

Larry Martin

11 years old

# Freedom School Poetry



# Freedom School Poetry

Foreword by Langston Hughes

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee  
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## To the memory of Emmett Till

In the summer of the year 1955, Emmett Till, 14 years old, was murdered in the state of Mississippi for allegedly "whistling at a white woman."

Nine years later — out of the same society that allowed the killings of Emmett Till, Herbert Lee, Lewis Allen, Medgar Evers, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and many more whose names we will never know — these poems and paintings have come. These are the expressions of the young freedom school students of Mississippi.

## Foreword

Goodmorning, Poetry!  
Poetry, how-do-you-do?  
I'm worrying along—  
So I come to worry you.

To modify a line from an old blues, this means that poetry possess the power of worriation. Poetry can both delight and disturb. It can interest folks. It can upset folks. Poetry can convey both pleasure and pain. And poetry can make people think. If poetry makes people think, it might make them think constructive thoughts, even thoughts about how to change themselves, their town and their state for the better. Some poems, like many of the great verses in the Bible, can make people think about changing all mankind, even the whole world. Poems, like prayers, possess power.

So goodmorning, Poetry!  
Poetry, how-do-you-do!  
I'm writing a poem  
To see if it takes on you.

Langston Hughes —  
to those who write  
these poems in  
this book.  
Spring,  
1965.

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I am Mississippi fed,  
I am Mississippi bred,  
Nothing but a poor, black boy.

I am a Mississippi slave,  
I shall be buried in a Mississippi grave,  
Nothing but a poor, dead boy.

*by* IDA RUTH GRIFFIN, age 12, Harmony, Carthage



# The House of Liberty

by JOYCE BROWN, age 16, McComb

I came not for fortune, nor for fame,  
I seek not to add glory to an unknown name,  
I did not come under the shadow of night,  
I came by day to fight for what's right.  
I shan't let fear, my monstrous foe,  
Conquer my soul with threat and woe.  
Here I have come and here I shall stay,  
And no amount of fear my determination can sway.

I asked for your churches, and you turned me down,  
But I'll do my work if I have to do it on the ground,  
You will not speak for fear of being heard,  
So crawl in your shell and say, "Do not disturb."  
You think because you've turned me away  
You've protected yourself for another day,

But tomorrow surely must come,  
And your enemy will still be there with the rising sun;  
He'll be there tomorrow as all tomorrows in the past,  
And he'll follow you into the future if you let him pass.  
You've turned me down to humor him,  
Ah! Your fate is sad and grim.  
For even tho' your help I ask,  
Even without it, I'll finish my task.

In a bombed house I have to teach my school,  
Because I believe all men should live by the Golden Rule,  
To a bombed house your children must come,  
Because of your fear of a bomb,  
And because you've let your fear conquer your soul,  
In this bombed house these minds I must try to mold;  
I must try to teach them to stand tall and be a man  
When you, their parents, have cowered down and refused  
to take a stand.

*(Written for the opening of the  
McComb Freedom School on the grass  
before the bombed-out private home  
at which the school had to be held)*

## Lonely

by WILMA BYAS, Clarksdale

Outside it's raining  
And here alone am I.  
The wind is blowing, blowing  
As I gaze into my fire.

My heart is slowly dying,  
Inside me it is paining,  
And here I sit so lonely, lonely  
While outside it's raining,  
                          raining,  
                          raining.

## Fight on Little Children

by EDITH MOORE, age 15, McComb

Fight on little children, fight on  
You know what you're doing is right.  
Don't stop, keep straight ahead  
You're just bound to win the fight.

Many hardships there will be;  
Many trials you'll have to face.  
But go on children, keep fighting  
Soon freedom will take hardship's place.

Sometimes it's going to be hard;  
Sometimes the light will look dim.  
But keep it up, don't get discouraged  
Keep fighting, though chances seem slim.

In the end you and I know  
That one day the facts they'll face.  
And realize we're human too  
That freedom's taken slavery's place.

## Our Largest and Smallest Cities

by NETTIE RHODES, age 14, Jackson

Large towns, small towns,  
Vacant cities, busy cities,  
sports coats, nightgowns,  
laughs, cries, sighs, pities.

All these build our largest and smallest cities.  
Candy bars, grocery stores  
hold the hearts of our gay kiddies  
and the gossip of our neighborhood biddies.

Loud cries, mumbled noises,  
Teen-agers, small kids' voices,  
Freedom-riders, Jackson Advocate subscribers,  
neighborhood people, political bribers.

Large towns, small towns,  
vacant cities, busy cities,  
sports coats, nightgowns,  
laughs, cries, sighs, pities,  
All these build our largest and smallest cities.

## Who Am I?

by SANDRA JO-ANN O., Hattiesburg

Who am I, let me see,  
Am I a dog or am I a bee?  
Am I a maniac who's out of her mind?  
I think I know and I'll tell you  
I'm not the girl I used to be.

Who am I? I have to know  
So I may tell it wherever I go.  
I'll tell it to men of all the land,  
I'll tell it to kids who shake my hand,  
That I am free and it shows  
To everyone over all the land.

Who am I? I'll tell you now,  
I'll have to find words, but I'll tell it somehow.  
I am a Negro who fought her best  
To earn her freedom and deserves to rest.  
So do as I did, and you'll be free,  
Just don't hit back, and you'll win  
Your rest.

## A Leader

*by* ROOSEVELT REDMOND, age 16, Indianola

A leader is a white mouth  
— I agree with him —

A leader will not take a stand  
he sits down, and says yes SIR  
— I agree with him —

A leader will not take a risk  
When everybody else is taking a  
big and great risk, he is a yes SIR.  
— I agree with him —

A leader will stand up and be  
heard, speak of the rights of others  
— I boo him —

A leader will take a risk even  
if it is against him, or hurt him  
I boo him

A leader will take many beatings  
or even give his life  
I boo him he is a Fool.

## Isn't It Awful?

by EDITH MOORE, age 15, McComb

Isn't it awful not to be able to eat in a public place  
Without being arrested or snarled at right in your face?

Isn't it awful not to be able to go to a public library and  
get an interesting book  
Without being put out and given a hateful look?

Isn't it awful not to be able to sleep peacefully nights  
For fear you may get bombed because you want your rights?

Isn't it awful not to be able to get your schooling where  
you please?  
Just because of our race, color and creed we cannot feel  
at ease.



## A Negro Condition

by LILLIE MAE POWELL, Pilgrim's Rest

One day while I was visiting a certain  
City this is what I saw. A Negro  
Soldier with a broken arm who  
Was wounded in the war.

The wind was blowing from the  
North; there was a drizzle of  
Rain. He was looking from the  
Last place; his arm was in a sling.

The Negro soldier didn't go  
Home. He was looking to the east  
And to the west. His broken arm  
Was in a sling.

## Why Do They Hate Us? What Has the Negro Done?

by FLORENCE SEYMOUR, Gulfport

It's enough to make you wonder, it's enough to make you cry,  
That every race hates the Negro, good Lord, I wonder why?

You can travel, and travel, you can travel this country  
through,

You'll find every race hates the Negro, no matter what  
they do.

You can scrub and mop their kitchens, and work from morning  
'til night,

But every race hates the Negro, and just won't treat  
them right.

You can wash and shine their cars and have their meals ready  
when they come,

Now tell me why do they hate us, what has the Negro done?

They say that monkeys are our ancestors, the beginning of  
our race,

But we have never killed a President, kidnapping children is  
out of our place.

We are Jim Crowed on every corner and everywhere we go,  
Not only in the South, but clear to the White House door.

We are Jim Crowed on the trains and in restaurants when  
we want a meal.

But they never Jim Crowed the Negro when he was on  
the battlefield.

They won't allow us to have our business, no where in  
the heart of town.

And if we own too fine a home, they will come and burn it down.

We have to live in rat dens, and huts on the edge of town.

It doesn't matter where we live, they mean to keep us down.

They pay us the lowest salaries, and work us almost for fun.

Now tell me why they hate us, Lord? What has the Negro done?

## What Does Freedom Mean?

*by* MADELINE MCHUGH, age 24, Hattiesburg

Whenever I think about sunlight and fresh air, or peace and springtime, I think about men wanting to be free.

There are men who want freedom all their lives and never get it: there are men who have freedom all their lives and never know it.

... but I think men who know they are free and try to help other men get it show how precious freedom really is.

## Because I'm Black

*by* RUTH PHILLIPS, age 16, Meridian

Sometimes I ask myself why did I have to be born black?  
And there are times when I feel as if I want to turn back!  
But then I ask myself again didn't God put me here for a  
purpose? Then I know that's why I'm not going to  
be satisfied within the Negro circle.

Just because God saw fit to paint me black; I'm the one  
that always sits in the back.  
I'm a man and I want to be treated as a man and  
not as a left hand.

One day God's gonna lift his hand over this great land,  
I don't want to be a left or a right but a man.  
I hope we all be around when God brings the high  
and mighty to the ground.

# I am a Negro

by ROSALYN WATERHOUSE, age 11, Meridian

I am a Negro and proud of its color too,  
If you were a Negro wouldn't you?  
I am glad of just what I am now  
To be and to do things I know how.  
I'm glad to be a Negro so happy and gay  
To grow stronger day by day.  
I am a Negro and I want to be free as any other child,  
To wander about the house and the woods and be wild.  
I want to be Free, Free, Free.

## Three Strikes to Freedom

by MARY ZANDERS, Gulfport

Freedom is like a baseball game,  
You have to be set and have an aim,  
When that's done, now you're ready  
To bat the ball with an arm that's steady.

Strike one, selfish is the ball,  
Missing this one is like missing them all,  
But you can strike it if you try,  
Kindness won't let anything pass you by.

Strike two, the ball is hate,  
If this ball could be struck before it's too late,  
The world would be better than just,  
Having everybody together because they must.

Strike three, equality is last,  
Miss this one and you're back in the past;  
Remember you can't sit still and wait  
For everything to stop and suddenly be straight.

# Freedom in Mississippi

by DAVID MARSH, age 16, Indianola

In the middle of the night,  
a stressive bell of Hope is ringing  
Everyone is on the eve of fear and success  
is not yet come

Until Everyone Wake up and Speak out  
in an overcoming voice, the slums will still Remain.

Let Not the pulling out of a few  
go down the whole crowd.

If this remains we will forever be  
under bowed.



## Why Did I my Don'ts

by SANDRA ANN HARRIS, age 17, Jackson

why did i my don'ts  
why did i my dids  
what's my didn'ts purpose  
is it to fulfill my dids

what isn'ts have i proclaimed  
what ises have i pronounced  
why can't i do my doings  
my couldn'ts do renounce

my wouldn'ts are excuses  
my couldn'ts couldn't be helped  
my weren'ts were all willful  
my were of little help

the haven'ts were just there  
my didn'ts did believe  
that all my won'ts are daring  
my wills to receive

# Segregation Will Not Be Here Long

by ALLAN GOODNER, Clarksdale

Segregation will not be here long;  
I will do my best to see it gone.  
And when it is gone the world be  
So very full of equality.  
The people will sing and begin to shout;  
And everyone will know what it's all about.  
They will leap for joy with a sigh;  
Praise the Lord . . . Some will cry.  
Glory Hallalujah . . . blessed be;  
God is a just God . . . for all eternity.  
For we've been buked for such a long time;  
Being Black . . . was such a crime.  
And when it's over . . . the world will see;  
God made us all brothers . . . Even you and me.  
On every corner . . . you will hear us say,  
We're FREE . . . Free and Free to stay.  
Even on the street . . . from every side;  
We're free . . . We're free . . . and God was our guide.  
They've killed us . . . and hung us from trees so high;  
But we knew some of us would have to die.  
Dying was not really oh so bad;  
We've got equality . . . and we're really glad.  
So how it's obvious and plain to see;  
God made us all equal . . . You and Me.

## Don't Give A Subject

by SHIRLEY BALLARD, age 17, Jackson

Don't give a subject  
because I don't give a dang  
some people do care  
but me, to you, go hang

many people get up and  
talk on a subject, topic  
spend time and energy  
when they could spend time in the tropic

Oh! hang you. Oh! hang me  
what in damnu, I, you, they,  
they them, him, her, care about  
that subject see

give something me, to, that's  
right off the brain. Well,  
let's have a little nonsense now  
and then. But! don't give it  
a subject.

subject.

subject.

subject.

## Once I wanted to fill the earth with laughter

Once I wanted to fill the earth with laughter  
and ease the world of all its grief and pain  
To make the world a marvelous place to live in  
As in the woods after a summer's rain.

When I had finished; nothing would it lack  
I had not learned, as yet, my skin was black.  
The world will heed neither my help or desires  
It doesn't care what comes from within  
It silently sits and turns to me deaf ears.  
For it has seen the color of my skin.

Lynda

# Time

*by* SHIRLEY BALLARD, age 17, Jackson

Time goes by so slowly

my mind reacts so lowly

how faint

how moody

I feel,

I love not

I care not.

Don't love me.

Let me live.

Die

Cry

Sigh

All alone

Maybe someday I'll go home.

## Mr. Turnbow

by LORENZO WESLEY, Milestone

I know a man who has no foe  
His name is Mr. Turnbow  
He is about five feet six  
Every time you see him he has a gun or a brick.

If you want to keep your head  
Then you'd better not come tripping around his bed.  
When he talks to you  
His fingers talk too.  
Some people will never understand  
But Mr. Turnbow is a good old man.

Nov. 22, 1963

by ARELYA J. MITCHELL, Holly Springs

The day was still and sad.  
And in my little town it was  
windy, dark, and wet.

The day went on and on so slow.  
Oh, how I wished it would end!  
Then it came on the radio,  
that the President had been shot.

"Shot," said I.

"Shot," said I, "Oh no, that can't be true!"

But in the emergency room they tried their  
might to save him, but the hope was slowly  
dying away as the afternoon began to fade  
promptly away.

Everyone just stopped and prayed. Their  
hearts skipped thump after thump as their  
throats began to lump (with tears).

Then the radio began to speak,

"He's dead. The President of the United States is dead."

All was still.

All was sad.

A thunderbolt had hit our path.

Eyes fell down.

Tears fell down.

No one made joyful sound.

A knot curled in my throat —

a knot that seems to have not been broken.

That phrase had hit us as if in answer to our prayers.

Why an answer so deep and sad?

Why an answer that has not a care?



All these questions and not any answers to me  
or no one else but Thee.

The next day was different —  
as different can be for the flag  
was lowered at half staff, you see.

All that had happened the other day seemed to have been  
but a dream.

Some believing.

Some unbelieving.

Some just staring and looking.

This was the date the world cried.

This was the date the world stood still.

This is the date we'll never forget!

## Other Children

by AIRVESTER BOWMAN, Milestone

Some children live in palaces  
behind an iron gate  
and go to sleep in beds of gold  
whenever it gets late.

Someday I'll travel 'round  
and visit every land  
and learn to speak the language  
that each child can understand

They will want to ask me questions then  
and I will ask them others  
and until we understand  
like sisters and like brothers.

## Roads

*by* AIRVESTER BOWMAN, Milestone

A road may lead to anywhere  
To Texas or to Maine  
To take you where you want to go,  
Having no one else to blame.

I might lead past the Tailor's door  
Where she sews with needle and thread  
With three children sitting by her side  
With hats on every head.

Oh, a road may lead you anywhere  
To New York or to a bad man,  
Then it might just fool you,  
And lead you back home again.

# Life, People, the Mysteries of Time

by CHARLIE BROWN, age 16, Indianola

Life, people, the mysteries of time,  
Commencing, ending, but not ending,  
Understandable but often misunderstood  
This is the mystery.

At times they are both terminated  
Not by nature but by people  
This is what mystifies us  
They mystery is ours, let's keep its objectives.

## The Wind

by CORA SAUNDERS, age 14, Greenwood

The wind is a very strange thing.  
The winter it will always bring.  
Sometimes it brings a full breeze,  
That sends away the dried leaves.  
It twirls and it whirls the leaves around,  
Then all at once  
It settles them down.

## Spring

by WILLIAM SMITH, Clarksdale

It was a hot spring day  
And the flowers were gay and sweet.  
The Call of Spring was whispering through  
The air like a drum with a soft beat.  
The grass stood tall and its color  
Was as bold as the sky.  
Everyone was welcoming spring  
And waving winter goodbye.  
The sun was glowing like a ball of fire;  
The heat was hot as steam.  
But the trees were as green and gay  
As a cool breeze in the month of May.

## Poem

by M. C. PERRY, age 18, Indianola

I was walking through the Woods of Green  
When at that moment of the hour  
I seem to have seen the figure of a flower

There amongst the Weeds  
Where the wind had blown  
Grew some stray weeds  
That had taken root and Grown.

## Who What Dropped When

?

Jesse Harris was dropped soft  
into a deep hole, only  
not too deep because when Wade  
dug (and I watched) Wade hit it  
(the coffin of Jesse Harris' grave)  
and that disturbed the joy  
of a good shiny possum only  
not only that hitting of the coffin  
did that, but this jumping light  
too, that slid out of that not too deep  
not too open hole, disturbed that joy  
I had with Wade. So the dogs ran  
and we were just as fast. Now  
who dropped Jesse in his hole?  
And who, oh who, dropped that light  
around this place and all through  
the trees after us? Well, he inclined  
to believe it was Thomas Jefferson,  
who was well known to hate Harrises,  
and whose grandson loved  
to bury fat possums. But the light,  
we never knew what dropped that around the place.

From the Freedom School  
at Moss Point.



## Mine

by ALICE JACKSON, age 17, Jackson

I want to walk the streets of a town,  
Turn into any restaurant and sit down,  
And be served the food of my choice,  
And not be met by a hostile voice.  
I want to live in the best hotel for a week,  
Or go for a swim at a public beach.  
I want to go to the best University  
and not be met with violence or uncertainty.  
I want the things my ancestors  
thought we'd never have.  
They are mine as a Negro, an American;  
I shall have them or be dead.

# Changing The American Stage

by ELNORA FONDREN, Clarksdale

America is a stage life land,  
All people have parts to learn in hand.  
If I were to walk down the street and say,  
"I want my freedom this very day,"  
I'd raise my fingers and lift my face,  
But my people would look at me in disgrace.  
"Why should I try to be free?  
I already have my liberty."  
The people are walking as statues do;  
I have no right to look at you.  
My face is different, my face is black,  
But why should you want to hold me back?

We are a nation, and it is said,  
"A Nation when parted is a stage that's dead."  
I was once a patriot true.  
Now you try to take me with you:  
Not to be brothers and to let me be free,  
But only to take care of thee.  
I still have to play my part;  
I am still a slave in my heart.  
To look at our flag, and say to thee,  
"I am here, but am I free?"  
The Nation of America is never to be  
Until we have our liberty.

If Khrushchev walked to my hometown,  
I'd try my best to show him around,  
Even though he is a man in wrong,  
I still would try to help him along.  
A man is a man, and life is life;  
I am a man, and he is in life.

The trail of freedom is all around,  
I wish it would come through this sorrowed town.  
In this nation, I want you to know,  
I am a citizen, and I want to be treated so.  
This nation has got to get together  
And leave it to God to decide who is better.  
I am here to testify,  
I want my freedom, and that ain't no lie.

So Mr. Charlie, you are the best,  
But I am as equal as you and the rest.  
I am telling you the earnest truth,  
We are people just like you.  
So get ready for the fright of your life.  
These people are going to get their freedom in height.  
Try to be ready, try to be strong,  
But you won't hold the black man down for long.

# The Voice of Freedom

by ROBERT LEE, age 18, Greenville

I am the voice that is heard everywhere;  
Each day I struggle to get segregation away from here.

I am the voice that men call upon

for Unity

for Brotherhood

for Now

for Eternity

I am the voice of Freedom.

Gaining me is America's task;

Through striving and sacrifice

Segregation will be unmasked.

I am the voice that speaks with great pride:

Segregation and discrimination will be cast aside.

I am the voice that proclaims,

“I will bring justice,”

“I will bring equality.”

I am the voice that shouts, “Segregation is dead.”

I am the voice of freedom.

I will be — America!

# Say Freedom!

*by* MITCHELL M., Hattiesburg

There shall come a day  
When every man will say  
**FREEDOM!**

When your heart desires,  
When your soul's on fire,  
Say **FREEDOM!**

How my voice sings out  
Above the loudest shout,  
Say **FREEDOM!**