

# 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

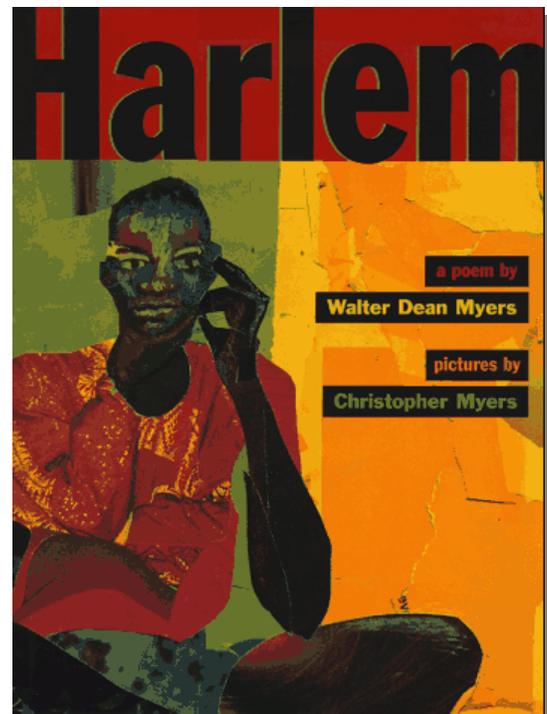
Harlem was a promise  
Of a better life, Of a place where a man didn't  
Have to know his place  
Simply because he was  
Black.

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  
Backing 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.