



sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane

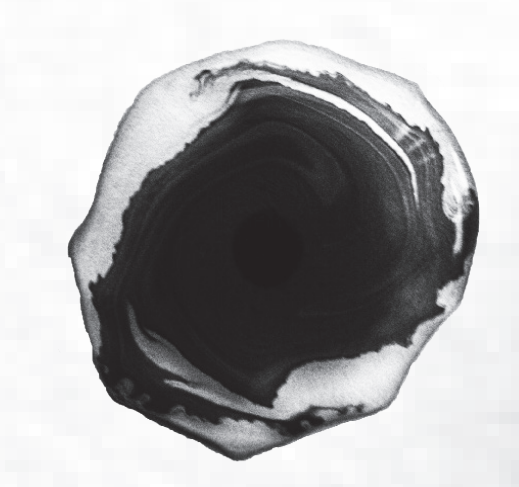
I am  
only a  
mediocre  
wretch...

all I asked was to be allowed  
to work along quietly, making  
a living and no noise<sup>14</sup>

# the fever took me

After graduation,  
there was nothing for me to do  
save to go into **menial employment**  
as other Negroes did. I took the nearest  
thing—an elevator. A better thing could not  
have happened. In the nearly two years which,  
altogether, I spent in the place, I improved  
the leisure between trips in studying and  
writing. While working here I brought  
out my **first book OAK AND IVY**  
which was privately printed  
and **sold well in a**  
While working here I brought out my first book  
circumscribed plane.

I must say that **my life** has been  
so uneventful



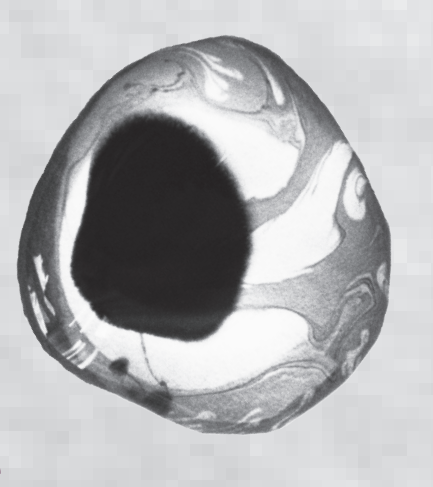
# so uneventful...

**positive trash**  
**positive trash**  
**positive trash**  
**positive trash**  
**positive trash**  
**positive trash**  
**positive trash**

I began writing early, when about 12, but published nothing until I was  
14-6 Then the fever took me and I wrote ream upon ream of **positive trash**  
when I should have been studying Euclid. 7 Plays, verses, stories, everything  
I could think or dream turned out. Fortunately, I seldom tried to publish. 8

old well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane

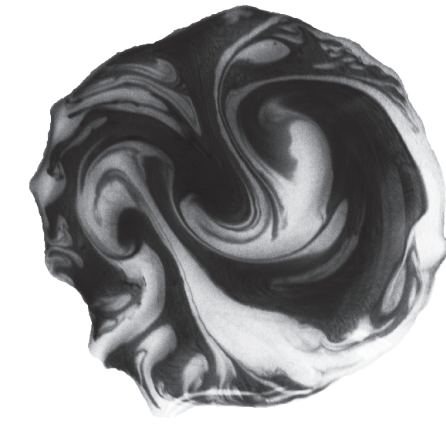
sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane sold well in a circumscribed plane





# I have tried to be as full as possible without being prolix

I continued reading, published *LYRICS OF LOWLY LIFE*, went to England where in spite of the opposition which British sentiment offered to my having a woman-manager, I had a most enjoyable time.<sup>13</sup> There my book<sup>14</sup> was **handsomely republished**. And there in the heart of a typical English home among the hills of Somerset, I finished my novel *THE UNCALLED*<sup>15</sup> which is to appear in the May Lippincott's.<sup>16</sup> A book of short stories mostly of Kentucky life will also appear in March.<sup>17</sup>



# mediocre

# 14

- We are unable to locate information on the individual. However, according to Honious, this letter appeared in the OHS archives alongside a sketch PAUL DUNBAR: THE POET IN HIS WASHINGTON HOME, BOX 1, MSS-659. This biographical sketch could be the result of the letter—interview to which Dunbar is here responding. See Honious, *WHAT DREAMS WE HAVE*, <http://www.npshistory.com>.
- Cunningham reports that as early as middle school, Dunbar was garnering praise for his verses from some of his teachers, who encouraged him to continue writing. All of Dunbar's biographers also write of Matilda saving his early works.
- Euclid of Alexandria was a Greek mathematician and is considered the founder of geometry.
- This statement runs counter to information from Dunbar's biographers, who mention that when he was fourteen, Dunbar began submitting his poems to the offices of the *DAYTON HERALD*, which eventually published *OUR MARTYRED SOLDIERS* in June 1888. See Cunningham 28.
- The club's membership was based on unanimous election and met Friday afternoons for debate and discussion.
- The *HIGH SCHOOL TIMES*.
- Many of Dunbar's contributions to his high school paper were unsigned.
- See James A. Herne to PLD, undated.
- Dunbar is referring to Edith Pond here, whom he had earlier described to Alice on July 20, 1897, as "green with envy at [his] social success" (Metcalf, *LETTERS OF PAUL*, 1980). Clearly, Dunbar is being political here by not mentioning his ill treatment of Edith Pond.
- LYRICS OF LOWLY LIFE*, which was dedicated to Alice, was also published in England with Chapman and Hall Publishers. In a letter to Alice, was also published in 1898, Dunbar explained, "I have just had a letter from my English publisher saying that reviews of my book are many and favorable. He sends them, and if they are what he calls favorable, I don't know where the *ill* would come in. I went through them like a wagon over a rutty road, first up and then down. Half of the time I am so discouraged I feel like throwing down the pen with a good sound 'damn.' Everything I do falls so far below what I conceive. I am only a mediocre wretch ... all I asked was to be allowed to work along quietly, making a living and no noise, but here I must be pulled out into the glare of public gaze and stand where I never intended to stand on a level with criticism of men whose advantages and antecedents have been so much greater than mine. I am sick of it" (Metcalf, *LETTERS OF PAUL*, 362.) Then, in a sudden turn, Dunbar wrote Alice that, "I have the plot in my head for a new short novel. It is a wee bit racy, but striking I think. If I do anything with it, I shall attempt to publish it anonymously. I thought perhaps you might collaborate with me on it. But, really, I've so many irons on the fire that the consideration of any other serious literary work ought to be put off until far into the future" (362). In her return letter Alice attempted to assuage Dunbar's worries and encouraged him.
- THE UNCALLED* sold over three thousand copies in the United States.
- Dunbar finished writing *THE UNCALLED* when he left England for New York, where he lived with Professor Kelly Miller of Howard University in Washington, DC. Originally serialized in *LIPPINCOTT'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE* in May 1898, the book was published by Dodd, Mead and Company later that year. Dodd accepted *THE UNCALLED* before the manuscript was finished and also advanced Dunbar royalties. The novel was reprinted in Toronto by G. N. Morang Company in 1898 and 1899; in 1899, Service and Patton, a London firm, published an English edition. In 1901 another reprint emerged from the International Association of Newspapers and Authors, a New York firm.
- FOLKS FROM DIXIE* (1898). The novel was illustrated by E. W. Kemble and included the following stories: ANNER 'LIZER'S STUMBLIN' BLOCK, THE ORDEAL AT MT. HOPE, THE COLONEL'S AWAKENING, THE TRIAL SERMONS ON BULL-SKIN, JIMSELLA, MT. PISGAH'S CHRISTMAS 'POSSUM, A FAMILY FEUD, AUNT MANDY'S INVESTMENT, THE INTERVENTION OF PETER, NELSE HATTON'S VENGEANCE, AT SHAFT 11, and THE DELIBERATION OF MR. DUNKIN. Cunningham notes that this collection of short stories was inspired by the stories of Dunbar heard from the elderly black people who lived in Howard Town in Washington and often spoke of their former days as slaves. Five stories were pre-Civil War, while seven were postbellum. See Cunningham 169-71. See also PLD to Major Pond, May 5, 1898.

Letter 85:  
February 17, 1898, PLD to A. S. Lanahan  
To Mrs. A. S. Lanahan<sup>5</sup>  
Library of Congress Washington, D.C.

2-17-98

Dear Madam:

Your letter of recent date is at hand. In answer I must say that my life has been so uneventful that there is little in it to interest anyone.

I was born at Dayton, Ohio twenty-five years ago. Attended the common schools there and was graduated from the high school. This constituted my "education."

My parents and grandparents had been slaves in Kentucky. My great-grand parents on the eastern shore of Maryland.

I began writing early, when about 12, but published nothing until I was 14.<sup>6</sup> Then the fever took me and I wrote ream upon ream of positive trash when I should have been studying Euclid.<sup>7</sup> Plays, verses, stories, everything I could think or dream turned out. Fortunately, I seldom tried to publish.<sup>8</sup>

My school life was pleasant. I was the only Negro in my class and apparently popular. My chums encouraged me. My teachers encouraged me. Then the boys made me president of the school society, the Philomathean<sup>9</sup>—after that editor in chief of the school [paper].

I set earnestly to work to live up to these honors and succeeded in bring out the paper a month late every time,<sup>10</sup> but agreed with such editorials as are still pointed to as marvels of school-boy-well-audacity.<sup>11</sup>

I laugh at these things now but as I look back upon them, I have a fancy that they must have been very serious to me then and done much to mold my life.

After graduation, there was nothing for me to do save to go into menial employment as other Negroes did. I took the nearest thing—an elevator. A better thing could not have happened. In the nearly two years which, altogether, I spent in the place, I improved the leisure between trips in studying and writing. While working here I brought out my first book *OAK AND IVY* which was privately printed and sold well in a circumscribed plane.

Then people began to think I read well and I took engagements for recitals from my own work. While engaged thus, a copy of my second book fell into the hands of James A. Herne<sup>12</sup> who sent it to Mr. Howells. Through whose review, Mr. Gilder of the Century and other editors found that their contributor was a Negro.

I continued reading, published *LYRICS OF LOWLY LIFE*, went to England where in spite of the opposition which British sentiment offered to my having a woman-manager, I had a most enjoyable time.<sup>13</sup> There my book<sup>14</sup> was handsomely republished. And there in the heart of a typical English home among the hills of Somerset, I finished my novel *THE UNCALLED*<sup>15</sup> which is to appear in the May Lippincott's.<sup>16</sup> A book of short stories mostly of Kentucky life will also appear in March.<sup>17</sup>

I have tried to be as full as possible without being prolix.

Thanking you for your interest,  
I am Sincerely Yours  
Paul Laurence Dunbar

Designed by Hannah Schultz in *Typography Two*, 2023, under the direction of Misty Thomas-Trout. Source: *The Selected Literary Letters of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, edited by Cynthia C. Murillo and Jennifer M. Nader. Typeset in the families of Ingra designed by Ermin Mededovic and Freight designed by Joshua Darden.

unsigned<sup>11</sup>

three thousand copies<sup>15</sup>

published nothing until I was 14