



POETRY FOUNDATION

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## Harlem

BY LANGSTON HUGHES

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

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# “Strange Fruit”—Billie Holiday (1939)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



Billie Holiday



Original label



Abel Meeropol

Considering the vivid images and sustained metaphor of the song “Strange Fruit,” it shouldn’t be surprising that it began as a poem. It was written by Abel Meeropol (1903-1986), a teacher, poet and songwriter, who published under the name Lewis Allan. Along with “Strange Fruit,” Meeropol/Allen would also compose the hits “The House I Live In” for Frank Sinatra and “Apples, Peaches and Cherries” for Peggy Lee.

But the lighter fare of these other songs do not remotely hint at the brutal power of “Strange Fruit,” a tale of a lynching told via the rich description of a lifeless body hanging from a flowering tree:

*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.*

Though the short song/poem is told as a metaphor, there is little left opaque in its lines (i.e. “Black body swinging in the Southern breeze”; “The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth”). Meeropol’s language throughout is uniformly simple and straight-forward. His rhyme scheme (A-A, B-B) is also sharp and brutally to the point. The author also shows a preference for strong, loaded words like “rot” and “suck.” And though he sometimes reaches for more gentle, even quaint, images (“Southern breeze”; “Scent of magnolia”), he immediately undermines them with his next lines and the hard, ugly truth of this grisly murder. The vivid contrast between the two—the romantically genteel vs. gore-ish real details--only adds to the work’s overall impact.

Singer Billie Holiday (nee Elenora Fagan; a.k.a. Lady Day) (1915-1959) is today (as during her lifetime) recognized as one of the First Ladies of the Blues. Born illegitimately in Philadelphia, Holiday had little interaction with her often traveling mother and even less with her absentee

father. After eventually being dispatched to Baltimore, the little girl was raised primarily by her aunt, Martha Miller.

As could be heard in her voice years later, Holiday's youth was a hard scrapple one—she was arrested for truancy at age nine and sent to reform school not long after. At age 15, Holiday's mother reentered the picture and moved her and her daughter to Harlem. There, Billie's mother worked as a prostitute in a brothel. Rumors have long circulated that Holiday, too, turned to prostitution at this time.

When she was a little older, Holiday began to support herself as a dancer in New York speakeasies. When dancers weren't needed, she auditioned as a singer. Long enamored of blues and jazz artists, and perhaps possessing a natural gift (her father was a musician by trade), Holiday learned a lot from listening and singing along to records by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. She made her "professional" singing debut at Pod's and Jerry's on West 133<sup>rd</sup> Street accompanied by pianist Dick Wilson. That first night, the duo made over \$100 in tips.

Around this time, she also adopted her stage name. "Billie" she borrowed from silent film actress Billie Dove; "Holiday" came from musician Clarence Holiday. (Clarence Holiday, it has also been rumored, may actually have been Billie Holiday's real father.)

Though the newly-christened Billie Holiday continued to perform at Pod's and Jerry's, she also began to branch out to other clubs. By the 1930s, jazz, with its mix of blues and ragtime, was all the rage in Harlem and New York. Holiday found a wide and willing audience wherever she performed. One night, at Monette's, a club on 132<sup>nd</sup>, she was heard by music producer and promoter John Hammond. Hammond, in turn, introduced her to clarinetist and "King of Swing" Benny Goodman. Together, they arranged for Holiday to cut her first record. On November 27, 1933, joined by a nine-piece band in the studio, Holiday recorded "Your Mother's Son-in-Law."

Despite the lackluster success of her first pressing, Holiday continued to excel on the club circuit. In 1935, she played the legendary Apollo. She also toured with some of the biggest bands of the day, including those of Count Basie and Artie Shaw. And she often returned to the recording studio, cutting sides for the Brunswick label including "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" and "Miss Brown to You."

Still, regardless of this success, Holiday faced some difficult times. Not everyone immediately cottoned to the emotional, heavy-with-feeling delivery of Lady Day and she sometimes found herself fired from clubs after just one night. She faced further challenges due to the racism of the era. Often she performed to segregated audiences or to audiences where only whites were admitted. This was especially true in the American south.

In December 1938, back home in New York, Holiday booked an extended series of performances (nine months worth of them) at a new and fully integrated club just opened by Barney Josephson, Café Society.

It was in late 1938 or early 1939, that teacher/poet Lewis Allan brought "Strange Fruit" to Billie Holiday. Though it would go on to become her most renowned song, at first, Holiday was reluctant to sing or record it. With its tale of lynching, it was largely out of character with most of the songs Holiday had performed up to the time. She said, "I was scared people would hate it. The first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake."

Despite Holiday's early reservations, she soon made it a staple of her evening concerts, closing her show with it often and usually to complete, awed silence by the crowd and even the nightclub's dazzled staff. On April 20, 1939, at age 23, Holiday took the "inflammatory" song into the recording studio and laid out the track for the Commodore label. Upon its release, a few

weeks later, “Strange Fruit” became the best selling record of Holiday’s career; it reached number 16 on the charts.

As both a song and a message, the single “Strange Fruit,” when conveyed by Billie Holiday’s dramatic, precise, and world-weary delivery, struck a major chord with audiences, both black and white. For many listeners, it either hit close to home or was disturbingly autobiographical. So-called “protest songs” were nothing new, but to have the story of a brutal lynching laid out so blatantly, yet so poetically, at this time in US history was unusual indeed. “Strange Fruit’s” subject matter was certainly a far cry from other songs that made the hit parade that year: Cole Porter’s “Well, Did You Evah,” “Two Sleepy People,” and Glenn Miller’s bouncy “In the Mood.”

The single “Strange Fruit” made Billie Holiday a star. Though she would never again record such an overtly political song, she continued to perform and record. Holiday had hits with “God Bless the Child,” “Lover Man,” “Lady in Satin,” “Gloomy Sunday,” and “Easy Living.” Her musical output remained impressive despite the personal demons that often undermined her life and work. Throughout her adult life she battled addiction to narcotics including heroin. The long gloves she often favored wearing on stage were supposedly there to hide her track marks. Holiday also had poor choice in men. During her life she had two legal husbands and one common-law one. Often the men she got involved with beat her, a result of the poor self-image she had fostered on her in childhood.

Holiday died when she was only 44 years old, of cirrhosis of the liver, on July 17, 1959. In the years since her passing, her music has lost none of its popularity or its potency. A new generation was introduced to her legacy via the 1972 motion picture “Lady Sings the Blues,” a bio pic starring Diana Ross as Holiday.

Though a few others have gone on to record the song “Strange Fruit,” including Ross, Nina Simone, Tori Amos, Lou Rawls and Jeff Buckley, nothing quite compares to Billie Holiday’s original. And the song and its message is still often evoked. As we have sadly learned in recent years, race-related killings and lynch-like murders are not yet a thing of the past. And the lyrics of “Strange Fruit” still describe them, as eloquently and as powerfully as ever.

*Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).*

LORRAINE  
HANSBERRY

A  
RAISIN  
IN THE  
SUN

INTRODUCTION  
BY ROBERT  
NEMIROFF



# LORRAINE HANSBERRY

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Lorraine Hansberry was born the youngest of four children in Chicago on May 19, 1930. Her father, Carl A. Hansberry, was a successful banker and real-estate broker who was very active in the NAACP and fought to end housing discrimination against blacks. Her mother, Nannie Perry Hansberry, a former schoolteacher, was similarly dedicated to striving for social and political change. As Hansberry later recalled, both parents taught her that "we were the products of the proudest and most mistreated of the races of men" and that "above all, there were two things which were never to be betrayed: the family and the race." She also learned a great deal about racial pride from an uncle, William Leo Hansberry, who was a professor at Howard University as well as one of the first African-American scholars to study African antiquity and history. Throughout her youth, the family's home was a center of black cultural, political, and economic life. On occasion there were visits by such prominent national figures as Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

Hansberry entered the University of Wisconsin in 1948, and studied art, literature, drama, and stage design for the two years. In 1950, she moved to New York City to "seek an education of a different kind." Hansberry soon began submitting articles to *Freedom*, a radi-

WALTER You want to know what I was thinking 'bout in the bathroom or not!

RUTH I know what you thinking 'bout.

WALTER (*Ignoring her*) 'Bout what me and Willy Harris was talking about last night.

RUTH (*Immediately—a refrain*) Willy Harris is a good-for-nothing loudmouth.

WALTER Anybody who talks to me has got to be a good-for-nothing loudmouth, ain't he? And what you know about who is just a good-for-nothing loudmouth? Charlie Atkins was just a "good-for-nothing loudmouth" too, wasn't he! When he wanted me to go in the dry-cleaning business with him. And now—he's grossing a hundred thousand a year. A hundred thousand dollars a year! You still call *him* a loudmouth!

RUTH (*Bitterly*) Oh, Walter Lee . . .  
(*She folds her head on her arms over the table*)

WALTER (*Rising and coming to her and standing over her*) You tired, ain't you? Tired of everything. Me, the boy, the way we live—this beat-up hole—everything. Ain't you? (*She doesn't look up, doesn't answer*) So tired—moaning and groaning all the time, but you wouldn't do nothing to help, would you? You couldn't be on my side that long for nothing, could you?

RUTH Walter, please leave me alone.

WALTER A man needs for a woman to back him up . . .

RUTH Walter—

WALTER Mama would listen to you. You know she listen to you more than she do me and Bennie. She think more of you. All you have to do is just sit down with her when you drinking your coffee one morning and talking 'bout things like you do and—(*He sits down be-*

*side her and demonstrates graphically what he thinks her methods and tone should be*)—you just sip your coffee, see, and say easy like that you been thinking 'bout that deal Walter Lee is so interested in, 'bout the store and all, and sip some more coffee, like what you saying ain't really that important to you— And the next thing you know, she be listening good and asking you questions and when I come home—I can tell her the details. This ain't no fly-by-night proposition, baby. I mean we figured it out, me and Willy and Bobo.

RUTH (*With a frown*) Bobo?

WALTER Yeah. You see, this little liquor store we got in mind cost seventy-five thousand and we figured the initial investment on the place be 'bout thirty thousand, see. That be ten thousand each. Course, there's a couple of hundred you got to pay so's you don't spend your life just waiting for them clowns to let your license get approved—

RUTH You mean graft?

WALTER (*Frowning impatiently*) Don't call it that. See there, that just goes to show you what women understand about the world. Baby, don't *nothing* happen for you in this world 'less you pay *somebody* off!

RUTH Walter, leave me alone! (*She raises her head and stares at him vigorously—then says, more quietly*) Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold.

WALTER (*Straightening up from her and looking off*) That's it. There you are. Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. (*Sadly, but gaining in power*) Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. (*Passionately now*) Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And

his woman say—*(In utter anguish as he brings his fists down on his thighs)*—Your eggs is getting cold!

RUTH *(Softly)* Walter, that ain't none of our money.

WALTER *(Not listening at all or even looking at her)* This morning, I was lookin' in the mirror and thinking about it . . . I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room—*(Very, very quietly)*—and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live . . .

RUTH Eat your eggs, Walter.

WALTER *(Slams the table and jumps up)*—DAMN MY EGGS—DAMN ALL THE EGGS THAT EVER WAS!

RUTH Then go to work. ]

WALTER *(Looking up at her)* See—I'm trying to talk to you 'bout myself—*(Shaking his head with the repetition)*—and all you can say is eat them eggs and go to work.

RUTH *(Wearily)* Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you every day, every night and every morning, and you never say nothing new. *(Shrugging)* So you would rather be Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So—I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace.

WALTER That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world . . . Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something.

RUTH *(Drily, but to hurt)* There are colored men who do things.

WALTER No thanks to the colored woman.

RUTH Well, being a colored woman, I guess I can't help myself none.

*(She rises and gets the ironing board and sets it*

*up and attacks a huge pile of rough-dried clothes, sprinkling them in preparation for the ironing and then rolling them into tight fat balls)*

WALTER *(Mumbling)* We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds!

*(His sister BENEATHA enters. She is about twenty, as slim and intense as her brother. She is not as pretty as her sister-in-law, but her lean, almost intellectual face has a handsomeness of its own. She wears a bright-red flannel nightie, and her thick hair stands wildly about her head. Her speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family's insofar as education has permeated her sense of English—and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally—at last—won out in her inflection; but not altogether, because over all of it is a soft slurring and transformed use of vowels which is the decided influence of the Southside. She passes through the room without looking at either RUTH or WALTER and goes to the outside door and looks, a little blindly, out to the bathroom. She sees that it has been lost to the Johnsons. She closes the door with a sleepy vengeance and crosses to the table and sits down a little defeated)*

BENEATHA I am going to start timing those people.

WALTER You should get up earlier.

BENEATHA *(Her face in her hands. She is still fighting the urge to go back to bed)* Really—would you suggest dawn? Where's the paper?

WALTER *(Pushing the paper across the table to her as he studies her almost clinically, as though he has never seen her before)* You a horrible-looking chick at this hour.