Harlem
Walter Dean Myers

They took to the road in Waycross, Georgia
Skipped over the tracks in East St. Louis
Took the bus from Holly Springs
Hitched a ride from Gee's Bend
Took the long way through Memphis
The third deck down from Trinidad
A wrench of heart from Gorree Island
A wrench of heart from Gorree Island
To a place called Harlem

Harlem was a promise
Of a better life, Of a place where a man didn't
Have to know his place
Simply because he was Black.

They brought a call, a song
First heard in the villages of
Ghana/Mali/Senegal

Calls and songs and shouts
Heavy-hearted tambourine rhythms
Loosed in the hard city
Like a scream torn from the throat
Of an ancient clarinet.

A new sound, raucous and sassy
Cascading over the asphalt village
Breaking against the black sky over
1-2-5 Street.
Announcing Hallelujah
Riffing past resolution

We hope, we pray
Our black skins
Reflecting the face of God
In storefront temples
Jive and Jehovah artists
Lay out the Human canvas
The mood indigo
A chorus of summer herbs
Of mangoes and bar-b-que
Of perfumed sisters
Hip-strutting past fried fish joints on
Lenox Avenue in steamy August

A carnival of children
People the daytime streets
Ringalevio warriors
Stickball heroes
Hide and seek knights and ladies
Waiting to sing their own sweet songs
Living out their own slam dunk dreams
Listening
For the coming of the blues

A weary blues that Langston knew
And Countee sung
A river of blues where Du Bois waded
And Baldwin preached

There is a lilt,
Tempo, cadence
A language of darkness
Darkness known
Darkness sharpened at Mintons
Darkness lightened at the Cotton Club
Sent flying from Abyssinian Baptist
To the Apollo.

The uptown A
Rattles past 100th Street
Unreal to real
Relaxing the soul
Shango and Jesus
Asante and Mende
One people, a hundred different
People
Huddled masses
And crowded dreams

Squares
Blocks, bricks
Fat/round women in a rectangle
Sunday night gospel
"Precious Lord...take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand..."
Caught by a full-lipped, full-lipped
Saint washing collard greens in a cracked
Porcelain sink
Back up Lady Day on the radio
Brother so black and blue,
Patting a wide foot outside the too hot
Walk-up,
"Boy, you ought to find the guy who told you
you could play some checkers 'cause he done lied
to you!"

Cracked reed/soprano sax laughter
Floats over a
Fleet of funeral cars.

In Harlem sparrows sit on the fire escapes outside of
Rent parties to learn the tunes.
In Harlem the wind doesn't blow past Smalls, it
Stops and listens to the sounds

Serious business, a poem/ rhapsody tripping along
Striver's Row, not getting its metric feet soiled
On the well-swept walks
Hustling through the hard rain at two o'clock in
The morning to its next gig.

A huddle of horns and a tinkle of glass, a note
Handed down from Marcus to Malcolm to a brother
Too bad and too cool to give his name.

Sometimes despair makes
The stoops shudder
Sometimes there are endless depths of pain
Singing a capella on the street corners.
And sometimes not.

Sometimes it is the artist looking into a mirror,
Painting a portrait of his own heart.
Place, sound,
Celebration,
Memories of feelings, a place
A journey on the A train
That started on the banks of the Niger
And has not ended

Harlem.