

Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. After graduation from high school, he spent a year in Mexico with his father, then moved to New York City, where he studied for a year at Columbia, and made his career. His first published poem in a nationally known magazine was ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers’, which appeared in *Crisis* in 1921. He became a leading light in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1925, Hughes was awarded the First Prize for Poetry by *Opportunity*, for his poem ‘The Weary Blues’, which gave its title to his first collection of poems, published in 1926. He wrote poetry, short stories, song lyrics, essays, humour, plays and an autobiography, *The Big Sea*.

Kayo Chingonyi’s debut collection, *Kumukanda* (2017), was a *Guardian* and *Telegraph* book of the year, and the winner of the 2018 International Dylan Thomas Prize and a Somerset Maugham Award. A former Burgess Fellow at the Centre for New Writing, University of Manchester, and Associate Poet at the ICA, London, Kayo is now Poetry Editor for the *White Review*, and Assistant Professor at Durham University. He has performed his work at festivals and events around the world. His second collection, *A Blood Condition*, will be published in 2021, with a memoir, *Prodigal*, to follow.

SELECTED POEMS

LANGSTON HUGHES

With an introduction by Kayo Chingonyi



Published in Great Britain in 2020 by
Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Previous published in 1999 by Serpent's Tail

First published in 1959 by Alfred A. Knopf, New York

Copyright © Langston Hughes, 1959

Introduction copyright © Kayo Chingonyi, 2020

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 451 1



This book contains a selection
of the poems of Langston Hughes chosen by himself
from his earlier volumes:

THE WEARY BLUES
FINE CLOTHES TO THE JEW
SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM
FIELDS OF WONDER
ONE-WAY TICKET
MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED

and from the privately printed limited edition

DEAR LOVELY DEATH

together with a number of new poems published
here for the first time in book form,
some never before anywhere.

CONTENTS

Introduction by Kayo Chingonyi xiii



Afro-American Fragments

Afro-American Fragment	3	American Heartbreak	9
The Negro Speaks of Rivers	4	October	16 10
Sun Song	5	As I Grew Older	11
Aunt Sue's Stories	6	My People	13
Danse Africaine	7	Dream Variations	14
Negro	8		



Feet of Jesus

Feet o' Jesus	17	Litany	24
Prayer	18	Angels Wings	25
Shout	19	Judgment Day	26
Fire	20	Prayer Meeting	27
Sunday Morning Prophecy	21	Spirituals	28
Sinner	23	Tambourines	29



Shadow of the Blues

The Weary Blues	33	Bad Luck Card	41
Hope	35	Reverie on the Harlem River	42
Late Last Night	36	Morning After	43
Bad Morning	37	Early Evening Quarrel	44
Sylvester's Dying Bed	38	Evil	45
Wake	39	As Befits a Man	46
Could Be	40		



Sea and Land

Havana Dreams	49	Water-Front Streets	51
Catch	50	Long Trip	52

Seascape	53	A Black Pierrot	66
Moonlight Night: Carmel	54	Ardella	67
Heaven	55	When Sue Wears Red	68
In Time of Silver Rain	56	Love	69
Joy	57	Beale Street	70
Winter Moon	58	Port Town	71
Snail	59	Natcha	72
March Moon	60	Young Sailor	73
Harlem Night Song	61	Sea Calm	74
To Artina	62	Dream Dust	75
Fulfilment	63	No Regrets	76
Gypsy Melodies	64	Troubled Woman	77
Mexican Market Woman	65	Island	78



Distance Nowhere

Border Line	81	One	92
Garden	82	Desert	93
Genius Child	83	A House in Taos	94
Strange Hurt	84	Demand	96
Suicide's Note	85	Dream	97
End	86	Night: Four Songs	98
Drum	87	Luck	99
Personal	88	Old Walt	100
Juliet	89	Kid in the Park	101
Desire	90	Song for Billie Holiday	102
Vagabonds	91	Fantasy in Purple	103



After Hours

Midnight Raffle	107	Miss Blues'es Child	113
What?	108	Trumpet Player	114
Gone Boy	109	Monroe's Blues	116
50-50	110	Stony Lonesome	117
Maybe	111	Black Maria	118
Lover's Return	112		



Life Is Fine

Life Is Fine	121	Fired	128
Still Here	123	Midnight Dancer	129
Ballad of the Gypsy	124	Blue Monday	130
Me and the Mule	125	Ennui	131
Kid Sleepy	126	Mama and Daughter	132
Little Lyric	127	Delinquent	133

S-sss-ss-sh! 134
Homecoming 135
Final Curve 136

Little Green Tree 137
Crossing 138
Widow Woman 139



Lament over Love

Misery 143
Ballad of the Fortune
Teller 144
Cora 146
Down and Out 147
Young Gal's Blues 148

Ballad of the Girl Whose Name
Is Mud 149
Hard Daddy 150
Midwinter Blues 151
Little Old Letter 152
Lament over Love 153



Magnolia Flowers

Daybreak in Alabama 157
Cross 158
Magnolia Flowers 159
Mulatto 160
Southern Mammy Sings 162
Ku Klux 163
West Texas 164
Share-Croppers 165
Ruby Brown 166

Roland Hayes Beaten 167
Uncle Tom 168
Porter 169
Blue Bayou 170
Silhouette 171
Song for a Dark Girl 172
The South 173
Bound No'th Blues 174



Name in Uphill Letters

One-Way Ticket 177
Migrant 178
Summer Evening 180
Graduation 182
Interne at Provident 184
Railroad Avenue 186
Mother to Son 187
Stars 188
To Be Somebody 189
Note on Commercial
Theatre 190

Puzzled 191
Seashore through Dark
Glasses 192
Baby 193
Merry-Go-Round 194
Elevator Boy 195
Who But the Lord? 196
Third Degree 197
Ballad of the Man Who's
Gone 198



Madam to You

Madam's Past History 201
Madam and Her Madam 202

Madam's Calling Cards 203
Madam and the Rent Man 204

Madam and the Number Writer 206	Madam and the Wrong Visitor 212
Madam and the Phone Bill 208	Madam and the Minister 213
Madam and the Charity Child 210	Madam and Her Might-Have- Been 215
Madam and the Fortune Teller 211	Madam and the Census Man 217



Montage of a Dream Deferred

Montage of a Dream Deferred 221



Words Like Freedom

I, Too 275	Africa 284
Freedom Train 276	Democracy 285
Georgia Dusk 279	Consider Me 286
Lunch in a Jim Crow Car 280	The Negro Mother 288
In Explanation of Our Times 281	Refugee in America 290
	Freedom's Plow 291

THE SONG –
AN INTRODUCTION
TO LANGSTON
HUGHES

It is appropriate that my first meeting with the work of Langston Hughes wasn't in the pages of a book but in Gary Bartz's rendition of 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers', a song I heard while listening to Gilles Peterson's World-wide Show on Radio 1 sometime in the early 2000s, when, at fourteen or fifteen years old, it was my habit to record songs from the radio on to my favoured TDK D 90 Type 1 audio cassettes. I sat there, finger primed on the pause button and, when I heard the soaring notation, I let the pause button go to record what came next.

The words in the singer's mouth had a swing not unlike someone walking down a street in Harlem, with that borough's famous élan (though, don't tell Brooklyn I said that). What did it mean to 'know rivers', I thought? So began my kinship with Langston; one of the enduring dialogues of my reading life. He was there at that

crucial point when my sense of self began taking shape and later, when I was an undergraduate in English Literature, searching the supplementary anthology of a module entitled 'Introduction to Advanced Literary Studies' for names I recognised, there he was again, like the nameless protagonist of his much anthologised poem speaking of continuity, 'the/ flow of human blood in human veins'.

It would be remiss of me here to brush past the quieter poems in Hughes's oeuvre, those that a volume such as this – reflecting the poems Hughes himself wished to preserve – brings into such sharp relief. I want, then, to offer my hand, dear reader, and take you for a walk around Langston's poems.

There is an important sense in which Langston is a blues poet, and indeed many of the poems in this volume reflect that in their titles, but there is another part of the blues that Langston brought into his poems: an attunement to the nuances of spoken language and African-American vernacular English most especially:

They done took Cordelia
Out to stony lonesome ground.

'Stony Lonesome'

Snow has friz me, sun has baked me.
Looks like between 'em
They done tried to make me
Stop laughin', stop lovin', stop livin'—

'Still Here'

The poems collected here live, have lived, because of that quality of lived experience we see reflected in them; these are poems in a demotic tongue which carry the intimacy of a conversation with an old friend while sitting on the steps of a brownstone. You will not find, in these pages, poems itching to show you their literary credentials; instead you are more likely to be taken in by their charisma first and notice their craft later. It is this that marks out Langston's particular gifts. The poet who eschews ego successfully is able to access something arcane in language, the sense of its continuity, its blood flow, and this is what Langston Hughes does for us.

Here is the work of a poet fiercely attuned to the jazz instrumentalist's tendency, better to say compulsion, to riff. He was given to this riffing himself, such that the poems on the page exist in dynamic relation with the poems in the air:

Across
The Harlem roof-tops
Moon is shining.
Night sky is blue.
Stars are great drops
Of golden dew.

'Harlem Night Song'

How he lets those words drift, drawing out the tension to better accent the sense of the rhyme as resolution and the speaking of each line as a matter for the speaker to

reconcile! This improvisational energy is part of what we might call Langston's 'sonic engagement', the ways his poems reflect musical forms even when they veer away from the Harlem artistic community which was a clear influence on Langston's poetics.

A couple of years ago, it was my tremendous honour to be asked to embody these poetics as part of an event featuring live dance and instrumentation at Wilton's Music Hall in East London. As I prepared to read his words aloud, I had to imagine the rooms to which Langston's poems so often gesture, I had to hear the horn player warming up, watch the figures of oblivious passers-by diminish through the misty window, the breath in that room had to become my breath. And, so, in commending this book to you, I ask that, if this is your first time reading Langston, you take the words into your heart, read them aloud, perhaps in combination with the music to which they so often pay homage. I hope that you will listen to the song at the centre of each of these poems as I believe Langston intended, which is to say you should let it wash over you as unexpected rain on a Harlem rooftop.

Kayo Chingonyi

July 2020

West Yorkshire

Afro-American Fragments



Afro-American Fragment

So long,
So far away
Is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood—
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

Subdued and time-lost
Are the drums—and yet
Through some vast mist of race
There comes this song
I do not understand,
This song of atavistic land,
Of bitter yearnings lost
Without a place—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa's
Dark face.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Sun Song

Sun and softness,
Sun and the beaten hardness of the earth,
Sun and the song of all the sun-stars
Gathered together—
Dark ones of Africa,
I bring you my songs
To sing on the Georgia roads.

Aunt Sue's Stories

Aunt Sue has a head full of stories.
Aunt Sue has a whole heart full of stories.
Summer nights on the front porch
Aunt Sue cuddles a brown-faced child to her bosom
And tells him stories.

Black slaves
Working in the hot sun,
And black slaves
Walking in the dewy night,
And black slaves
Singing sorrow songs on the banks of a mighty river
Mingle themselves softly
In the flow of old Aunt Sue's voice,
Mingle themselves softly
In the dark shadows that cross and recross
Aunt Sue's stories.

And the dark-faced child, listening,
Knows that Aunt Sue's stories are real stories.
He knows that Aunt Sue never got her stories
Out of any book at all,
But that they came
Right out of her own life.

The dark-faced child is quiet
Of a summer night
Listening to Aunt Sue's stories.

Danse Africaine

The low beating of the tom-toms,
The slow beating of the tom-toms,
 Low . . . slow
 Slow . . . low—
 Stirs your blood.

 Dance!

A night-veiled girl
 Whirls softly into a
 Circle of light.
 Whirls softly . . . slowly,
Like a wisp of smoke around the fire—
 And the tom-toms beat,
 And the tom-toms beat,
And the low beating of the tom-toms
 Stirs your blood.

Negro

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hand the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me still in Mississippi.

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

American Heartbreak

I am the American heartbreak—
Rock on which Freedom
Stumps its toe—
The great mistake
That Jamestown
Made long ago.