
LANGSTON HUGHES (1902–1967), who was to become one of the first American poets to reach a wide audience with a direct, personal poetic style created from the rhythms and language of everyday black speech, was born in Joplin, Missouri. In his high school classes he read the poetry of Carl Sandburg and Edgar Lee Masters, and he published several poems in the literary magazine. Hughes's father persuaded him to study engineering at Columbia University, but after only one year Hughes abandoned his studies and signed on as a mess boy on a ship that took him to Africa and Europe. He had begun to place his poetry in the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, including what was to become one of his best-known poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (which he had written as a teenager), and he was determined to be a writer.

Hughes's career as an African American poet was launched a few years later with his book *The Weary Blues* (1926), poems about a Harlem musician. Hughes completed a B.A. from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and then settled in New York City. During the Harlem Renaissance he became an important member of the literary group including Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay, writers who emphasized Negro topics — their African heritage, the slave era, and modern city life. Exhibiting an impressive versatility and productivity in his career, Hughes wrote plays as well as poetry and prose and edited twenty-eight collections of African American poetry and folklore. As his biographer Arnold Rampersad wrote, the greatest truth about Hughes's life was that his "true satisfaction came only from the love and regard of the black race, which he earned by placing his finest gift, his skill with language, in its service."

Hughes's interest in fiction developed later than his talent for poetry. As he described it in his autobiography *I Wonder As I Wander* (1956), he was traveling in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s when he picked up a paperback copy of a collection of short stories he had never read before by D. H. Lawrence. He was so impressed with them — especially with "The Rocking-Horse Winner" — that a night or two later he sat down at his well-traveled portable typewriter to write stories of his own. Hughes sent his first three stories to his literary agent in New York, and by the time he returned to the United States, all three had been sold to popular magazines. His early fiction was published as *The Ways of White Folks* in 1934. During World War II Hughes began to write a series of stories in the *Chicago Defender* newspaper about an imaginary character named Jesse B. Semple, a working-class black man living in Harlem, whose conversations blended urban cynicism and genial mother wit on a wide variety of timely topics, such as war, racial prejudice, women's rights, unemployment, and education for blacks. Hughes published three collections of these stories as well as *The Best of Simple* (1961). "Thank You, M'am" is from his book *Something in Common* (1958). Hughes chose it as an example of his work in 1967 when he edited the anthology *Best Stories by Black Authors, 1899–1967*. *The Short Stories of Langston Hughes* was published in 1996.

LANGSTON HUGHES

Thank You, M'am

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined caused him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk and his legs flew up. The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

After that the woman said, "Pick up my pocketbook, boy, and give it here."

She still held him tightly. But she bent down enough to permit him to stoop and pick up her purse. Then she said, "Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?"

Firmly gripped by his shirt front, the boy said, "Yes'm."

The woman said, "What did you want to do it for?"

The boy said, "I didn't aim to."

She said, "You a lie!"

By that time two or three people passed, stopped, turned to look, and some stood watching.

"If I turn you loose, will you run?" asked the woman.

"Yes'm," said the boy.

"Then I won't turn you loose," said the woman. She did not release him.

"Lady, I'm sorry," whispered the boy.

"Um-hum! Your face is dirty. I got a great mind to wash your face for you. Ain't you got nobody home to tell you to wash your face?"

"No'm," said the boy.

"Then it will get washed this evening," said the large woman, starting up the street, dragging the frightened boy behind her.

He looked as if he were fourteen or fifteen, frail and willow-wild, in tennis shoes and blue jeans.

The woman said, "You ought to be my son. I would teach you right from wrong. Least I can do right now is to wash your face. Are you hungry?"

"No'm," said the being-dragged boy. "I just want you to turn me loose."

"Was I bothering you when I turned that corner?" asked the woman.

"No'm."

"But you put yourself in contact with me," said the woman. "If you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming. When I get through with you, sir, you are going to remember Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones."

Sweat popped out on the boy's face and he began to struggle. Mrs. Jones stopped, jerked him around in front of her, put a half nelson about his neck, and continued to drag him up the street. When she got to her door, she dragged the boy inside, down a hall, and into a large kitchenette-furnished room at the rear of the house. She switched on the light and left the door open. The boy could hear other roomers laughing and talking in the large house. Some of their doors were open, too, so he knew he and the woman were not alone. The woman still had him by the neck in the middle of her room.

She said, "What is your name?"

"Roger," answered the boy.

"Then, Roger, you go to that sink and wash your face," said the woman, whereupon she turned him loose — at last. Roger looked at the door — looked at the woman — looked at the door — *and went to the sink.*

"Let the water run until it gets warm," she said. "Here's a clean towel."

"You gonna take me to jail?" asked the boy, bending over the sink.

"Not with that face, I would not take you nowhere," said the woman. "Here I am trying to get home to cook me a bite to eat, and you snatch my pocketbook! Maybe you ain't been to your supper either, late as it be. Have you?"

"There's nobody home at my house," said the boy.

"Then we'll eat," said the woman. "I believe you're hungry — or been hungry — to try to snatch my pocketbook!"

"I want a pair of blue suede shoes," said the boy.

"Well, you didn't have to snatch *my* pocketbook to get some suede shoes," said Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. "You could of asked me."

"M'am?"

The water dripping from his face, the boy looked at her. There was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face, and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next. The door was open. He could make a dash for it down the hall. He could run, run, run, *run!*

The woman was sitting on the daybed. After a while she said, "I were young once and I wanted things I could not get."

There was another long pause. The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.

The woman said, "Um-hum! You thought I was going to say *but*, didn't you? You thought I was going to say, *but I didn't snatch people's pocketbooks.* Well, I wasn't going to say that." Pause. Silence. "I have done things, too, which I would not tell you, son — neither tell God, if He didn't already know. Everybody's got something in common. So you set down while I fix us something to eat. You might run that comb through your hair so you will look presentable."

In another corner of the room behind a screen was a gas plate and an ice-box. Mrs. Jones got up and went behind the screen. The woman did not watch the boy to see if he was going to run now, nor did she watch her purse, which she left behind her on the daybed. But the boy took care to sit on the far side of the room, away from the purse, where he thought she could easily see him out

of the corner of her eye if she wanted to. He did not trust the woman *not* to trust him. And he did not want to be mistrusted now.

"Do you need somebody to go to the store," asked the boy, "maybe to get some milk or something?"

"Don't believe I do," said the woman, "unless you just want sweet milk yourself. I was going to make cocoa out of this canned milk I got here."

"That will be fine," said the boy.

She heated some lima beans and ham she had in the icebox, made the cocoa, and set the table. The woman did not ask the boy anything about where he lived, or his folks, or anything else that would embarrass him. Instead, as they ate, she told him about her job in a hotel beauty shop that stayed open late, what the work was like, and how all kinds of women came in and out, blondes, redheads, and Spanish. Then she cut him a half of her ten-cent cake.

"Eat some more, son," she said.

When they were finished eating, she got up and said, "Now here, take this ten dollars and buy yourself some blue suede shoes. And next time, do not make the mistake of latching onto *my* pocketbook *nor* *nobody else's*—because shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet. I got to get my rest now. But from here on in, son, I hope you will behave yourself."

She led him down the hall to the front door and opened it. "Good night! Behave yourself, boy!" she said, looking out into the street as he went down the steps.

The boy wanted to say something other than, "Thank you, m'am," to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door. Then she shut the door.

[1958]

ZORA NEALE

pers in Notasulga, Ala., Florida, a town founded by her father, a Baptist preacher who moved from one relative to another. She was old enough to travel to Washington, D.C. In 1921 she founded the first student literary magazine in the South.

In 1925 Hurston was the first African American to publish a renaissance in Harlem. Like Hughes, she lived a southern life. With her mother, she returned to her heritage. After Hurston, she went to Barnard College, she became a part of the Harlem community. As a critic, she sought to achieve a balance in her writing between her individuality and her individuality and her individuality stereotypes to keep African Americans in the center.

urgent to realize that the race problem is not a natural endowment, but a received, there must be a reference to the African American they would be just.

*During the Great Depression, she wrote and published her first novel, *I, Zora*, in Florida, and then *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in search for love and peace. She wrote an autobiography. Although a woman writer of her time, her writing was part of the Harlem Renaissance, the women's movement, and the "Gilded Six-Bits" and other works. A collection that first brought her to the attention of the public.*

RELATED COM

tion," page 1430; Zora Neale Hurston, 1476; Alice Walker, page 1564.