

# *The Collected Poetry*

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Léopold Sédar Senghor

*Translated and with an Introduction by*  
Melvin Dixon

University Press of Virginia

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~~Words fly off and crumple in the East Wind's breath,  
Like man's monuments beneath the blasting bombs  
But the poem is heavy with milk, and the Poet's heart  
Burns a dustless fire.~~

### To New York

*(for jazz orchestra and trumpet solo)*

New York! At first I was bewildered by your beauty,  
Those huge, long-legged, golden girls.  
So shy, at first, before your blue metallic eyes and icy smile,  
So shy. And full of despair at the end of skyscraper streets  
Raising my owl eyes at the eclipse of the sun.  
Your light is sulphurous against the pale towers  
Whose heads strike lightning into the sky,  
Skyscrapers defying storms with their steel shoulders  
And weathered skin of stone.  
But two weeks on the naked sidewalks of Manhattan—  
At the end of the third week the fever  
Overtakes you with a jaguar's leap  
Two weeks without well water or pasture all birds of the air  
Fall suddenly dead under the high, sooty terraces.  
No laugh from a growing child, his hand in my cool hand.  
No mother's breast, but nylon legs. Legs and breasts  
Without smell or sweat. No tender word, and no lips,  
Only artificial hearts paid for in cold cash  
And not one book offering wisdom.  
The painter's palette yields only coral crystals.  
Sleepless nights, O nights of Manhattan!  
Stirring with delusions while car horns blare the empty  
    hours  
And murky streams carry away hygenic loving  
Like rivers overflowing with the corpses of babies.

II

Now is the time for signs and reckoning, New York!  
Now is the time of manna and hyssop.  
You have only to listen to God's trombones, to your heart  
Beating to the rhythm of blood, your blood.  
I saw Harlem teeming with sounds and ritual colors  
And outrageous smells—  
At teatime in the home of the drugstore-deliveryman  
I saw the festival of Night begin at the retreat of day.  
And I proclaim Night more truthful than the day.  
It is the pure hour when God brings forth  
Life immemorial in the streets,  
All the amphibious elements shining like suns.  
Harlem, Harlem! Now I've seen Harlem, Harlem!  
A green breeze of corn rising from the pavements  
Plowed by the Dan dancers' bare feet,  
Hips rippling like silk and spearhead breasts,  
Ballets of water lilies and fabulous masks  
And mangoes of love rolling from the low houses  
To the feet of police horses.  
And along sidewalks I saw streams of white rum  
And streams of black milk in the blue haze of cigars.  
And at night I saw cotton flowers snow down  
From the sky and the angels' wings and sorcerers' plumes.  
Listen, New York! O listen to your bass male voice,  
Your vibrant oboe voice, the muted anguish of your tears  
Falling in great clots of blood,  
Listen to the distant beating of your nocturnal heart,  
The tom-tom's rhythm and blood, tom-tom blood and tom-  
tom.

III

New York! I say New York, let black blood flow into your  
blood.  
Let it wash the rust from your steel joints, like an oil of life  
Let it give your bridges the curve of hips and supple vines.  
Now the ancient age returns, unity is restored,  
The reconciliation of Lion and Bull and Tree  
Idea links to action, the ear to the heart, sign to meaning.

See your rivers stirring with musk alligators  
And sea cows with mirage eyes. No need to invent the  
Sirens.

Just open your eyes to the April rainbow  
And your ears, especially your ears, to God  
Who in one burst of saxophone laughter  
Created heaven and earth in six days,  
And on the seventh slept a deep Negro sleep.