE

SO, MY DEAR, YOU ARE SO DISAPPOINTED.
I BEAR THE FLOWERS OF YOUR LOVE, *(touching her bruised cheek)*
ON THE CONTOURS OF MY BODY,
IN THE SHADOWS OF MY SOUL.

PAUL

YOU FEEL WOUNDED,
YET SO DO I,
BY YOUR LIES AND DECEIT.
YOU INTOXICATED MY SOUL,
YOU MADE ME MARRY YOU
AND ELOPE IN DISGRACE!
THIS IS NOT LOVE!

ALICE

YOU CLAIMED LOVE FOR ME,
YET ROMANCED OTHERS,
TELLING ME YOUR IDLE BOASTS!
WHAT LOVE DID YOU HAVE?

PAUL

THE SAME LOVE YOU HAVE.
YOU PRIDE YOURSELF IN A LIE;
YOUR HAUGHTY CREOLE POSE,
IS BUT A FICTION,
TO MASK YOUR HATRED OF YOUR RACE

'TIS THE LIE OF A BASTARD HALF-BREED,
SPRUNG FROM THE LOINS OF A VAGRANT WHITE MAN
AND A LOWLY BLACK MOTHER,
WHO CAN'T EVEN READ.

YET DOES SHE DISDAIN MY DARK SKIN!
THE AFFRONT, THE INDIGNITY,
'TIS NO WONDER I DESPISE YOU!

ALICE

PAUL! YOU THROW MY TRUST IN MY FACE,
TO WOUND AND DEMEAN.
YOU TURN MY PAST JOYS
INTO UGLY PICTURES.
IS THIS THE LOVE YOU SHOW
THE WOMAN YOU MARRIED?

PAUL

I MARRIED YOU TO SATISFY MY NEEDS.
I AM A MAN, NOT MERELY A POET.
I SHALL NOT STARE IDLY
INTO THE FACE OF DESIRE
AND FOREGO ITS PROMISE.

ALICE

DISGUSTING! ARROGANT!

PAUL

I DO NOT TRUST WOMEN,
ESPECIALLY MULATTO WOMEN.
THE BLOOD-MIX DOES NOTHING FOR YOUR SEX!
YOU ARE A WOMAN

AND WOMEN ARE VINDICTIVE.

ALICE (*interrupting*)

VINDICTIVE, VINDICTIVE?
BUT I ALONE CARRY THE SCARS,
THE TOKENS OF YOUR LOVE,
YOU DRUNKEN BRUTE!

PAUL

IT IS A QUALITY WHICH WOMEN
AND SNAKES HAVE IN COMMON,
TO STRIKE, WHEN WOUNDED,
REGARDLESS OF REASON,
AT EVERYTHING NEAR.

ALICE

ALAS, YOUR LOVE IS COMPOUNDED
WITH A HATRED SO DEEP,
THAT BEARS NO DESCRIPTION.
YOUR MIND AILS AND IS CLOUDED.
AGAINST MY HEART'S DESIRE,
WE ARE DESCENDED
INTO THE ABYSS!
THIS MORBID NONSENSE IS BORN
OF AN UNHEALTHY MENTAL
AND PHYSICAL STATE!

(Enter Mathilde, Paul's mother.)

MATHILDE

AN UNHEALTHY MENTAL
AND PHYSICAL STATE?
SO, MY SON'S NAME IS VILIFIED
BY THIS WOMAN,
WHO STOLE HERSELF INTO OUR FAMILY!
THIS UNEASY UNION IS NOT DESTINED TO BLOSSOM.

ALICE

WE LIVE IN TENSION AND BROODING,
THANKS TO A MOTHER,
WHO WOULD POSSESS HER SON,
HER OWN UNEASY LOVE TO SUSTAIN.
I ALONE AM MISTRESS OF THIS HOUSE
AND WIFE TO DARLING PAUL.

PAUL (*To Alice*)

YOU WILL RESPECT MY DARLING MOTHER;
WE LOVE EACH OTHER,
WITH A PASSION YOU CANNOT UNDERSTAND.

MATHILDE

I CARE NOT FOR YOUR ANGER AND PRIDE!
FOR YEARS I SCRUBBED FLOORS
AND WASHED CLOTHES,
FOR THE SAKE OF MY LITTLE PAUL,

(Mathilde takes Paul's hand and continues.)

SO THAT HE COULD BECOME HIMSELF,
A GREAT WRITER!
-TO LIVE IN WASHINGTON,
WITH MY SON,
TIS' JUST RECOMPENSE FOR MY SACRIFICE.

ALICE

THIS LOVE IS UNHOLY;
I'LL HAVE NONE OF IT!
MAY THE FORMER SLAVE
LOVE HER DARLING LITTLE BLACK BOY!

(Alice leaves in a fit of passion, slamming the door. Paul has a coughing fit and has a drink to comfort himself. His mother hugs him, as if he were a little boy.)

MATHILDE

SEE HOW YOUR SORROW AND ANGER EAT AWAY

AT YOUR CONSUMPTIVE LUNGS!
THIS IS THE PRICE YOU PAY
FOR YOUR LIGHTSKINNED TROPHY.

PAUL

I KNOW, MA, I KNOW.

Act 3, Scene 3

(It is early 1902. Patsy is at home in New Orleans with her other daughter, Leila. They are busy sewing, working silently. The room is poorly lit and there is a general aura of gloom and despondency. Leila reaches for an open envelope in her worktable drawer. She says, "Alice wrote to us a few days ago." She begins to read to Patsy. She has obviously read the letter many times previously.)

LEILA

DEAR MOTHER,
SADLY, TRAGIC'LY
PAUL AND I ARE SEPARATED.
LAST WEEK HE CAME HOME
IN A BEASTLY CONDITION,
WORSE THAN USUAL.
HE HAD BEEN DRUNK FOR DAYS,
DRINKING AND COUGHING BLOOD.
I WENT TO HELP HIM TO BED
AND HE BEHAVED DISGRACEFULLY.
HE LEFT THAT NIGHT
AND I WAS ILL, ILL FOR WEEKS.
WHAT HAPPENED TO THE MAN I MARRIED,
WHO WROTE POETRY?
HE STILL WRITES,
BUT NOT FOR ME!
OUR GREAT LITERARY ROMANCE
IS AT A LONG-AWAITED END.
I NOW SEE MY CHOICE
PERHAPS NOT BETTER THAN YOURS.
HE SUFFERS SO MUCH TORMENT!

I CANNOT HELP HIM,
OR SHARE IN THE BRUTAL AGONY OF HIS SLOW DEATH.
ALL MY LOVE TO YOU AND DEAR LEILA,
ALICE RUTH MOORE.

Act 3, Scene 4

(Paul's desk is in the middle of the room, as in scene one. There is however an air of decay. Alcohol bottles and glasses clutter the desk and the room in general.)

PAUL *(writing to Alice)*

DEAR ALICE, I DON'T KNOW
HOW TO WRITE TO YOU.
FOR A LONG TIME MY HEART
HAD SOMETHING HARD AND BITTER AGAINST YOU.
I HAVE TRIED TO HATE YOU,
BUT I WRITE NOW WITH LOVE.
YOU ARE ALWAYS WITH ME
AND THE PAST IS LIKE A BLACK DREAM.

WE ARE MARRIED FOR AN ETERNITY.
I AM A BROKEN-HEARTED MAN,
BUT, THANK GOD, YOU ARE MINE
I LOVE YOU AND CAN LOVE NO OTHER.
WILL YOU MEET ME SOON, MY LOVE?
REMEMBER OUR SUN-KISSED HILL
AND WRITE TO ME SOON.

ALICE

(In a far corner of other side of stage, reads Paul's letter.)

NO!
I COULD HAVE OVERLOOKED THE BRUTAL TREATMENT,
BUT THAT VILE STORY HE SPREAD ABOUT ME,
THAT I COULD NOT, COULD NOT STAND.

(Alice hastily writes on a piece of paper, folds it and places it in an envelope. She gets up and leaves, sobbing violently.)

PAUL

(Paul has moved to a chaise longue. He looks feeble and has a drink in his hand.)

SO, WE ARE BY OUR NATURES DIVIDED,
THE CREOLE AND THE ETHIOP.
WE BOTH DO LOVE AND DESPISE EACH OTHER.
AND THE SELF THAT CRIES OUT
LIES BURIED WITHIN.
THE LIES OF OUR PAST
TURN OUR RADIANCE TO GRIEF.

(Paul is sitting in his rocking chair. He suddenly convulses in a coughing fit. Alice's picture falls from his hand to the ground.)

END OF ACT III

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