

Thoughts in a Zoo
by Countee Cullen

They in their cruel traps, and we in ours,
Survey each other's rage, and pass the hours
Commiserating each the other's woe,
To mitigate his own pain's fiery glow.
Man could but little proffer in exchange
Save that his cages have a larger range.
That lion with his lordly, untamed heart
Has in some man his human counterpart,
Some lofty soul in dreams and visions wrapped,
But in the stifling flesh securely trapped.
Gaunt eagle whose raw pinions stain the bars
That prison you, so men cry for the stars!
Some delve down like the mole far underground,
(Their nature is to burrow, not to bound),
Some, like the snake, with changeless slothful eye,
Stir not, but sleep and smoulder where they lie.
Who is most wretched, these caged ones, or we,
Caught in a vastness beyond our sight to see?

Vocabulary

commiserating: sympathizing with (sharing sorrows)

mitigate: to ease sadness or grief

save: except

proffer: to put forth, offer

counterpart: a duplicate, one that complements another, a suitable match

stifling: suffocating, oppressively close (like a small cage)

gaunt: extremely thin and haggard (from great suffering)

pinions: wings

delve: dig

slothful: lazy, slow

smoulder (smolder): to display repressed feelings of anger

wretched: miserable, unfortunate

Who is "They" in the first line? _____

Who is "we" in the first line? _____

