I know what the caged bird feels, alas!
    When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
    When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
    And the river flows like a stream of glass;
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,¹
    And the faint perfume from its chalice² steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing
    Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
    When he fain³ would be on the bough⁴ a-swing;
    And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
    When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
    When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,
    But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

—Paul Laurence Dunbar

¹ opes — opens
² chalice — a cup or goblet
³ fain — gladly
⁴ bough — branch

“Sympathy” by Paul Laurence Dunbar. In the public domain.