# THE BIG SEA

an autobiography by

LANGSTON HUGHES

Introduction by Arnold Rampersad

*Also by Langston Hughes*

The Weary Blues
Not Without Laughter
The Ways of White Folks
Laughing to Keep from Crying
Simple Speaks His Mind
Simple Takes a Wife
Simple Stakes a Claim
Tambourines to Glory
The Best of Simple
Something in Common
and Other Stories
I Wonder as I Wander

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TO

EMERSON AND TOY HARPER

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# INTRODUCTION

Langston Hughes was for some time a reluctant autobiographer. Although he published *The Big Sea* (1940) when he was only thirty-eight, he was first asked seriously to write such a work when he was just past twenty-three, in 1925. To help his mentor Carl Van Vechten with his introduction to Hughes's first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes had sent "L'histoire de ma vie," a brief but dazzling essay that set off a brainstorm in Van Vechten. Yes, the publisher Alfred A. Knopf (who was about to bring out Hughes's first book of poems) and he completely agreed: Hughes should do an autobiography at once! But Hughes did not like the idea. "I hate to think backwards," he explained. "It isn't amusing . . . I am still too much enmeshed in the affects of my young life to write clearly about it. I haven't escaped into serenity and grown old yet. I wish I could. What moron ever wrote those lines about 'carry me back to the scenes of my childhood'?"

By 1939, when he sat down at last to write his autobiography, he was presumably no longer so "enmeshed in the affects of my young life" that he could not write clearly about it. Moreover, he was no longer so young. After *The Weary Blues* had come another volume of verse, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927); then a novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930); a collection of stories, *The Ways of White Folks* (1934); a collection of radical verse, *A New Song* (1938); and a long-running Broadway play, *Mulatto* (1935), in addition to other produced plays and lesser publications. More important, by this time the adult mask so carefully constructed to conceal "the affects

of my young life" was firmly in place. In 1939, Langston Hughes was internationally known as a leftist radical, a proudly racial poet, and a daring world traveler who had spent a year in the U.S.S.R., then come home via China and Japan.

Nevertheless, some friends saw a puzzle in his personality. At one level, Langston was the ever-smiling, often-laughing boon companion; at another, he was unfathomable. One fictional portrait, drawn in the nineteen-twenties by the black novelist Wallace Thurman, had him as "the most close-mouthed and cagey individual" the narrator had ever encountered "when it came to personal matters. He fended off every attempt to probe his inner self and did this with such an unconscious and naïve air that the prober soon came to one of two conclusions: Either [Hughes] had no depth whatsoever, or else he was too deep for plumbing by ordinary mortals." The German intellectual Arthur Koestler, who had roamed with him in Central Asia during several weeks in 1932, would report that "behind the warm smile of his dark eyes there was a grave dignity, and a polite reserve which communicated itself at once. He was very likable and easy to get on with, but at the same time one felt an impenetrable, elusive remoteness which warded off all undue familiarity."

On the surface, the purpose of autobiography is to reveal. On the other hand, it is a commonplace that significant autobiographies begin under unconscious orders from the autobiographer. What were Hughes's orders, insofar as we can guess them? Two, perhaps, were more important than all others. First, Hughes, who depended almost desperately on the smiling surface he offered to the world, had to preserve that face even as he expressed, as an artist, some intimation of psychological depth that could come only from the recitation of varied and trying experiences—in short, from the

revelation of conflict and unhappiness. Second, and more telling, Hughes, who for certain intimate reasons craved the affection and regard of blacks to an extent shared by perhaps no other important black writer, had to compose a book that would speak not only to whites—who published and bought books, who made books possible—but also to blacks. And yet the message of a black writer to whites and the message from the same writer to blacks are often not only different but contradictory.

His loving sense of a black audience led to problems from the start. When Blanche Knopf read the first draft of *The Big Sea*, she found tedious the long Harlem Renaissance section that comprises the second half of the book. It was "too full of Carl [Van Vechten], [Wallace] Thurman, [Jean] Toomer," and so on, until it became "a sort of Harlem Cavalcade, which is wrong." In response, he vigorously defended the details of Harlem life as "the background against which I moved and developed as a writer, and from which much of the material of my stories and poems came." No doubt, "some small portions of it may have vital meaning only to my own people," but these portions would add "to the final integrity and truth of the work" as a whole: "I am trying to write a truthful and honest book." Black readers "would certainly give me a razzing if I wrote only about sailors, Paris night clubs, etc., and didn't put something 'cultural' in the book—although the material is not there for that reason, but because it was a part of my life. And the fault lies in the writing if I have not made it live."

Largely at the insistence of Van Vechten, almost all the cuts were restored. Langston was "the last historian of that period who knows anything about it," Van Vechten declared in urging Hughes to expand rather than trim the section—which is now generally recognized as the finest firsthand

account of the Harlem Renaissance in existence. But Hughes's attempt to reach the black reader went further than such sections.

That *The Big Sea* is a tour de force of subterfuge is strongly suggested by the conflicting contemporary reviews of the book. Most alertly, *The New York Times Book Review* saw both sides—the work was "both sensitive and poised, candid and reticent, realistic and embittered." Where the *Times* saw substantial bitterness, however, the New York *Sun* noted that Hughes "does not allow much bitterness to creep in"; and another reviewer urged whites to read it "because it is true and honest and not bitter." Whereas in *The Nation*, Oswald Garrison Villard spoke of Hughes's "absolute intellectual honesty and frankness," elsewhere Alain Locke lamented that Hughes had glossed over too many important matters. The radical Ella Winter found him "too gentle with us 'white folks.' " Ralph Ellison, then a Marxist, complained that "too much attention is apt to be given to the aesthetic aspects of experience at the expense of its deeper meanings"; he further questioned whether the style was appropriate to "the autobiography of a Negro writer of Hughes's importance." Another radical was shocked to notice "not a single mention of a radical publication you've written for or a single radical you have met or who has meant anything to you." In *The New Republic*, Richard Wright praised Hughes as "a cultural ambassador" who had carried on "a manly tradition" in literature when other black writers "have gone to sleep at their posts." In calling Hughes "a cultural ambassador," however, Wright invited memory of a passage in his most important essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," where he had scorned past black writing in general as the "prim and decorous ambassadors," the "artistic ambassadors . . . who

went a-begging to white America . . . in the knee-pants of servility."

In *The Big Sea*, deeper meaning is deliberately concealed within a seemingly disingenuous, apparently transparent, or even shallow narrative. In a genre defined in its modern mode by confession, Hughes appears to give virtually nothing away of a personal nature. In fact, only three admissions in the work qualify as autobiographical exposé; but the meaning of even these episodes is easily lost in the autobiographer's deliberately disingenuous design. The first is in Hughes's boyhood, when, after waiting trustingly for Jesus to come to him at a religious revival, he fakes a conversion, then weeps far into the night in guilt and shame. The second, in his adolescence, and almost cheerfully advanced against a background of Mexican Technicolor, concerns Hughes's brutal feelings for his father: "I hated my father." The third involves Hughes's banishment, when he was twenty-nine, by Mrs. Charlotte Mason, a rich, old white woman who had generously supported him as a patron over the previous two years.

Even in 1939, ten years afterwards, as he himself writes, Hughes cannot recall the exact moment of banishment without feeling sick. It is at this point that Hughes unobtrusively links the three apparently unrelated episodes: "That beautiful room, that had been so full of light and help and understanding for me, suddenly became like a trap closing in, faster and faster, the room darker and darker, until the light went out with a sudden crash in the dark, and everything became like that night in Kansas when I had failed to see Jesus and had lied about it afterwards. Or that morning in Mexico when I suddenly hated my father."

These three episodes are the pillars on which the entire integrity of *The Big Sea* rests. The first admission, about the

fake religious conversion, concerns Langston and Mary and James Reed, friends in Lawrence, Kansas, of his grandmother, with whom he had lived most of his boyhood in the almost total absence of his father and the infrequent presence of his mother. Hughes lived with Mary and James Reed for a few months in 1915, just after his grandmother died and while his mother was in Illinois. As she had done many times before, Mary Reed had taken him to an extended revival sponsored by her church. An evening near the end was set aside for the youngest sinners to be saved. At home, Auntie Reed assured Langston that at that point "something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul." Langston believed her. But, at the service, nothing happened. "I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting—but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing!"

He decides to fake his salvation. The church erupted in jubilation, but that night he cried bitterly in bed. "I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus any more, since he didn't come to help me."

We will return to this episode, but for the moment the chapter that follows it, "The Mother of the Gracchi," is especially instructive. Here, Hughes writes about his mother's amateur theatricals, and in particular about her long recitations on stage. On one such occasion, when she was the Mother of the Gracchi, and Langston and another little boy, dressed in togas, were her children, for whom she is willing

to die, Langston ruined her presentation by mugging wildly throughout it. On another occasion, at church, he "deliberately and with malice aforethought, forgot a poem I knew very well, having been forced against my will to learn it." Present on that occasion was "my mother, who had come all the way from Kansas City to hear me recite." Again he had humiliated his mother—as *The Big Sea* itself, in these scenes, informs us.

Significant threads link the fake conversion, the "Mother of the Gracchi," and the Children's Day fiascoes. All involve an alienated child. In one episode, his mother is absent; in another, she is present but only on a visit; on the stage, she dares to represent herself as a paragon of motherly devotion. We might also notice what she considers art, and what Hughes's later career would make of it. In the most powerful of these scenes, the child is waiting, waiting, waiting for a presence who would be "with you from then on!" The weeping into the night comes from two sources: the knowledge of complete abandonment (by Jesus in fiction, but by parents in fact); and the knowledge of culpability, of having responded to the love given by the Reeds with a lie. These elements play into the crucial scenes in *The Big Sea* involving Hughes and his father.

James Nathaniel Hughes is the only person Langston Hughes ever describes himself as hating. In one of the more willful pieces of character assassination in our literature, James Nathaniel Hughes is left for dead as a mean, selfish, materialistic man. Seeded quietly in the tale, however, is the charge against J. N. Hughes that his son knew would probably only bemuse whites but would snap his black readers wide awake if they were nodding over his book: "My father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro." In the summer of 1919, just before his senior year in high

school, Langston had visited his father in Mexico after years of dreaming about him but without actually seeing him. Langston discovered then, after being humiliated by the older man, that "I hated my father."

The following year, with no hope of attending university unless his father helped him, he returned to Mexico. In *The Big Sea*, his hopes are made to converge on a single episode, when father and son ride on horseback in a heavily armed party of landowners and businessmen into a region only recently rid of bandits by federal troops. They visit a ranch owned by his father in the mountains. The ranch "seemed to take in a whole mountain side and on over the rim beyond that. Little fires were glowing on his mountain, as we rode upward in the dusk toward a cluster of peasant huts." Earlier, they had passed the swaying bodies of three barefoot Indians hanged for banditry. The next day, riding again, they debate Langston's future. His father derides Langston's hope to be a writer; Langston should go to Europe or South America, and not "stay in the States, where you have to live like a nigger with niggers." Langston protests, but in vain.

With his father's expansive promises of wealth away from other blacks and the United States comes an almost magical brightening of the world. Riding with unusual slowness, his father unveils a plan for Langston to study in Switzerland, learn mining and at least two foreign languages, then return to Mexico to live. Langston, however, refuses his father's offer. "My father shut up. I shut up. Our horses went on down the mountain into the blue shadows."

Having led the young black Christ-poet up to a high place, Satan has threatened him with poverty and oblivion, then offered him the world in exchange for his soul. Langston, however, remains true to his God, which is poetry and the black folks, two elements seen by him as virtually one and

the same. His admission that he hated his father establishes for the black reader the depth of his will to be a writer and his undying love of the black race. What his father detests, the son loves; thus Langston Hughes almost subliminally whispers to his black readers, his ultimate audience in spite of the realities of the marketplace and the intentions of Knopf, that his life is completely devoted to their own. For them, he had "killed" his own father. And killed his mother, too. His mother's neglect of him has been linked to her "false" art, against which Langston offers in *The Big Sea* his own art, exemplified by the poem (cited in full) "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 . . ."). In *The Big Sea*, Hughes informs us exactly where and when the poem was written—at sundown on a train to Mexico to rejoin his father in 1920, as Langston brooded on the chasm that lay between him and both his parents. In a few minutes he had finished writing "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," a work that transcends his personal suffering to celebrate the history and beauty of the black race.

*The Big Sea* quietly juxtaposes this racial devotion against the central paradox of Hughes's life, announced after his discussion, in the first chapter, of his rather cool reception by blacks in Africa in 1923. "You see, unfortunately," he confesses in the first line of his next chapter, "I am not black." On the surface, this statement refers simply to a biological fact and to racist custom in the United States, where "the word 'Negro' is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure." Hughes probably also means to emphasize, however, two other points: the extraordinary nature of his devotion to the African race, given the variety of blood in his veins; and, more important, the lesson that for a Negro in America racial

pride cannot be a cloistered virtue but must be constantly tested and intensified by sacrifice and effort.

And yet a question remains: how did Hughes come to discover that he should and could install the black race in the place in his heart vacated by his absconding parents? Or, more pertinent, how could *The Big Sea* suggest to its readers that he had done so? For an answer we must return to the brief but idyllic description of his life with Auntie and Uncle Reed in Lawrence, Kansas, after his grandmother died, and in the absence of his mother and father. "Auntie Reed and her husband had a little house a block from the Kaw River, near the railroad station. They had chickens and cows . . . Auntie Reed let me set the hens, and Uncle Reed let me drive the cows to pasture." This loving portrait is unlike that of either of his parents or his grandmother, whom he depicts as kindly but also excessively proud, and aloof from black mass culture. In the portrait of the Reeds is a tribute offered by its author through the Reeds to the black race. "For me," Hughes writes, "there have never been any better people in the world. I loved them very much."

If indeed, after the fake conversion, Hughes never cried again but once in his life, as he states in *The Big Sea*, the moment must have been pivotal in his young life. His disappointment at Jesus merely epitomizes his disappointment at all those—notably his parents—who had not come to save him from loneliness and abandonment. No doubt he also blamed himself to some extent for having been abandoned, but *The Big Sea* does not suggest such guilt. One act, however, was completely his own, as he freely admits. He had repaid the love Auntie Reed and the church folk had showered on him with a lie.

Resenting his mother, at some quite conscious level he knew that he would have to prepare himself for the future

by some forceful opposition to her and to the world of the Langstons. But this opposition could not offend the Reeds. His life would have to be in some way a reparation to the Reeds, who had protected and cherished him, and to the black congregation into which Mary Reed had brought him as a shining star. Rather than the traditional forms of teenage rebellion, his will to rebel would take in time a subtler form; it would combine a sense of duty with a seemingly erratic bohemianism that would gradually merge into his commitment to being a writer whose principal subject would be the black masses. In the process, Langston would turn his back, to his mother's anger, on almost all bourgeois measures of success.

The third moment of exposé in *The Big Sea*, Hughes's break with his patron, is treated with comparative discretion, even though biographical research more than reinforces Hughes's own testimony to the profound, sustained pain it caused him, and suggests strongly that it was the principal cause of Hughes's most radical phase of socialism, in 1931–33. The episode closes the book, bringing it, in a sense, full circle, but without the same degree of dramatization invested in the two previous decisive moments. In fact, the autobiography, following the crucial rejection of James Nathaniel Hughes by his son in Mexico, has unfolded as the story of a man completely at ease with himself. No other significant controversy is allowed to ruffle the smiling surface of Langston's tale until his patron brings down the curtain on the reprised note of rejection and abandonment.

Hughes's leftist involvements have vanished without a trace. A crucial radical poem about the opening of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in the midst of the Depression is presented in excerpts which criticize the rich without actually asserting any radical sentiment; Hughes carefully omits its last, most

Communist section ("Hail Mary, Mother of God! / The new Christ child of the Revolution's about to be born"). He recalls the poem as his innocent reaction to the oncoming Depression ("The thought of it made me feel bad, so I wrote this poem"), and—erroneously, since it came later—as one cause of his break with his white patron. While one love affair, in Paris in 1924, is orchestrated into a much more dramatic episode than it was in reality, sexual attraction is also finally sacrificed to the more relaxed tone of Langston's life, and sacrificed at the same time, somehow, to his greater goals in life.

This tone, which hasty readers could not connect to the key episodes of pain, was the principal cause of the relatively lukewarm response of some reviewers—for example, young Ralph Ellison's solemn sense that the style was inappropriate to a black man of Hughes's importance. After all, Langston Hughes had been for a decade the foremost of black writers, with no real challenge until 1940—the year of *Native Son*. In his commentary on the book, Hughes did little to dispel this notion. To a newspaper editor, he described *The Big Sea* as written with the "pace and incident value of a series of short stories. It is not 'literary' in the high-brow sense." And yet many reviewers came around, at last, to testify that it had a curious appeal.

Hughes's deepest concern was not so much with the professional reviewers as it was with the masses of blacks for whom most of his work had been composed, and to whom he was psychologically mortgaged. Accepting the balancing act forced on Hughes by the double audience that almost any black writer bearing a racial message but dependent on a white publisher had to keep in mind, he gambled that, through his artistic sleight of hand, blacks would receive his concealed message. His gamble, in a word, was to attempt to cross the autobiographical deep by paddling nonchalantly on

its surface—just as millions of blacks passed through their lives under the most degrading circumstances by enduring and smiling and laughing, and thus preserved a fundamental sense of dignity and self-respect that segregation might contaminate but could not destroy. Hughes depended on his black readers to understand at once how his apparently nonchalant style and the unembittered substance of his book, and his life, cohered with the style and substance of their lives, as they laughed to keep from crying and, in so doing, endured and even sometimes prevailed.

Thus *The Big Sea*, as it should be, is of a piece with Hughes's work in his basic literary identity, which was not as a writer of prose, much less of autobiography, but as a poet. Within poetry, his greatest achievement, and perhaps the only truly original achievement by a black poet in form and feeling from his day to our own, was in his development of poetry out of the blues, as in *The Weary Blues*, his first book of verse, and, more radically, in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, which is dominated by the blues presented in fundamentally unsponsored, unmediated form. The smiling poise of *The Big Sea* is, in fact, closely and deliberately akin to the poise of the blues, where laughter, art, and the will to survive triumph at last over personal suffering. *The Big Sea* replicates the classic mode of black heroism as exemplified in the blues; the last line of a brief prefatory note to *Fine Clothes to the Jew* says it all: "The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh."

*The Big Sea* spurns the more violent, cynical, embittered mode of black feeling, which Hughes, for all his racial radicalism, had himself consistently spurned. It convinces readers by its honest, water-clear prose; his sentences are utterly devoid of affectation. This is American writing at its best—simpler than Hemingway's; as simple and direct as that

of another Missouri-born writer, much admired by Hughes, Mark Twain.

Other black American writers have presented their autobiographies with clearly messianic intent. Perhaps Hughes more quietly communicates a similar purpose in his title, with its echo of the New Testament. But messianism is not a part of the blues, and he deliberately deflects the inference—after inviting it. "Literature is a big sea full of many fish. I let down my nets and pulled," he concludes. "I'm still pulling."

ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

*Princeton University, June 1992*

*Life is a big sea*

*full of many fish.*

*I let down my nets*

*and pull.*

# I

# Twenty-One

Of course, I felt bad sometimes because I couldn't share my new-found comfort as fully as I might have wished with my mother, who was working as a cook in a rest home in Atlantic City. And in Cleveland we had relatives who were having a pretty hard time getting along at all, for the depression had come. But at least the burden of my kid brother's care had been lifted from my mother. He was happy and well fed in New England, not running the back alleys of Atlantic City.

I always felt slightly bad, too, when I was riding in the long town-car that belonged to my Park Avenue patron—and most other Negroes (and white folk) were walking. I would never occupy the car alone if I could help it. But sometimes she would insist, if it were very late, that I be driven to Harlem—or to the ferry, if I were going to Jersey—in her car. At such times I felt specially bad, because I knew the chauffeur did not like to drive me.

He was a rather grim and middle-aged white man, who, probably in all his career as a chauffeur, had never before been asked to drive a Negro about. At least, I felt that in his attitude toward me when I was alone in the deep, comfortable back seat of the car (where I didn't want to be) with him driving me to Harlem. I would have preferred to ride in front with him, talk with him, and get to know him, but he never gave me a chance. He was always coldly polite and unsmiling, drawing ceremoniously up to the curb in front of my Harlem rooming house, getting out and opening the door for me, but never looking pleasant, or joking, or being kind about it. I felt bad riding with him, because I knew he *hated* to drive me, and I knew he had to do it if he wanted to keep his job. And I dislike being the cause of anyone's having to do anything he doesn't want to do just to keep a job—since I know how

unpleasant that is. So often, I would ask my patron's chauffeur simply to drop me at the nearest subway entrance.

But I remember once an amusing situation developed on a certain occasion when I was going out of town on a mid-winter lecture trip. I had been delayed at luncheon on Park Avenue, and so was late getting to the train. There was a terrific blizzard with heavy snow, and, fearing that in a taxi I might be too late for the train, my hostess sent not only her car and chauffeur with me to the station, but her secretary as well to help me get my ticket and have the baggage checked.

The secretary was a tall New England spinster, very efficient and pleasant, and not at all ungracious like the chauffeur. But the funny thing was that when the long town-car drew up to the ramp in the Pennsylvania Station and a dozen colored red caps that I had gone to college with rushed up to take the baggage and saw me get out with the secretary—as a white chauffeur held the door—the red caps were gleefully amazed.

As the secretary rushed ahead to get the Pullman reservation, several of the red caps I knew shook hands and asked me where I was going, and my college friends slapped me on the back in their usual friendly manner and demanded: "Since when the swell chariot, Lang?" But the chauffeur closed the door with a bang, jumped back into the car, and whirled away.

New York began to be not so pleasant that winter. People were sleeping in subways or on newspapers in office doors, because they had no homes. And in every block a beggar appeared. I got so I didn't like to go to dinner on luxurious Park Avenue—and come out and see people hungry on the streets, huddled in subway entrances all

night and filling Manhattan Transfer like a flop house. I knew I could very easily and quickly be there, too, hungry and homeless on a cold floor, anytime Park Avenue got tired of supporting me. I had no job, and no way of making a living.

During the winter Zora Hurston came to Westfield from one of her many trips into the deep South, and there began to arrange her folk material, stacks and stacks of it—some of which later appeared in *Mules and Men*. Together we also began to work on a play called *Mule Bone,* a Negro folk comedy, based on an amusing tale Miss Hurston had collected about a quarrel between two rival church factions. I plotted out and typed the play based on her story, while she authenticated and flavored the dialogue and added highly humorous details. We finished a first draft before she went South again, and from this draft I was to work out a final version.

Zora, a very gay and lively girl, was seriously hemmed in in village-like Westfield. But those backing her folk-lore project felt that she should remain quietly in a small town and not go galavanting gaily about New York while engaged in the serious task of preparing her manuscripts. So she was restless and moody, working in a nervous manner. And we were both distressed at the growing depression—hearing of more and more friends and relatives losing jobs and becoming desperate for lack of work.

In the midst of that depression, the Waldorf-Astoria opened. On the way to my friend's home on Park Avenue I frequently passed it, a mighty towering structure looming proud above the street, in a city where thousands were poor and unemployed. So I wrote a poem about it called "Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," modeled after an

ad in *Vanity Fair* announcing the opening of New York's greatest hotel. (Where no Negroes worked and none were admitted as guests.)

The hotel opened at the very time when people were sleeping on newspapers in doorways, because they had no place to go. But suites in the Waldorf ran into thousands a year, and dinner in the Sert Room was ten dollars! (Negroes, even if they had the money, couldn't eat there. So naturally, I didn't care much for the Waldorf-Astoria.) The thought of it made me feel bad, so I wrote this poem, from which these excerpts are taken:

ADVERTISEMENT FOR THE WALDORF-ASTORIA

*Fine living à la carte!!*

LISTEN, HUNGRY ONES!

Look! See what *Vanity Fair* says about the
new Waldorf-Astoria:
"All the luxuries of private home. . . ."
Now, won't that be charming when the last flop-
house has turned you down this winter?
Furthermore:
"It is far beyond anything hitherto attempted in the hotel world. . . ." It cost twenty-eight million dollars. The famous Oscar Tschirky is in charge of banqueting. Alexandre Gastaud is chef. It will be a distinguished background for society.
So when you've got no place else to go, homeless and hungry ones, choose the Waldorf as a background for your rags—
(Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good enough?)

ROOMERS

Take a room at the new Waldorf, you down-and-outers—
sleepers in charity's flop-houses.

They serve swell board at the Waldorf-Astoria. Look at this menu, will you:

*GUMBO CREOLE*
*CRABMEAT IN CASSOLETTE*
*BOILED BRISKET OF BEEF*
*SMALL ONIONS IN CREAM*
*WATERCRESS SALAD*
*PEACH MELBA*

Have luncheon there this afternoon, all you jobless.

Why not?

Dine with some of the men and women who got rich off of your labor, who clip coupons with clean white fingers because your hands dug coal, drilled stone, sewed garments, poured steel to let other people draw dividends and live easy.

(Or haven't you had enough yet of the soup-lines and the bitter bread of charity?)

Walk through Peacock Alley tonight before dinner, and get warm, anyway. You've got nothing else to do.

NEGROES

Oh, Lawd! I done forgot Harlem!

Say, you colored folks, hungry a long time in 135th Street—they got swell music at the Waldorf-Astoria. It sure is a mighty nice place to shake hips in, too. There's dancing after supper in a big warm room. It's cold as hell on Lenox Avenue. All you've had all day is a cup of coffee. Your pawnshop overcoat's a ragged banner on your hungry frame. You know, downtown folks are just crazy about Paul Robeson! Maybe they'll like you, too, black mob from Harlem. Drop in at the Waldorf this afternoon for tea. Stay to dinner. Give Park Avenue a lot of darkie color—free—for nothing! Ask the Junior Leaguers to sing a spiritual for you. They probably know 'em better than you do—and their lips won't be so chapped with cold after they step out of their closed cars in the undercover driveways.

*Hallelujah! Undercover driveways!*
*Ma soul's a witness for de Waldorf-Astoria!*

(A thousand nigger section-hands keep the roadbeds smooth so investments in railroads pay ladies with diamond necklaces staring at Cert murals.)

*Thank Gawd A'mighty!*

(And a million niggers bend their backs on rubber plantations, for rich behinds to ride on thick tires to the Theatre Guild tonight.)

*Ma soul's a witness!*

(And here we stand, shivering in the cold, in Harlem.)

*Glory be to Gawd—*
*De Waldorf-Astoria's open!*

EVERYBODY

So get proud and rare back, everybody! The new Waldorf-Astoria's open!

(Special siding for private cars from the railroad yards.)

You ain't been there yet?

(A thousand miles of carpet and a million bathrooms.)

What's the matter?

You haven't seen the ads in the papers? Didn't you get a card? Don't you know they specialize in American cooking? Ankle on down to 49th Street at Park Avenue. Get up off that subway bench tonight with the *Evening Post* for cover! Come on out o' that flop-house! Stop shivering your guts out all day on street corners under the El.

Jesus, ain't you tired yet?

"It's not you," my benefactor said when she had read that far. "It's a powerful poem! But it's not you."

I knew she did not like it.

I began that winter to feel increasingly bad, increasingly worried and apprehensive. Not all at once, but gradually I knew something was wrong. I sensed it vaguely, intuitively—the way I felt in Mexico, when my father would come home and find the bookkeeping not added up right, and I could feel before he got home that it wasn't added up right, even though I had worked on it all the

afternoon! So it was hard eating dinner with him in his bare, tiled dining room in Toluca, just as it became hard eating dinner on Park Avenue with people who had freshly cut flowers on the table while the snow fell outside.

## NOT PRIMITIVE

That winter I had been in Cuba looking for a Negro composer to write an opera with me, using genuinely racial motifs. The lady on Park Avenue thought that Amadeo Roldan might do, or Arturo Cartulo. I could not find Cartulo, and Roldan said he wasn't a Negro. But Miguel Covarrubias had given me a letter to José Antonio Fernandez de Castro, person extraordinary of this or any other world. And José Antonio saw to it that I had a rumba of a good time and met everybody, Negro, white and mulatto, of any interest in Havana—from the drummers at Marianao to the society artist and editor of *Social,* Masaguer.

But I came back to New York with no Negro composer who could write an opera.

More and more tangled that winter became the skein of poet and patron, youth and age, poverty and wealth—and one day it broke! Quickly and quietly in the Park Avenue drawing-room, it broke.

Great wealth had given to a woman who meant to be kind the means to power, and a technique of power, of so mighty a strength that I do not believe she herself knew what that force might become. She possessed the power to control people's lives—pick them up and put them down when and where she wished.

Langston Hughes, born in 1902, came of age early in the 1920s. In *The Big Sea* he recounts those memorable years in the two great playgrounds of the decade—Harlem and Paris. In Paris he was a cook and waiter in nightclubs. He knew the musicians and dancers, the drunks and dope fiends. In Harlem he was a rising young poet—at the center of the "Harlem Renaissance."

Arnold Rampersad writes in his incisive new introduction to *The Big Sea*, an American classic: "This is American writing at its best—simpler than Hemingway; as simple and direct as that of another Missouri-born writer . . . Mark Twain."

Langston Hughes is the Jazz Poet! The constant communicator of Blues. He is the singer, philosopher, the folk and urban lyricist. This book is the chronicle of a bright and lively artistic ear that brought the African-American people full into the twentieth century. It is a wonderful book!

—AMIRI BARAKA

ARNOLD RAMPERSAD, author of the widely acclaimed biography *The Life of Langston Hughes*, is Woodrow Wilson Professor of Literature and director of American Studies at Princeton University.

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