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From "A Poem for Farish Street"

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from A Poem for Farish Street

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The House of Prayer

Two undertaking parlors on this street
close to the House of God
have witnessed all the shame of Farish Street.
In another life Sister Sadie Lou
was like that gal from Madame’s Fancy House
Bawdy Belle with her tight spanky-baby dress
her cigarette
her blood-red pasted lips on a clown's face
high heeled shoes
and lacquered hair
and her shoulder bag
swinging down her hips
full of tricks.
Hey gal, what you selling
on Farish Street?
And she laughs a hollow joyless sound
Oh, you know you know, I know you know—

"Mary Mack, dressed in black
Silver buttons
All down her back.
I like sugar
I like tea
I love pretty girls
And they love me.
Ask my mama
For fifteen cents
To see that elephant
Jump that fence
Jump so high
Touched the sky
Didn't come back
Till the Fourth of July."

* * *

Black Magic
There's a magic man on Farish Street
Root doctor, hoodoo man
Sells charms and potions
"Cross the river for liquor
And bring your own bottle to the party."
They are playing checkers in the twilight
Before the barber shop
Before the beauty parlor
Before the drug store where the man sells magic:
Love charms and potions and good luck pieces,
powders, and odors, and aphrodisiacs
High John the Conqueror and
Sampson Snake Root;
Across from the YW and the YMCA
Where the saints go marching in
Where the street dead-ends
And the cemetery begins
The other side of the tracks
There's a man selling lucky charms
And he sells bargains too
Choose between God and the devil
Choose between flesh and the spirit
Choose between sacred and the profane
But remember, when you sell your soul to the devil
Prepare to live in hell!
Black man you know well
Lie down with dogs and get up with fleas
There's a man going round taking names
Laud knows they scandalizing my name
I want Jesus to make up my dying bed
when they carry my coffin down Farish Street
pigeon-toed and wrinkled nosed
Sidling up to fate.