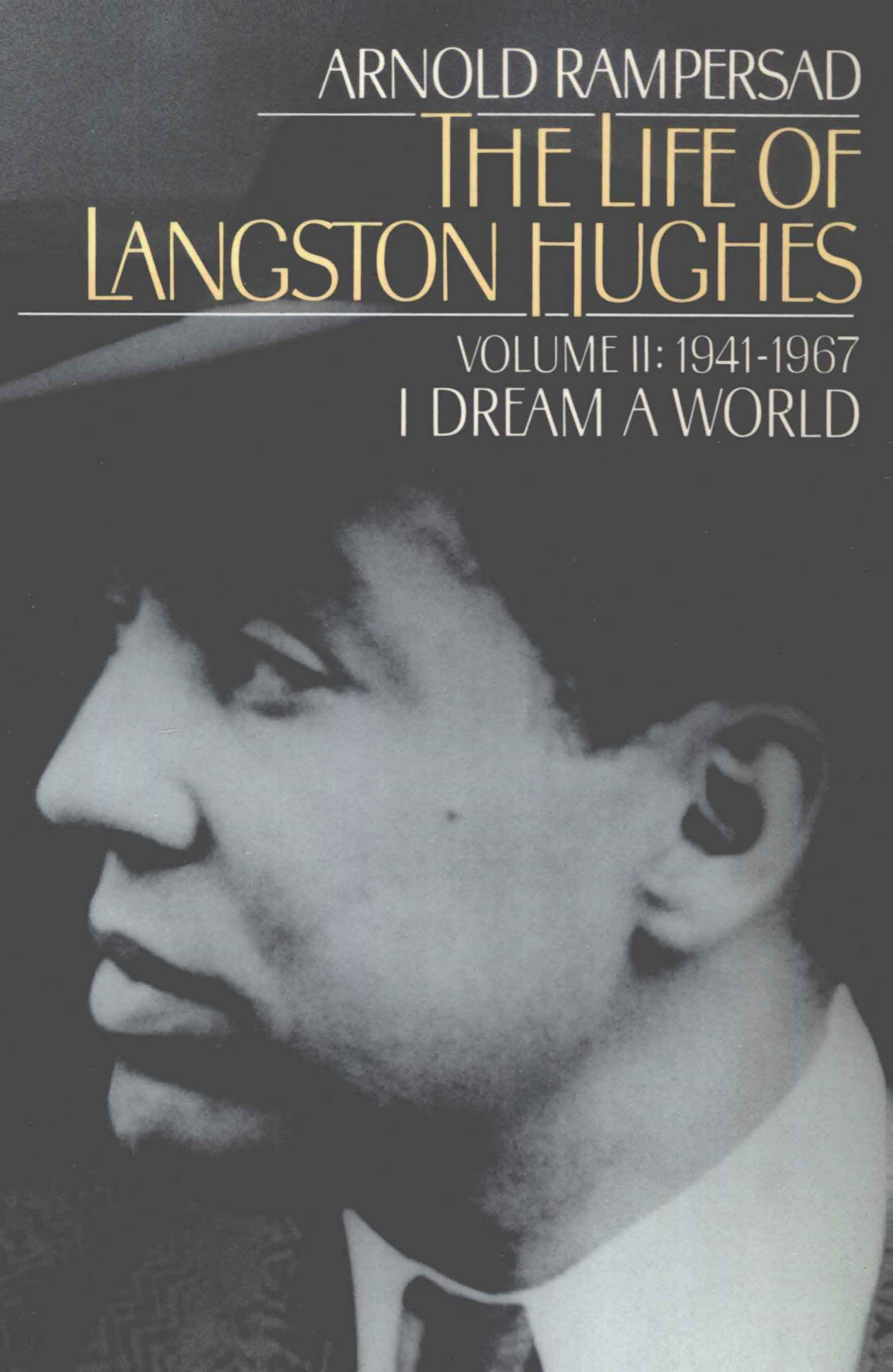
ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

THE LIFE OF LANGSTON HUGHES

VOLUME II: 1941-1967
I DREAM A WORLD



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I Dream a World

again, to
Marvina White

Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection.

LANGSTON HUGHES, 1964

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THE LIFE OF LANGSTON HUGHES

1

STILL HERE
1941

I've been scarred and battered.
My hopes the wind done scattered . . .
"Still Here," 1941

ON FEBRUARY 1, 1941, his thirty-ninth birthday, Langston Hughes was released from the Peninsula Community Hospital in Monterey, California, after almost three weeks there. By this time, the disturbing illness that had forced him to seek admission—an attack of gonorrhea marked by an almost free-flowing urethral discharge, aches and pains in his legs, an excruciating locking of his left knee, and fever—was in remission. But on the day of his release he was still weak and groggy, with his temperature not quite returned to normal. He had allowed his infection to go too far before seeking treatment. Large doses of sulfathiazole and then sulfapyridine, the standard medication for venereal disease in the era before the discovery of penicillin, had left him constipated, depressed, and confused at times almost to the point of delirium—without doing much to curb the urethral flow. Finally, in a painful procedure, his physician had inserted a catheter "with tenderness & caution!!" in order to drain the discharge, which finally stopped.

The day was cool, the sky above the Monterey Peninsula murky with rain and winter mists when Langston rode from the hospital to the grounds of his friend and patron Noël Sullivan's estate, Hollow Hills Farm, some five miles away in Carmel Valley. Since September, he had been living there as a guest of Sullivan's in a one-room cottage built especially for him, where he could write and sleep free from most distractions. Now, however, he unpacked in an upstairs room in the main house where, over the next two weeks or so, he would nurse himself back to health. The room was comfortable, and soothingly decorated entirely in blue. On a side table was a gift sent from New York by his loyal friend Carl Van Vechten—a flowering plant, "a kind of glowing little tree growing out of white pebbles in a white pot," as Langston gratefully de-

scribed it. "The very lovely gay and joyous plant," he wrote, "made the room seem like spring in full bloom in spite of the rain outside."

An accompanying card said simply, "Pour la vie." Nothing could have been more appropriate as a gift to Langston at this point than a symbol of life. In the middle of his own life he had stumbled and fallen so badly that he himself must have despaired at times of ever rising again. In America, the bitter saying goes, there are no second acts; would the curtain rise again for him? What weighed most on his mind now was not his illness, indelicate as it was, but something worse—the momentous step he had taken, just before entering the hospital, in repudiating one of his poems, "Goodbye Christ." A harsh attack on religious hypocrisy, the poem had been penned in the Soviet Union soon after Langston's exuberant arrival there in 1932 with a band of young black Americans summoned to make a film on American race relations, and had been published the same year without his permission, by a radical friend:

> . . . Goodbye,
> Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
> Beat it on away from here now.
> Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
> A real guy named
> Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—
>
> I said, ME! . . .

Forgotten for seven years, the piece had reappeared with almost diabolical timing the previous November when, after a number of professional setbacks, Langston had looked forward eagerly to a major address to an audience of booklovers about his freshly published autobiography *The Big Sea.* But his talk at a hotel auditorium in Pasadena, California, had been raucously sabotaged by a right-wing religious group stirred to action by the nationally known evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Thus McPherson had repaid Hughes—with ample interest—for a passing shot at her in the poem. Next, the powerful and widely circulated *Saturday Evening Post* reprinted the piece of verse along with Aimee McPherson's counterattack, and dispatched them both into homes across the country. (By curtly refusing one of his radical poems in 1932, "Good Morning Revolution," the *Post* had earned itself a place in "Goodbye Christ": Christ had been sold "Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks,/ Even to Rockefeller's Church, / Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.")

The result was a squall of controversy with Langston Hughes at the center. "Lots of wires," a "Mountain of mail," and newspaper "Clippings by [the] ton" commenting on the poem began to descend on Hollow Hills Farm. Only a portion of this material had reached Hughes when, fearing that his entire career as a writer was in jeopardy, he took a decisive step. Bowing to his critics on the right, he drew up and circulated an explanation that dismissed "Goodbye Christ" as a regrettable error of his immature youth, an error that he would

not repeat. "Having left the terrain of the 'radical at twenty' to approach the 'conservative at forty,' " and "desiring no longer to *épater le bourgeois,*" he insisted that he "would not and could not write" such verse any more.

This statement amounted to a public repudiation of his alignment with radical socialism in the entire preceding decade, beginning with powerful poems in 1931 in *New Masses* against imperialism in the Caribbean and reaching its zenith with the militant verse of his Soviet year, of which "Goodbye Christ" was only the most profane. Spurning moderation in the Scottsboro Boys *cause célèbre,* when nine black young men faced the death penalty on flimsy charges of rape, he had thrown in his lot with the communist lawyers and propagandists confronting the Alabama judical system. A year in the Soviet Union had intensified the appeal of radical socialism, although he never joined the Communist Party. As a newspaper correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, he had been impartial in theory but sympathized clearly with the extreme left. As late as 1938, he had signed a statement in the communist *Daily Worker* about recent Moscow trials, a statement that asked liberals "to support the efforts of the Soviet Union to free itself from insidious internal dangers, principal menace to peace and democracy." Now he had broken with the radical left—which reacted with disdain. Citing one of his more militant pieces of verse, the San Francisco *People's World* vented its contempt. "This Hughes is a long way from the Hughes who not so many years ago wrote:

'Put one more 'S' in the USA

and make it Soviet
'Put one more 'S' in the USA,
we'll live to see it yet.'

The time had come to dismiss this traitor. "So goodbye Huges [*sic*]," the *People's World* jeered. "This is where you get off."

In the past, Langston Hughes might have shrugged off such an attack, but the acrid publicity had come after months of demoralizing failures. The previous spring, a reading tour had proved both tiring and, in the end, unprofitable. Then, after months of toil on a much touted Negro Exposition in Chicago, which was supposed to celebrate the seventy-five years since Emancipation, Langston had been left by the sponsors with shelved promises, sly evasions, and no hope of pay. "Chicago," he muttered darkly, was "certainly one of the chief abodes of the Devil in the Western Hemisphere." Anticipating not only lavish critical praise but also a financial windfall from his autobiography *The Big Sea,* he had watched in disbelief as his book failed to sell even as Richard Wright's first published novel, *Native Son,* garnered its author both a small fortune and so much acclaim that with this one bold stroke Wright displaced Hughes as the most renowned of Afro-American authors.

His troubles did not end. Several weeks of work in Los Angeles on a black musical revue organized by the putatively leftist but vacillating and almost entirely white Hollywood Theatre Alliance ended in frustration with Langston's

clandestine withdrawal from the project and the city—in part because of his disgust with the Alliance, in part because of his venereal illness, which he hoped to treat quietly in Carmel. The end of the year found him "broke and remorseful as usual"—or, as he joked weakly, "broke and ruint." He was in the hospital, "moaning and groaning" and groggy from his sulfa drugs, when word came of what he himself abjectly called the "last straw." When the three subtenants—all of them his friends—negligently fell far behind on the rent at his apartment at 66 St. Nicholas Place in Harlem, the authorities formally evicted him *in absentia.* His dearest friends in New York, Toy and Emerson Harper, deposited his possessions, including many important manuscripts and books, in the basement of their apartment at 634 St. Nicholas Avenue, also in Harlem.

Twice before in his life—once in a pivotal teenage struggle with his father over his choice of poetry over profit, then later in a harrowing, protracted entanglement with his major patron Mrs. Charlotte Mason ("Godmother") over his right to choose his own path as an artist and an individual, Langston had verged on a nervous breakdown. But never before had he faced such a hostile public scrutiny of his basic beliefs and intentions, or the insinuations that he was finished as a creative artist and a moral force. At the heart of his current crisis was his act of renunciation. Although he had seldom pushed himself forward as a radical, and although his smile was ready and his laughter large, the essence of Hughes's career as a writer had been from the start an interplay between art and social conscience, with a need to defy. Instilled deep in his mentality as a child had been the example of Lewis Sheridan Leary, his maternal grandmother's first husband, who had died at Harpers Ferry fighting in John Brown's band, and whose sacrifice had been the core of Mary Langston's moral conditioning of her grandson Langston Hughes.

In his current crisis, as he sought guidance for the future, Langston must have asked himself hard questions about the grand enterprise he had made of his life—to live by his writing (as no black had ever done), and to make black America not only the major raw material of his art but also, in cunning manipulation and defiance of the white world that controlled publishing, his main audience. Was the enterprise, heroic and even sacred from one point of view, intrinsically unsound? Was it fundamentally so flawed in conception, so much an exercise in paradox, that it made his ambitions more fantasy than anything else? And why had he attempted it in the first place? Behind much of the activity of black artists in the Harlem Renaissance had been the assumption that excellence in art would alter the nation's perceptions of blacks, and lead eventually to freedom and justice. Had he subscribed too readily to this view, and then been betrayed by its falseness?

His friend the poet Countee Cullen had marvelled "at this curious thing: / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" In spite of their sonorousness, Hughes had always disliked these lines; but had Cullen been right, and was the role of the artist an impossibility for a black in America? One thing was certain: Langston needed time to think through his crisis. In his teenage strife with his father he had retreated into violent illness, then returned to health with a deter-

mination to devote his life to the word. With his patron "Godmother," he had fled to black Haiti and the shadow of Henri Christophe's Citadel La Ferrière, then returned to America burning with radical zeal. Now he would depend on the generosity and sympathy of another white patron, Noël Sullivan.

As a committed Catholic and a major financial supporter of the Church in the Carmel area, as well as an increasingly embittered critic of communism, Sullivan had good reason to loathe "Goodbye Christ" and personally excommunicate its author. Instead, he accepted Langston's explanation of the poem, and opened his home to him as a place of refuge. The grandson of a wealthy banker and the nephew of a former mayor of San Francisco, Sullivan was well known locally both as a patron of the arts, especially music, and as a champion of liberal causes. He lived at least one part of his beliefs by employing and befriending blacks and even entertaining some—especially visiting musical stars such as Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Dorothy Maynor, and Roland Hayes—at home. "I don't think Mr. Sullivan had a single prejudiced bone in his body," one of his black employees later judged. Sullivan and Hughes had met in 1932 when the poet, exhausted at the end of his first cross-country reading tour, had passed several blissful days at Sullivan's mansion on Hyde Street in San Francisco. Captivated by the black poet's gentle blend of integrity, courage, and innocence, Sullivan had later subsidized a year of his writing following his return in 1933 from the Soviet Union, in a cottage in Carmel-by-the-Sea. Out of this stay had come the short story collection *The Ways of White Folks,* which Hughes dedicated to him. During some of the dreariest months of the Depression, Sullivan had sent money to Langston's mother Carrie Clark, and had made it clear, following his purchase of a small estate in Carmel Valley late in the thirties, that Langston was free to visit at any time and stay indefinitely. As for Langston's pro-socialism, Sullivan believed so strongly at the same time in his "purity of heart and goodness and kindness and intelligence" that he willingly set their ideological differences completely to the side.

Sullivan loved the life of art and pleasure that his banking fortune made possible, but also wore his nagging sense of guilt for everyone to see; in contrast to the poverty and disease of so many others (his sister Alyce, for example, was terminally ill), he viewed himself uneasily as a wretchedly fortunate man "to whom life owes nothing." To aid Langston Hughes, and have him living at Hollow Hills, was both a spiritual and psychological boon to Sullivan. "I love to know you are near Noël," one of his closest friends, the actress Elsie Arden, wrote Langston; "your serenity of spirit and manner, your gentle voice and your inviolable affection for him are of real support in his heavy and often difficult hours." No one knew better than Langston, on the other hand, how much Sullivan had done for him since 1933, and how much he was doing now. "To say what your friendship has meant to me," he would write Sullivan some months later, "would take more pages than I have ever written in any of my books. The way you stood by me last winter in my various and varied vicissitudes makes me believe in you like the early Christians must have believed in that rock on which . . . the church was founded."

On Langston's first day back at Hollow Hills, his birthday was marked by Sullivan (who fretted and worried but also passed up few chances for a celebration) with a small party that protectively included none of the Carmel arts community from beyond the Farm, excepting Robinson Jeffers and his wife Una, who had also known Langston since 1932. Too ill to attend, Langston stayed upstairs in his room. For the next few days he hardly budged from bed, although now and then he sat on a small balcony that overlooked the slopes of the Farm and the green peach orchards of the valley. Attended mainly by Mrs. Eulah Pharr, Sullivan's capable black housekeeper of a dozen years, he drank warm soup and goat's milk, swallowed his sulfa tablets, browsed through his mail—which remained swollen with letters about the controversy—and dozed. Among his birthday gifts were new record albums by Louis Armstrong and Carmen Miranda, but he made no effort to go downstairs to listen to them. As for his gifts of books, they "seem to put me to sleep," he admitted—although Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* was "charming." "Shame for a literary man," he concluded, "but I don't seem to be much of a reader."

The winter rains persisted. When the rain stopped, sometimes the only sounds were the bleating of Noël Sullivan's sheep and goats and the barking of his dogs, including his half-a-dozen dachshunds and two or three German Shepherds. An old bull named Julius, long past his prime but much beloved by his owner, grazed in a pasture. The sun appeared, but only fitfully. For company Langston mainly had Eulah Pharr and Noël Sullivan's close friend Leander Crowe, a handsome young Canadian who passed his days at Hollow Hills mainly writing poems and short stories, which he published from time to time in the local newspapers. On February 15, the house became even more quiet when Sullivan set out with Robinson and Una Jeffers on a pleasure trip to New York. One of his last acts was to slip Langston a loan of $150 to meet his doctor's bills.

Slowly Langston returned to health, and to a sense of what he must do, and *not* do, in the coming months to heal himself. Before settling on a plan, he carefully gauged the measure of his support in the "Mountain of mail" about "Goodbye Christ." To his relief, most of it was on his side. Typical was a letter from the black social worker Thyra Edwards of Chicago, who assured him that he was still admired and loved: "You have already given too much to the struggle of the people of the world to feel the slightest tremor of doubt now." An African Methodist Episcopal bishop, critical at first of the poem but scorning now the continuing attacks of "a few narrow minded religionists," promised his support in the wake of Hughes's statement: "I want to be among the first to assure you I appreciate and deeply sympathize with the motives that prompted you to do so." In the *Pittsburgh Courier,* a dean at Virginia Union University expressed his distaste for the poem but lauded Hughes for "his bigness of spirit." The gifted black poet Melvin B. Tolson warned Langston against despair: "You have so much fine work ahead." Support had come even from the leading black American communist, James W. Ford, who ringingly

denounced the attack in the *People's World* as "a slander on the Negro people!"

Not every black was on Langston's side. In Pasadena not long afterwards, the fine novelist and folklore expert Zora Neale Hurston, a volatile character who had wreaked havoc on his mind in 1931 with her outrageous claim of sole authorship of "Mule Bone," the play they had written together, publicly dropped some scorching remarks at his expense. "They tell me Zora laid me low in Pasadena," he laughed weakly to a friend. But Hurston was almost alone among well-known blacks in taking advantage of his troubles.

Perhaps no advice was more valued by Langston than that of his best friend and look-alike Arna Bontemps, a man of quiet but granite resolve and a prolific writer who had come to Harlem from Los Angeles in 1924, married and started a family, and at the same time slowly began to build an enviable reputation as a poet and novelist. Together, Hughes and Bontemps had written the children's book *Popo and Fifina* and the play *When the Jack Hollers,* and they were in constant touch through the mail. About Langston's sharpest goad, *Native Son,* which he himself admired, Bontemps soothingly reported now on "the sudden boom and abrupt decline" of the novel; *Publishers Weekly* had concluded that "the boom was due to novelty of such a book being chosen by Book-of-the-Month and the fade-out followed discovery on part of readers (who thought they were getting a murder-thriller) that the book contained a 'political argument'." In any event, he believed, the fate of *Native Son* had little to do with Langston Hughes, who may have become suddenly too afraid of poverty. As an insider at the Rosenwald Fund in Chicago, he broke some news, then offered Langston calm advice: "Hints for recuperation: (a) Don't worry about shortage of funds; you're going to get a fellowship in a couple of months or so (b) Give up ideas of mass production writing: it puts too heavy a burden on your mind. Concentrate on two or three things that really interest you. If you can boil it down to one, so much the better. In other words, don't get frantic about making some money right away. It will only delay work on whatever serious project you may be planning. Don't get excited: wait for the worm to turn! . . . These, if followed tacitly, will restore health. Honest-to-God!"

However, the fellowship (if it came) would be in the future. Langston needed money now, since Sullivan's loan had relieved only the most extreme of his needs. Money had been at the root of so many of his troubles. Determined to devote himself solely to writing, but flatly barred by racism from many jobs, especially in radio and television, which were open to whites with talent and experience grossly inferior to his own, Hughes continued to exist on the edge of poverty. Now his need of money set up a new disaster. Arguing in the wake of the failure of *The Big Sea* with Blanche Knopf, his longtime publisher, about his forthcoming collection of poems, "Shakespeare in Harlem," he was on the defensive. From the start, her typically imperious choice of an illustrator had disturbed him. Waving away his suggestions, including the veteran *Esquire* cartoonist E. Simms Campbell, she had settled on E. McKnight Kauffer, a