

Classic Poetry Series

**Maya Angelou**  
**- poems -**

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# Maya Angelou(4 April 1928 - 28 May 2014)

(born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928) was an American author and poet who has been called "America's most visible black female autobiographer" by scholar Joanne M. Braxton. She is best known for her series of six autobiographical volumes, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. The first and most highly acclaimed, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), tells of her first seventeen years. It brought her international recognition, and was nominated for a National Book Award. She has been awarded over 30 honorary degrees and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for her 1971 volume of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*.

Angelou was a member of the Harlem Writers Guild in the late 1950s, was active in the Civil Rights movement, and served as Northern Coordinator of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Since 1991, she has taught at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina where she holds the first lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies. Since the 1990s she has made around eighty appearances a year on the lecture circuit. In 1993, Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Bill Clinton's inauguration, the first poet to make an inaugural recitation since Robert Frost at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. In 1995, she was recognized for having the longest-running record (two years) on The New York Times Paperback Nonfiction Bestseller List.

With the publication of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou was heralded as a new kind of memoirist, one of the first African American women who was able to publicly discuss her personal life. She is highly respected as a spokesperson for Black people and women. Angelou's work is often characterized as autobiographical fiction. She has, however, made a deliberate attempt to challenge the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre. Her books, centered on themes such as identity, family, and racism, are often used as set texts in schools and universities internationally. Some of her more controversial work has been challenged or banned in US schools and libraries.

# A Brave And Startling Truth

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet  
Traveling through casual space  
Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns  
To a destination where all signs tell us  
It is possible and imperative that we learn  
A brave and startling truth

And when we come to it  
To the day of peacemaking  
When we release our fingers  
From fists of hostility  
And allow the pure air to cool our palms

When we come to it  
When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate  
And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean  
When battlefields and coliseum  
No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters  
Up with the bruised and bloody grass  
To lie in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches  
The screaming racket in the temples have ceased  
When the pennants are waving gaily  
When the banners of the world tremble  
Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

When we come to it  
When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders  
And children dress their dolls in flags of truce  
When land mines of death have been removed  
And the aged can walk into evenings of peace  
When religious ritual is not perfumed  
By the incense of burning flesh  
And childhood dreams are not kicked awake  
By nightmares of abuse

When we come to it  
Then we will confess that not the Pyramids

With their stones set in mysterious perfection  
Nor the Gardens of Babylon  
Hanging as eternal beauty  
In our collective memory  
Not the Grand Canyon  
Kindled into delicious color  
By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe  
Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji  
Stretching to the Rising Sun  
Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,  
Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores  
These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it  
We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe  
Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger  
Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace  
We, this people on this mote of matter  
In whose mouths abide cankerous words  
Which challenge our very existence  
Yet out of those same mouths  
Come songs of such exquisite sweetness  
That the heart falters in its labor  
And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet  
Whose hands can strike with such abandon  
That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living  
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness  
That the haughty neck is happy to bow  
And the proud back is glad to bend  
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction  
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it  
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body  
Created on this earth, of this earth  
Have the power to fashion for this earth  
A climate where every man and every woman  
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety

Without crippling fear

When we come to it

We must confess that we are the possible

We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world

That is when, and only when

We come to it.

Maya Angelou

# A Conceit

Give me your hand

Make room for me  
to lead and follow  
you  
beyond this rage of poetry.

Let others have  
the privacy of  
touching words  
and love of loss  
of love.

For me  
Give me your hand.

Maya Angelou

# A Plagued Journey

There is no warning rattle at the door  
nor heavy feet to stomp the foyer boards.  
Safe in the dark prison, I know that  
light slides over  
the fingered work of a toothless  
woman in Pakistan.  
Happy prints of  
an invisible time are illumined.  
My mouth agape  
rejects the solid air and  
lungs hold. The invader takes  
direction and  
seeps through the plaster walls.  
It is at my chamber, entering  
the keyhole, pushing  
through the padding of the door.  
I cannot scream. A bone  
of fear clogs my throat.  
It is upon me. It is  
sunrise, with Hope  
its arrogant rider.  
My mind, formerly quiescent  
in its snug encasement, is strained  
to look upon their rapturous visages,  
to let them enter even into me.  
I am forced  
outside myself to  
mount the light and ride joined with Hope.

Through all the bright hours  
I cling to expectation, until  
darkness comes to reclaim me  
as its own. Hope fades, day is gone  
into its irredeemable place  
and I am thrown back into the familiar  
bonds of disconsolation.  
Gloom crawls around  
lapping lasciviously  
between my toes, at my ankles,

and it sucks the strands of my  
hair. It forgives my heady  
fling with Hope. I am  
joined again into its  
greedy arms.

Maya Angelou



# Ain't That Bad?

Dancin' the funky chicken  
Eatin' ribs and tips  
Diggin' all the latest sounds  
And drinkin' gin in sips.

Puttin' down that do-rag  
Tighten' up my 'fro  
Wrappin' up in Blackness  
Don't I shine and glow?

Hearin' Stevie Wonder  
Cookin' beans and rice  
Goin' to the opera  
Checkin' out Leontyne Price.

Get down, Jesse Jackson  
Dance on, Alvin Ailey  
Talk, Miss Barbara Jordan  
Groove, Miss Pearlle Bailey.

Now ain't they bad?  
An ain't they Black?  
An ain't they Black?  
An' ain't they Bad?  
An ain't they bad?  
An' ain't they Black?  
An' ain't they fine?

Black like the hour of the night  
When your love turns and wriggles close to your side  
Black as the earth which has given birth  
To nations, and when all else is gone will abide.

Bad as the storm that leaps raging from the heavens  
Bringing the welcome rain  
Bad as the sun burning orange hot at midday  
Lifting the waters again.

Arthur Ashe on the tennis court

Mohammed Ali in the ring  
Andre Watts and Andrew Young  
Black men doing their thing.

Dressing in purples and pinks and greens  
Exotic as rum and Cokes  
Living our lives with flash and style  
Ain't we colorful folks?

Now ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we bad?  
An' ain't we Black?  
An' ain't we fine?

Maya Angelou

# Alone

Lying, thinking  
Last night  
How to find my soul a home  
Where water is not thirsty  
And bread loaf is not stone  
I came up with one thing  
And I don't believe I'm wrong  
That nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

There are some millionaires  
With money they can't use  
Their wives run round like banshees  
Their children sing the blues  
They've got expensive doctors  
To cure their hearts of stone.  
But nobody  
No, nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen closely  
I'll tell you what I know  
Storm clouds are gathering  
The wind is gonna blow  
The race of man is suffering  
And I can hear the moan,  
'Cause nobody,  
But nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone  
Nobody, but nobody  
Can make it out here alone.

Maya Angelou

# Awaking In New York

Curtains forcing their will  
against the wind,  
children sleep,  
exchanging dreams with  
seraphim. The city  
drags itself awake on  
subway straps; and  
I, an alarm, awake as a  
rumor of war,  
lie stretching into dawn,  
unasked and unheeded.

Maya Angelou

# Caged Bird

The free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wings  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks  
down his narrow cage  
can seldom see through  
his bars of rage  
his wings are clipped and  
his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings  
with fearful trill  
of the things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn  
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still

and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou

# California Prodigal

FOR DAVID P—B

The eye follows, the land  
Slips upward, creases down, forms  
The gentle buttocks of a young  
Giant. In the nestle,  
Old adobe bricks, washed of  
Whiteness, paled to umber,  
Await another century.

Star Jasmine and old vines  
Lay claim upon the ghosted land,  
Then quiet pools whisper  
Private childhood secrets.

Flush on inner cottage walls  
Antiquitous faces,  
Used to the gelid breath  
Of old manors, glare disdainfully  
Over breached time.

Around and through these  
Cold phantasmatalities,  
He walks, insisting  
To the languid air,  
Activity, music,  
A generosity of graces.

His lupin fields spurn old  
Deceit and agile poppies dance  
In golden riot. Each day is  
Fulminant, exploding brightly  
Under the gaze of his exquisite  
Sires, frozen in the famed paint  
Of dead masters. Audacious  
Sunlight casts defiance  
At their feet.





# Equality

You declare you see me dimly  
through a glass which will not shine,  
though I stand before you boldly,  
trim in rank and marking time.  
You do own to hear me faintly  
as a whisper out of range,  
while my drums beat out the message  
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.

You announce my ways are wanton,  
that I fly from man to man,  
but if I'm just a shadow to you,  
could you ever understand ?

We have lived a painful history,  
we know the shameful past,  
but I keep on marching forward,  
and you keep on coming last.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.

Take the blinders from your vision,  
take the padding from your ears,  
and confess you've heard me crying,  
and admit you've seen my tears.

Hear the tempo so compelling,  
hear the blood throb in my veins.  
Yes, my drums are beating nightly,  
and the rhythms never change.

Equality, and I will be free.  
Equality, and I will be free.



# Glory Falls

Glory falls around us  
as we sob  
a dirge of  
desolation on the Cross  
and hatred is the ballast of  
the rock  
which his upon our necks  
and underfoot.  
We have woven  
robes of silk  
and clothed our nakedness  
with tapestry.  
From crawling on this  
murky planet's floor  
we soar beyond the  
birds and  
through the clouds  
and edge our waays from hate  
and blind despair and  
bring horror  
to our brothers, and to our sisters cheer.  
We grow despite the  
horror that we feed  
upon our own  
tomorrow.  
We grow.

Maya Angelou

# Harlem Hopscotch

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

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

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

Both feet flat, the game is done.  
They think I lost. I think I won.

Maya Angelou

# Human Family

I note the obvious differences  
in the human family.  
Some of us are serious,  
some thrive on comedy.

Some declare their lives are lived  
as true profundity,  
and others claim they really live  
the real reality.

The variety of our skin tones  
can confuse, bemuse, delight,  
brown and pink and beige and purple,  
tan and blue and white.

I've sailed upon the seven seas  
and stopped in every land,  
I've seen the wonders of the world  
not yet one common man.

I know ten thousand women  
called Jane and Mary Jane,  
but I've not seen any two  
who really were the same.

Mirror twins are different  
although their features jibe,  
and lovers think quite different thoughts  
while lying side by side.

We love and lose in China,  
we weep on England's moors,  
and laugh and moan in Guinea,  
and thrive on Spanish shores.

We seek success in Finland,  
are born and die in Maine.  
In minor ways we differ,  
in major we're the same.

I note the obvious differences  
between each sort and type,  
but we are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

We are more alike, my friends,  
than we are unlike.

Maya Angelou

# I know why the caged bird sings

A free bird leaps on the back  
Of the wind and floats downstream  
Till the current ends and dips his wing  
In the orange sun's rays  
And dares to claim the sky.

But a BIRD that stalks down his narrow cage  
Can seldom see through his bars of rage  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill  
Of things unknown but longed for still  
And his tune is heard on the distant hill for  
The caged bird sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
And the trade winds soft through  
The sighing trees  
And the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright  
Lawn and he names the sky his own.

But a caged BIRD stands on the grave of dreams  
His shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
His wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
So he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with  
A fearful trill of things unknown  
But longed for still and his  
Tune is heard on the distant hill  
For the caged bird sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou



# In All Ways A Woman

In my young years I took pride in the fact that luck was called a lady. In fact, there were so few public acknowledgments of the female presence that I felt personally honored whenever nature and large ships were referred to as feminine. But as I matured, I began to resent being considered a sister to a changeling as fickle as luck, as aloof as an ocean, and as frivolous as nature. The phrase 'A woman always has the right to change her mind' played so aptly into the negative image of the female that I made myself a victim to an unwavering decision. Even if I made an inane and stupid choice, I stuck by it rather than 'be like a woman and change my mind.'

Being a woman is hard work. Not without joy and even ecstasy, but still relentless, unending work. Becoming an old female may require only being born with certain genitalia, inheriting long-living genes and the fortune not to be run over by an out-of-control truck, but to become and remain a woman command the existence and employment of genius.

The woman who survives intact and happy must be at once tender and tough. She must have convinced herself, or be in the unending process of convincing herself, that she, her values, and her choices are important. In a time and world where males hold sway and control, the pressure upon women to yield their rights-of-way is tremendous. And it is under those very circumstances that the woman's toughness must be in evidence.

She must resist considering herself a lesser version of her male counterpart. She is not a sculptress, poetess, authoress, Jewess, Negress, or even (now rare) in university parlance a rectoress. If she is the thing, then for her own sense of self and for the education of the ill-informed she must insist with rectitude in being the thing and in being called the thing.

A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but a woman called by a devaluing name will only be weakened by the misnomer. She will need to prize her tenderness and be able to display it at appropriate times in order to prevent toughness from gaining total authority and to avoid becoming a mirror image of those men who value power above life, and control over love.

It is imperative that a woman keep her sense of humor intact and at the ready. She must see, even if only in secret, that she is the funniest, looniest woman in her world, which she should also see as being the most absurd world of all times. It has been said that laughter is therapeutic and amiability lengthens the life

span. Women should be tough, tender, laugh as much as possible, and live long lives. The struggle for equality continues unabated, and the woman warrior who is armed with wit and courage will be among the first to celebrate victory.

Maya Angelou

# Insomniac

There are some nights when  
sleep plays coy,  
aloof and disdainful.  
And all the wiles  
that I employ to win  
its service to my side  
are useless as wounded pride,  
and much more painful.

Maya Angelou

# Kin

FOR BAILEY

We were entwined in red rings  
Of blood and loneliness before  
The first snows fell  
Before muddy rivers seeded clouds  
Above a virgin forest, and  
Men ran naked, blue and black  
Skinned into the warm embraces  
Of Sheba, Eve and Lilith.  
I was your sister.

You left me to force strangers  
Into brother molds, exacting  
Taxations they never  
Owed or could ever pay.

You fought to die, thinking  
In destruction lies the seed  
Of birth. You may be right.

I will remember silent walks in  
Southern woods and long talks  
In low voices  
Shielding meaning from the big ears  
Of overcurious adults.

You may be right.  
Your slow return from  
Regions of terror and bloody  
Screams, races my heart.  
I hear again the laughter  
Of children and see fireflies  
Bursting tiny explosions in  
An Arkansas twilight.

Maya Angelou

# Life Doesn't Frighten Me

Shadows on the wall  
Noises down the hall  
Life doesn't frighten me at all

Bad dogs barking loud  
Big ghosts in a cloud  
Life doesn't frighten me at all

Mean old Mother Goose  
Lions on the loose  
They don't frighten me at all

Dragons breathing flame  
On my counterpane  
That doesn't frighten me at all.

I go boo  
Make them shoo  
I make fun  
Way they run  
I won't cry  
So they fly  
I just smile  
They go wild

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Tough guys fight  
All alone at night  
Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Panthers in the park  
Strangers in the dark  
No, they don't frighten me at all.

That new classroom where  
Boys all pull my hair  
(Kissy little girls  
With their hair in curls)

They don't frighten me at all.

Don't show me frogs and snakes  
And listen for my scream,  
If I'm afraid at all  
It's only in my dreams.

I've got a magic charm  
That I keep up my sleeve  
I can walk the ocean floor  
And never have to breathe.

Life doesn't frighten me at all  
Not at all  
Not at all.

Life doesn't frighten me at all.

Maya Angelou

# Men

When I was young, I used to  
Watch behind the curtains  
As men walked up and down the street. Wino men, old men.  
Young men sharp as mustard.  
See them. Men are always  
Going somewhere.  
They knew I was there. Fifteen  
Years old and starving for them.  
Under my window, they would pauses,  
Their shoulders high like the  
Breasts of a young girl,  
Jacket tails slapping over  
Those behinds,  
Men.

One day they hold you in the  
Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you  
Were the last raw egg in the world. Then  
They tighten up. Just a little. The  
First squeeze is nice. A quick hug.  
Soft into your defenselessness. A little  
More. The hurt begins. Wrench out a  
Smile that slides around the fear. When the  
Air disappears,  
Your mind pops, exploding fiercely, briefly,  
Like the head of a kitchen match. Shattered.  
It is your juice  
That runs down their legs. Staining their shoes.  
When the earth rights itself again,  
And taste tries to return to the tongue,  
Your body has slammed shut. Forever.  
No keys exist.

Then the window draws full upon  
Your mind. There, just beyond  
The sway of curtains, men walk.  
Knowing something.  
Going someplace.  
But this time, I will simply

Stand and watch.

Maybe.

Maya Angelou



# Million Man March Poem

The night has been long,  
The wound has been deep,  
The pit has been dark,  
And the walls have been steep.

Under a dead blue sky on a distant beach,  
I was dragged by my braids just beyond your reach.  
Your hands were tied, your mouth was bound,  
You couldn't even call out my name.  
You were helpless and so was I,  
But unfortunately throughout history  
You've worn a badge of shame.

I say, the night has been long,  
The wound has been deep,  
The pit has been dark  
And the walls have been steep.

But today, voices of old spirit sound  
Speak to us in words profound,  
Across the years, across the centuries,  
Across the oceans, and across the seas.  
They say, draw near to one another,  
Save your race.  
You have been paid for in a distant place,  
The old ones remind us that slavery's chains  
Have paid for our freedom again and again.

The night has been long,  
The pit has been deep,  
The night has been dark,  
And the walls have been steep.

The hells we have lived through and live through still,  
Have sharpened our senses and toughened our will.  
The night has been long.  
This morning I look through your anguish  
Right down to your soul.  
I know that with each other we can make ourselves whole.

I look through the posture and past your disguise,  
And see your love for family in your big brown eyes.

I say, clap hands and let's come together in this meeting ground,  
I say, clap hands and let's deal with each other with love,  
I say, clap hands and let us get from the low road of indifference,  
Clap hands, let us come together and reveal our hearts,  
Let us come together and revise our spirits,  
Let us come together and cleanse our souls,  
Clap hands, let's leave the preening  
And stop impostering our own history.  
Clap hands, call the spirits back from the ledge,  
Clap hands, let us invite joy into our conversation,  
Courtesy into our bedrooms,  
Gentleness into our kitchen,  
Care into our nursery.

The ancestors remind us, despite the history of pain  
We are a going-on people who will rise again.

And still we rise.

Maya Angelou

# Momma Welfare Roll

Her arms semaphore fat triangles,  
Pudgy hands bunched on layered hips  
Where bones idle under years of fatback  
And lima beans.

Her jowls shiver in accusation  
Of crimes clichéd by  
Repetition. Her children, strangers  
To childhood's toys, play  
Best the games of darkened doorways,  
Rooftop tag, and know the slick feel of  
Other people's property.

Too fat to whore,  
Too mad to work,  
Searches her dreams for the  
Lucky sign and walks bare-handed  
Into a den of bureaucrats for  
Her portion.  
'They don't give me welfare.  
I take it.'

Maya Angelou

# Old Folks Laugh

They have spent their  
content of simpering,  
holding their lips this  
and that way, winding  
the lines between  
their brows. Old folks  
allow their bellies to jiggle like slow  
tambourines.  
The hollers  
rise up and spill  
over any way they want.  
When old folks laugh, they free the world.  
They turn slowly, slyly knowing  
the best and the worst  
of remembering.  
Saliva glistens in  
the corners of their mouths,  
their heads wobble  
on brittle necks, but  
their laps  
are filled with memories.  
When old folks laugh, they consider the promise  
of dear painless death, and generously  
forgive life for happening  
to them.

Maya Angelou

# On Aging

When you see me sitting quietly,  
Like a sack left on the shelf,  
Don't think I need your chattering.  
I'm listening to myself.  
Hold! Stop! Don't pity me!  
Hold! Stop your sympathy!  
Understanding if you got it,  
Otherwise I'll do without it!  
When my bones are stiff and aching,  
And my feet won't climb the stair,  
I will only ask one favor:  
Don't bring me no rocking chair.  
When you see me walking, stumbling,  
Don't study and get it wrong.  
'Cause tired don't mean lazy  
And every goodbye ain't gone.  
I'm the same person I was back then,  
A little less hair, a little less chin,  
A lot less lungs and much less wind.  
But ain't I lucky I can still breathe in.

Maya Angelou

# On The Pulse Of Morning

A Rock, A River, A Tree  
Hosts to species long since departed,  
Mark the mastodon.  
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens  
Of their sojourn here  
On our planet floor,  
Any broad alarm of their of their hastening doom  
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.  
But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,  
Come, you may stand upon my  
Back and face your distant destiny,  
But seek no haven in my shadow.  
I will give you no hiding place down here.  
You, created only a little lower than  
The angels, have crouched too long in  
The bruising darkness,  
Have lain too long  
Face down in ignorance.  
Your mouths spelling words  
Armed for slaughter.  
The rock cries out today, you may stand on me,  
But do not hide your face.  
Across the wall of the world,  
A river sings a beautiful song,  
Come rest here by my side.  
Each of you a bordered country,  
Delicate and strangely made proud,  
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.  
Your armed struggles for profit  
Have left collars of waste upon  
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.  
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,  
If you will study war no more.  
Come, clad in peace and I will sing the songs  
The Creator gave to me when I  
And the tree and stone were one.  
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your brow  
And when you yet knew you still knew nothing.  
The river sings and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to  
The singing river and the wise rock.  
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,  
The African and Native American, the Sioux,  
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,  
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,  
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,  
The privileged, the homeless, the teacher.  
They hear. They all hear  
The speaking of the tree.  
Today, the first and last of every tree  
Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the river.  
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the river.  
Each of you, descendant of some passed on  
Traveller, has been paid for.  
You, who gave me my first name,  
You Pawnee, Apache and Seneca,  
You Cherokee Nation, who rested with me,  
Then forced on bloody feet,  
Left me to the employment of other seekers-  
Desperate for gain, starving for gold.  
You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot...  
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru,  
Bought, sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare  
Praying for a dream.  
Here, root yourselves beside me.  
I am the tree planted by the river,  
Which will not be moved.  
I, the rock, I the river, I the tree  
I am yours- your passages have been paid.  
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage,  
Need not be lived again.  
Lift up your eyes upon  
The day breaking for you.  
Give birth again  
To the dream.  
Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands.  
Mold it into the shape of your most

Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts.  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.  
Do not be wedded forever  
To fear, yoked eternally  
To brutishness.  
The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change.  
Here, on the pulse of this fine day  
You may have the courage  
To look up and out upon me,  
The rock, the river, the tree, your country.  
No less to Midas than the mendicant.  
No less to you now than the mastodon then.  
Here on the pulse of this new day  
You may have the grace to look up and out  
And into your sister's eyes,  
Into your brother's face, your country  
And say simply  
Very simply  
With hope  
Good morning.

Maya Angelou



# Our Grandmothers

She lay, skin down in the moist dirt,  
the canebrake rustling  
with the whispers of leaves, and  
loud longing of hounds and  
the ransack of hunters crackling the near  
branches.

She muttered, lifting her head a nod toward  
freedom,  
I shall not, I shall not be moved.

She gathered her babies,  
their tears slick as oil on black faces,  
their young eyes canvassing mornings of madness.  
Momma, is Master going to sell you  
from us tomorrow?

Yes.

Unless you keep walking more  
and talking less.

Yes.

Unless the keeper of our lives  
releases me from all commandments.

Yes.

And your lives,  
never mine to live,  
will be executed upon the killing floor of  
innocents.

Unless you match my heart and words,  
saying with me,

I shall not be moved.

In Virginia tobacco fields,  
leaning into the curve

of Steinway  
pianos, along Arkansas roads,  
in the red hills of Georgia,  
into the palms of her chained hands, she  
cried against calamity,  
You have tried to destroy me  
and though I perish daily,

I shall not be moved.

Her universe, often  
summarized into one black body  
falling finally from the tree to her feet,  
made her cry each time into a new voice.  
All my past hastens to defeat,  
and strangers claim the glory of my love,  
Iniquity has bound me to his bed.

yet, I must not be moved.

She heard the names,  
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:  
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,  
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,  
whore, hot tail, thing, it.  
She said, But my description cannot  
fit your tongue, for  
I have a certain way of being in this world,

and I shall not, I shall not be moved.

No angel stretched protecting wings  
above the heads of her children,  
fluttering and urging the winds of reason  
into the confusions of their lives.  
The sprouted like young weeds,

but she could not shield their growth  
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor  
shape them into symbolic topiaries.  
She sent them away,  
underground, overland, in coaches and  
shoeless.

When you learn, teach.  
When you get, give.  
As for me,

I shall not be moved.

She stood in midocean, seeking dry land.  
She searched God's face.  
Assured,  
she placed her fire of service  
on the altar, and though  
clothed in the finery of faith,  
when she appeared at the temple door,  
no sign welcomed  
Black Grandmother, Enter here.

Into the crashing sound,  
into wickedness, she cried,  
No one, no, nor no one million  
ones dare deny me God, I go forth  
along, and stand as ten thousand.

The Divine upon my right  
impels me to pull forever  
at the latch on Freedom's gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my  
feet without ceasing into the camp of the  
righteous and into the tents of the free.

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,  
honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted  
down a pyramid for years.  
She is Sheba the Sojourner,  
Harriet and Zora,  
Mary Bethune and Angela,  
Annie to Zenobia.

She stands  
before the abortion clinic,  
confounded by the lack of choices.  
In the Welfare line,  
reduced to the pity of handouts.  
Ordained in the pulpit, shielded  
by the mysteries.  
In the operating room,  
husbanding life.  
In the choir loft,  
holding God in her throat.  
On lonely street corners,  
hawking her body.  
In the classroom, loving the  
children to understanding.

Centered on the world's stage,  
she sings to her loves and beloveds,  
to her foes and detractors:  
However I am perceived and deceived,  
however my ignorance and conceits,  
lay aside your fears that I will be undone,

for I shall not be moved.

Maya Angelou

# Passing Time

Your skin like dawn  
Mine like musk

One paints the beginning  
of a certain end.

The other, the end of a  
sure beginning.

Maya Angelou

# Phenomenal Woman

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I'm telling lies.  
I say,  
It's in the reach of my arms  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.  
When I try to show them  
They say they still can't see.  
I say,

It's in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I'm a woman

Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need of my care,  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Maya Angelou

# Pickin Em Up and Layin Em Down

There's a long-legged girl  
in San Francisco  
by the Golden Gate.  
She said she'd give me all I wanted  
but I just couldn't wait.  
I started to  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
gettin to the next town  
Baby.

There's a pretty brown  
in Birmingham.  
Boys, she little and cute  
but when she like to tied me down  
I had to grab my suit and started to  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
getting to the next town  
Baby.

I met that lovely Detroit lady  
and thought my time had come  
But just before I said "I do"  
I said "I got to run" and started to  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,



getting to the next town  
Baby.

There ain't no words for what I feel  
about a pretty face  
But if I stay I just might miss  
a prettier one some place  
I started to  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
Pickin em up  
                  and layin em down,  
getting to the next town  
Baby.

Maya Angelou

# Preacher, Don't Send Me

Preacher, don't send me  
when I die  
to some big ghetto  
in the sky  
where rats eat cats  
of the leopard type  
and Sunday brunch  
is grits and tripe.

I've known those rats  
I've seen them kill  
and grits I've had  
would make a hill,  
or maybe a mountain,  
so what I need  
from you on Sunday  
is a different creed.

Preacher, please don't  
promise me  
streets of gold  
and milk for free.  
I stopped all milk  
at four years old  
and once I'm dead  
I won't need gold.

I'd call a place  
pure paradise  
where families are loyal  
and strangers are nice,  
where the music is jazz  
and the season is fall.  
Promise me that  
or nothing at all.

Maya Angelou

# Recovery

A Last love,  
proper in conclusion,  
should snip the wings  
forbidding further flight.  
But I, now,  
reft of that confusion,  
am lifted up  
and speeding toward the light.

Maya Angelou

# Refusal

Beloved,  
In what other lives or lands  
Have I known your lips  
Your Hands  
Your Laughter brave  
Irreverent.  
Those sweet excesses that  
I do adore.  
What surety is there  
That we will meet again,  
On other worlds some  
Future time undated.  
I defy my body's haste.  
Without the promise  
Of one more sweet encounter  
I will not deign to die.

Maya Angelou

# Remembrance

Your hands easy  
weight, teasing the bees  
hived in my hair, your smile at the  
slope of my cheek. On the  
occasion, you press  
above me, glowing, spouting  
readiness, mystery rapes  
my reason

When you have withdrawn  
your self and the magic, when  
only the smell of your  
love lingers between  
my breasts, then, only  
then, can I greedily consume  
your presence.

Maya Angelou

# Savior

Petulant priests, greedy  
centurions, and one million  
incensed gestures stand  
between your love and me.

Your agape sacrifice  
is reduced to colored glass,  
vapid penance, and the  
tedium of ritual.

Your footprints yet  
mark the crest of  
billowing seas but  
your joy  
fades upon the tablets  
of ordained prophets.

Visit us again, Savior.  
Your children, burdened with  
disbelief, blinded by a patina  
of wisdom,  
carom down this vale of  
fear. We cry for you  
although we have lost  
your name.

Maya Angelou

# Son to Mother

I start no  
wars, raining poison  
on cathedrals,  
melting Stars of David  
into golden faucets  
to be lighted by lamps  
shaded by human skin.

I set no  
store on the strange lands,  
send no  
missionaries beyond my  
borders,  
to plunder secrets  
and barter souls.

They  
say you took my manhood,  
Momma.  
Come sit on my lap  
and tell me,  
what do you want me to say  
to them, just  
before I annihilate  
their ignorance ?

Maya Angelou

# Song for the Old Ones

My Fathers sit on benches  
their flesh counts every plank  
the slats leave dents of darkness  
deep in their withered flanks.

They nod like broken candles  
all waxed and burnt profound  
they say 'It's understanding  
that makes the world go round.'

There in those pleated faces  
I see the auction block  
the chains and slavery's coffles  
the whip and lash and stock.

My Fathers speak in voices  
that shred my fact and sound  
they say 'It's our submission  
that makes the world go round.'

They used the finest cunning  
their naked wits and wiles  
the lowly Uncle Tomming  
and Aunt Jemima's smiles.

They've laughed to shield their crying  
then shuffled through their dreams  
and stepped 'n' fetched a country  
to write the blues with screams.

I understand their meaning  
it could and did derive  
from living on the edge of death  
They kept my race alive.

Maya Angelou



# Still I Rise

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may tread me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops.  
Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.  
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

Maya Angelou

# Televised

Televised news turns  
a half-used day into  
a waste of desolation.  
If nothing wondrous preceded  
the catastrophic announcements,  
certainly nothing will follow, save  
the sad-eyed faces of  
bony children,  
distended bellies making  
mock at their starvation.  
Why are they always  
Black ?  
Whom do they await ?  
The lamb-chop flesh  
reeks and cannot be  
eaten. Even the  
green peas roll on my plate  
unmolested. Their innocence  
matched by the helpless  
hope in the children's faces.  
Why do Black children  
hope ? Who will bring  
them peas and lamb chops  
and one more morning ?

Maya Angelou

# The Black Family Pledge

BECAUSE we have forgotten our ancestors,  
our children no longer give us honor.

BECAUSE we have lost the path our ancestors cleared  
kneeling in perilous undergrowth,  
our children cannot find their way.

BECAUSE we have banished the God of our ancestors,  
our children cannot pray.

BECAUSE the old wails of our ancestors have faded beyond our hearing,  
our children cannot hear us crying.

BECAUSE we have abandoned our wisdom of mothering and fathering,  
our befuddled children give birth to children  
they neither want nor understand.

BECAUSE we have forgotten how to love, the adversary is within our  
gates, and holds us up to the mirror of the world shouting,  
'Regard the loveless'

Therefore we pledge to bind ourselves to one another, to embrace our  
lowliest, to keep company with our loneliest, to educate our illiterate,  
to feed our starving, to clothe our ragged, to do all good things,  
knowing that we are more than keepers of our brothers and sisters.

We ARE our brothers and sisters.

IN HONOR of those who toiled and implored God with golden tongues,  
and in gratitude to the same God who brought us out of hopeless desolation, we  
make this pledge.

Maya Angelou

# The Detached

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

We pray,  
Savoring sweet the teathed lies,  
Bellying the grounds before alien gods,  
    Gods, who neither know nor  
    wish to know that  
    HELL IS INTERNAL.

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

Maya Angelou

# The Health-Food Diner

The Health-Food Diner  
No sprouted wheat and soya shoots  
And Brussels in a cake,  
Carrot straw and spinach raw,  
(Today, I need a steak).

Not thick brown rice and rice pilaw  
Or mushrooms creamed on toast,  
Turnips mashed and parsnips hashed,  
(I'm dreaming of a roast).

Health-food folks around the world  
Are thinned by anxious zeal,  
They look for help in seafood kelp  
(I count on breaded veal).

No smoking signs, raw mustard greens,  
Zucchini by the ton,  
Uncooked kale and bodies frail  
Are sure to make me run

to

Loins of pork and chicken thighs  
And standing rib, so prime,  
Pork chops brown and fresh ground round  
(I crave them all the time).

Irish stews and boiled corned beef  
and hot dogs by the scores,  
or any place that saves a space  
For smoking carnivores.

Maya Angelou

# The Lesson

I keep on dying again.  
Veins collapse, opening like the  
Small fists of sleeping  
Children.  
Memory of old tombs,  
Rotting flesh and worms do  
Not convince me against  
The challenge. The years  
And cold defeat live deep in  
Lines along my face.  
They dull my eyes, yet  
I keep on dying,  
Because I love to live.

Maya Angelou

# The Mothering Blackness

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

She came down creeping  
here to the black arms waiting  
now to the warm heart waiting  
rime of alien dreams befrosts her rich brown face  
She came down creeping

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

Maya Angelou



# The Rock Cries Out to Us Today

A Rock, A River, A Tree  
Hosts to species long since departed,  
Mark the mastodon.  
The dinosaur, who left dry tokens  
Of their sojourn here  
On our planet floor,  
Any broad alarm of their of their hastening doom  
Is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.  
But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully,  
Come, you may stand upon my  
Back and face your distant destiny,  
But seek no haven in my shadow.  
I will give you no hiding place down here.  
You, created only a little lower than  
The angels, have crouched too long in  
The bruising darkness,  
Have lain too long  
Face down in ignorance.  
Your mouths spelling words  
Armed for slaughter.  
The rock cries out today, you may stand on me,  
But do not hide your face.  
Across the wall of the world,  
A river sings a beautiful song,  
Come rest here by my side.  
Each of you a bordered country,  
Delicate and strangely made proud,  
Yet thrusting perpetually under siege.  
Your armed struggles for profit  
Have left collars of waste upon  
My shore, currents of debris upon my breast.  
Yet, today I call you to my riverside,  
If you will study war no more.  
Come, clad in peace and I will sing the songs  
The Creator gave to me when I  
And the tree and stone were one.  
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your brow  
And when you yet knew you still knew nothing.  
The river sings and sings on.

There is a true yearning to respond to  
The singing river and the wise rock.  
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,  
The African and Native American, the Sioux,  
The Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek,  
The Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheikh,  
The Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,  
The privileged, the homeless, the teacher.  
They hear. They all hear  
The speaking of the tree.  
Today, the first and last of every tree  
Speaks to humankind. Come to me, here beside the river.  
Plant yourself beside me, here beside the river.  
Each of you, descendant of some passed on  
Traveller, has been paid for.  
You, who gave me my first name,  
You Pawnee, Apache and Seneca,  
You Cherokee Nation, who rested with me,  
Then forced on bloody feet,  
Left me to the employment of other seekers-  
Desperate for gain, starving for gold.  
You, the Turk, the Swede, the German, the Scot...  
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru,  
Bought, sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare  
Praying for a dream.  
Here, root yourselves beside me.  
I am the tree planted by the river,  
Which will not be moved.  
I, the rock, I the river, I the tree  
I am yours- your passages have been paid.  
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need  
For this bright morning dawning for you.  
History, despite its wrenching pain,  
Cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage,  
Need not be lived again.  
Lift up your eyes upon  
The day breaking for you.  
Give birth again  
To the dream.  
Women, children, men,  
Take it into the palms of your hands.  
Mold it into the shape of your most

Private need. Sculpt it into  
The image of your most public self.  
Lift up your hearts.  
Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.  
Do not be wedded forever  
To fear, yoked eternally  
To brutishness.  
The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change.  
Here, on the pulse of this fine day  
You may have the courage  
To look up and out upon me,  
The rock, the river, the tree, your country.  
No less to Midas than the mendicant.  
No less to you now than the mastodon then.  
Here on the pulse of this new day  
You may have the grace to look up and out  
And into your sister's eyes,  
Into your brother's face, your country  
And say simply  
Very simply  
With hope  
Good morning.

Maya Angelou

# The Traveller

Byways and bygone  
And lone nights long  
Sun rays and sea waves  
And star and stone

Manless and friendless  
No cave my home  
This is my torture  
My long nights, lone

Maya Angelou

# The Week of Diana

The dark lantern of world sadness has cast its shadow upon the land.

We stumble into our misery on leaden feet.

Our minds seek to comprehend the unknowable and our hearts seek to

Measure a tomorrow without the Sunshine Princess.

Her hands which had held bright tiaras and jewelled crowns,

Also stroked the faces of pain along

Angola's dusty roads.

She was born to the privilege of plenty

Yet, she communed with the needy without a show of pompous piety.

Glowing in Bosnia, radiant at glittering balls,

We came to love her and claim her for her grace and accessibility.

Luminous always.

We smiled to see her enter and grinned at her happiness.

Now the world we made is forever changed...

Made smaller, meaner, less colorful.

Yet, because she did live,

Because she ventured life and confronted change,

She has left us a legacy.

We also may dare...

To care for some other than ourselves and those who look like us.

And maybe we can take a lesson from her

And try to live our lives

With passion, compassion, humor and grace.

Goodbye Sunshine Princess.

Maya Angelou

# These Yet To Be United States

Tremors of your network  
cause kings to disappear.  
Your open mouth in anger  
makes nations bow in fear.

Your bombs can change the seasons,  
obliterate the spring.  
What more do you long for ?  
Why are you suffering ?

You control the human lives  
in Rome and Timbuktu.  
Lonely nomads wandering  
owe Telstar to you.

Seas shift at your bidding,  
your mushrooms fill the sky.  
Why are you unhappy ?  
Why do your children cry ?

They kneel alone in terror  
with dread in every glance.  
Their nights ['rights' ? - Schrift nicht lesbar] are threatened daily  
by a grim inheritance.

You dwell in whitened castles  
with deep and poisoned moats  
and cannot hear the curses  
which fill your children's throats.

Maya Angelou

# They Went Home

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

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

My praises were on all men's lips,  
they liked my smile, my wit, my hips,  
they'd spend one night, or two or three.  
But...

Maya Angelou



# Touched By An Angel

We, unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight  
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives  
and in its train come ecstasies  
old memories of pleasure  
ancient histories of pain.  
Yet if we are bold,  
love strikes away the chains of fear  
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity  
In the flush of love's light  
we dare be brave  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.

Maya Angelou

# We Had Him

Beloveds, now we know that we know nothing  
Now that our bright and shining star can slip away from our fingertips like a puff  
of summer wind

Without notice, our dear love can escape our doting embrace  
Sing our songs among the stars and and walk our dances across the face of the  
moon

In the instant we learn that Michael is gone we know nothing  
No clocks can tell our time and no oceans can rush our tides  
With the abrupt absence of our treasure

Though we our many, each of us is achingly alone  
Piercingly alone  
Only when we confess our confusion can we remember that he was a gift to us  
and we did have him

He came to us from the Creator, trailing creativity in abundance  
Despite the anguish of life he was sheathed in mother love and family love and  
survived and did more than that

He thrived with passion and compassion, humor and style  
We had him  
Whether we knew who he was or did not know, he was ours and we were his  
We had him

Beautiful, delighting our eyes  
He raked his hat slant over his brow and took a pose on his toes for all of us and  
we laughed and stomped our feet for him

We were enchanted with his passion because he held nothing  
He gave us all he had been given

Today in Tokyo, beneath the Eiffel Tower, in Ghana's Blackstar Square, in  
Johannesburg, in Pittsburgh, in Birmingham, Alabama and Birmingham England,  
we are missing Michael Jackson

But we do know that we had him  
And we are the world.

Maya Angelou

# Weekend Glory

Some clichty folks  
don't know the facts,  
posin' and preenin'  
and puttin' on acts,  
stretchin' their backs.

They move into condos  
up over the ranks,  
pawn their souls  
to the local banks.  
Buying big cars  
they can't afford,  
ridin' around town  
actin' bored.

If they want to learn how to live life right  
they ought to study me on Saturday night.

My job at the plant  
ain't the biggest bet,  
but I pay my bills  
and stay out of debt.  
I get my hair done  
for my own self's sake,  
so I don't have to pick  
and I don't have to rake.

Take the church money out  
and head cross town  
to my friend girl's house  
where we plan our round.  
We meet our men and go to a joint  
where the music is blue  
and to the point.

Folks write about me.  
They just can't see  
how I work all week  
at the factory.

Then get spruced up  
and laugh and dance  
And turn away from worry  
with sassy glance.

They accuse me of livin'  
from day to day,  
but who are they kiddin'?  
So are they.

My life ain't heaven  
but it sure ain't hell.  
I'm not on top  
but I call it swell  
if I'm able to work  
and get paid right  
and have the luck to be Black  
on a Saturday night.

Maya Angelou

# When Great Trees Fall

When great trees fall,  
rocks on distant hills shudder,  
lions hunker down  
in tall grasses,  
and even elephants  
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall  
in forests,  
small things recoil into silence,  
their senses  
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,  
the air around us becomes  
light, rare, sterile.  
We breathe, briefly.  
Our eyes, briefly,  
see with  
a hurtful clarity.  
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,  
examines,  
gnaws on kind words  
unsaid,  
promised walks  
never taken.

Great souls die and  
our reality, bound to  
them, takes leave of us.  
Our souls,  
dependent upon their  
nurture,  
now shrink, wizened.  
Our minds, formed  
and informed by their  
radiance,  
fall away.  
We are not so much maddened

as reduced to the unutterable ignorance  
of dark, cold  
caves.

And when great souls die,  
after a period peace blooms,  
slowly and always  
irregularly. Spaces fill  
with a kind of  
soothing electric vibration.  
Our senses, restored, never  
to be the same, whisper to us.  
They existed. They existed.  
We can be. Be and be  
better. For they existed.

Maya Angelou

# When I Think About Myself

When I think about myself,  
I almost laugh myself to death,  
My life has been one great big joke,  
A dance that's walked  
A song that's spoke,  
I laugh so hard I almost choke  
When I think about myself.

Sixty years in these folks' world  
The child I works for calls me girl  
I say 'Yes ma'am' for working's sake.  
Too proud to bend  
Too poor to break,  
I laugh until my stomach ache,  
When I think about myself.

My folks can make me split my side,  
I laughed so hard I nearly died,  
The tales they tell, sound just like lying,  
They grow the fruit,  
But eat the rind,  
I laugh until I start to crying,  
When I think about my folks.

Maya Angelou



# When You Come

When you come to me, unbidden,  
Beckoning me  
To long-ago rooms,  
Where memories lie.

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

I CRY.

Maya Angelou

# Woman Work

I've got the children to tend  
The clothes to mend  
The floor to mop  
The food to shop  
Then the chicken to fry  
The baby to dry  
I got company to feed  
The garden to weed  
I've got shirts to press  
The tots to dress  
The can to be cut  
I gotta clean up this hut  
Then see about the sick  
And the cotton to pick.

Shine on me, sunshine  
Rain on me, rain  
Fall softly, dewdrops  
And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind  
Let me float across the sky  
'Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes  
Cover me with white  
Cold icy kisses and  
Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky  
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow  
You're all that I can call my own.

Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou poems, quotations and biography on Maya Angelou poet page. Read all poems of Maya Angelou and infos about Maya Angelou. (born Marguerite Ann Johnson on April 4, 1928) was an American author and poet who has been called "America's most visible black female autobiographer" by scholar Joanne M. Braxton. She is best known for her series of six autobiographical volumes, which focus on her childhood and early adult experiences. She changed her name to Maya Angelou while she was working as a Calypso dancer in San Francisco. She began her writing career in the late 1950s in New York. Another of her better known poems was written in response to the death of the immensely popular singer, Michael Jackson. Although Angelou was not present at any of the memorials held for Jackson, her poem, We Had Him, was read by Queen Latifah at the Staples Center in Los Angeles, California. We Had Him by Maya Angelou. Maya Angelou. 1928 - 2014/Female/American An author, poet, dancer, actress, and singer, she is known for her activity in the Civil Rights movement and autobiographies. [wikipedia]. Favorite. Poems. Popular A-Z. Maya Angelou. I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou. 198.2k. I know why the caged bird sings. Maya Angelou. I know why the caged bird sings. A free bird leaps on the back Of the wind and floats downstream Till the current ends and dips his wing In the orange suns rays And dares to claim the sky.