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Trance

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Trance (Langston Hughes: In Translation) by Edgar Nkosi White

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(for Hafiz)



The stillest fall of all is the fall from grace. No louder than a feather falling in a forest, and yet we fall. There are many ways to kill a man. Gun and knife will work well but to make a man irrelevant will also do, and what better way to ignore an artist than to place him in a high school or even college textbook for generations of students to ignore? This can be called death by anthology. This is when you take a vital and radical giant like Langston Hughes, who was global before there was the word global, and place him in a box marked poetry of the Negro.

Langston Hughes had many contradictions. An enigma disguised as a poet. His sadness he kept to himself and his laughter he gave to the world. His whole life he was searching for Pushkin even before he knew who Pushkin was. Born in Missouri of a black father who almost instantly abandoned both him and America for Mexico, and a mother who came from privilege and no money (can you get a better crucible for the making of a poet?). Add one grandmother who could actually remember John Brown and Harpers Ferry where she saw her husband die. Given all this it is inevitable that Langston would ask:

[“What becomes of a dream deferred?”](#)

The answer is that the dream goes to Broadway and becomes a *Raisin in the Sun*. And what becomes of the poet who asks the question? Well, he must travel the world like the Flying Dutchman, he visits every port and will never really fit in anywhere. He will wander and wonder but fortunately for him he wears exile well.

It was a good thing that Langston’s father, James Hughes, chose Mexico to hide in as a result of this accident (in life there are no accidents if you’re an artist). As a result Langston had a lifelong love of Spanish which served him well when he met Garcia Lorca later in Harlem. Langston would translate Lorca’s [Poeta en Nueva York](#) (A Poet in New York) but that will be later in the odyssey. First we have

to get the sixteen-year-old Langston out of Mexico where he can't decide whom to kill first, his father or himself.

Nobody loves a genius child
Kill quick and let his blood run wild.

Fortunately he didn't kill his father because it would have brought him bad luck and he had enough of that already. The irony of course was that his father, whom Langston referred to as "Our father who art in Mexico," may have left America but in his mind and values he would always be essentially American, which is to say obsessed with money greed and success. He was a total capitalist and despite his experience of exploitation and poverty had no moral dilemma whatsoever about exploiting the poor of Mexico and becoming quite the black "jefe," or the landlord of a slum housing estate. Langston couldn't stand him. And so of course when he asked Langston what it was he intended to do and Langston replied, be a writer, his father immediately gave him an account book and told him: "Here, you want to write, write this. Go collect my rent, boy."

In all the years that Langston was apart from his father he always wondered and fantasized about him. This man who had dared to take a chance and leave America, but now that he's met him he finds, better the dream of the father than the father himself. And as for the mother, what does she want?

She wants him back home where he can go out and work to support her, but he has a dream, a secret dream, to come to New York and go to school, see Harlem and become a writer.

But you have to be very careful with dreams because the minute you put them into words you lose the trance. People wake you. They wake you and step on your dreams. So now he's very careful when he asks for a year. A year of tuition at Columbia which he wants his father to finance, and if he's not successful then he'll come back to Mexico and be the accountant son his father wants him to be. His father agrees to this, so perhaps it was a good thing he didn't commit suicide after all.

A year later you land in New York, wired with wonder, you've never seen people move so fast but you pretend that you're not in awe, that you're not a stranger, that you're not overwhelmed. Now enrolled at Columbia University, people make clear the fact that they are less than thrilled to have you. (You see when you sent your application from Mexico they were expecting you to be Spanish not Black). Columbia doesn't like Blacks or Jews but they're willing to make an exception if you agree not to publicize the fact. In other words keep a low profile especially while living in the dorm. They even allow you to write for the school newspaper, *The Spectator*. (Langston hated the racism at [Columbia](#) so much that he wrote under the pseudonym LANG HSU, taking a Chinese alter-ego much the way the jazz musician, Charlie Yardbird Parker, would later record under the name Charlie Chan when he was banned from the studios).

There is one compensation for attending Columbia. It's Harlem although it denies it. Harlem, with all its possibility. Harlem, the fertile crescent. That cross section where the South and the Caribbean meet and ideas germinate and explode into renaissance.

Timing is everything and it is important if you're an artist to be born on time. Although Langston caught a lot of hell, he had the good sense to be born in the age of W.E. DuBois, who had a significant magazine (*The Crisis*), which dealt with issues of race and class and also poetry. That tiny magazine became the fulcrum that influenced the thinking of many Caribbean, African, and even Asian activists to come (among these was a quiet cook and sometimes longshoreman named Ho Chi Minh who was at the time visiting Harlem).

Another student who hated his time at Columbia was a Spanish poet in hiding named Federico Garcia Lorca. He hated not only [Columbia](#) but New York as well. At the time he was studying the work of the sixteenth-century mystic Spanish poet [Gongora](#), whose poetry together with that of [Walt Whitman](#) was to have a major influence on his poetry. But it was only when Langston introduced Lorca to Harlem

that Lorca really found his stride. His best poem in the volume *A Poet In New York* takes place in Harlem where he goes in search of the [King of Harlem](#).

Con una cuchara
arrancaba los ojos a los cocodrilos
y golpeaba el trasero de los monos.
Con una cuchara.

With a spoon
He gouged out the eyes of crocodiles
And beat on the backsides of monkeys
With a spoon.

And the final image:

iba al sitio donde lloraban los negros. . . .
sordomuda en la penumbra,
a tu gran rey prisionero, con un traje de conserje.

Went to that place where the blacks were weeping. . . .
Deaf and dumb in the shadows
For your great king imprisoned in a janitors uniform.

There are many images as well of the workers who must:

lick the wounds of their diseased masters.

Lorca would never write like this again. Those who knew his previous work kept asking the question, what in the world happened to Lorca, the answer was, Harlem.

Langston lasted one year at Columbia but instead of returning to his father and Mexico he went to sea and started a lifelong love affair with travel. He threw away his books but not his pen. The sea brought him to Africa where he worked as a merchant marine, cabin boy, whatever was available and found more questions than answers. For example why is it that the richest continent has the poorest people?

Everyone had come and carved themselves a slice. Placed flags at will, renamed mountains, rivers, and countries after themselves, their families, or their monarchs, and brought bibles, schools, and language, enough to explain why. Langston wondered where God stood in this great trance-dance of history. One thing was certain. He wasn't speaking and therefore the foreign governments who were there felt the need to interpret for Him.

The same sea that took him to Africa took him to Europe, and there he jumped ship. He spent time in Paris writing and sending poems to *Crisis* magazine. Although jobs were scarce, one thing that was on his side once more was time. Jazz music had just reached Europe in the Twenties and many musicians and artists were part of the mix and the excitement. It was as if Harlem suddenly was exported overseas.

What had been despised or taken for granted in America was much celebrated and prized in France especially. France between wars was a good place to be and being twenty-one he was able to live without sleep and his work was beginning to appear with regularity. Some like [Samuel Beckett](#) were even translating Langston's poetry into French (later even [Borges](#) would translate some of Langston's poems into Spanish). Retuning to America is always good if you return in triumph, especially from Europe. He had collected enough poems now for his first book and that would be [The Weary Blues](#).

But what was good was that Langston didn't do as the majority of the literati were doing in Harlem, namely endless parties and gossip and being seen in the company of the socialites and celebrities who were now flocking to Harlem for the nightlife. The Cole Porters and the Noel Cowards and the Orson

Wellese. He never let them drain him. Instead, after a few months he was back at sea and this was how he generally lived his life. Always getting fresh material from the day-to-day struggles. Sometime later he found himself in Cuba and saw firsthand how invisible forces were yet at work controlling the labor forces and making certain that racism would always be firmly in place. He was arrested for sitting in a hotel lobby. He made the error of thinking he was no longer in America. He forgot that the same rules of segregation apply wherever an American hotel happens to be. As the manager explained it was not the policy of Cuba which denied him entrance, it was the fact that American tourists objected to having blacks in the dining room in any capacity other than servants.

The truth of the matter was that Langston was on the government's radar the moment he landed in the country. A Harlem poet who was traveling steerage class along with cane-cutters and the labor class was sure to draw attention. The biggest fear even then was Communism and labor organizing. His poems in [New Masses](#) had certainly come to their attention.

It was in Cuba that he met the poet [Nicolas Guillen](#) and developed a lifelong friendship. Guillen would go on to become Cuba's greatest living poet and it was Langston who was a major influence causing Guillen to turn his eyes from French Baudelaire and Rimbaud to the street rhythms of musicians of Cuba (the form known as [son](#)) just as Langston had done with Jazz and the Blues.

[Búcate plata](#),
búcate plata,
poqqe me boy a corré.

Go find some money
Find you some money
or else I'm gone.

Can you get more basically street than this injunction by a woman to her man?

Yo bien sé cómo etá to,
pero biejo, hay que comé:
búcate plata,
búcate plata,
poqqe me hoy a corré.

Look I know how things stand
But listen man, you have to survive
So find me some money or I'm gone.

Now, would Guillen have found his way to this earthy street style of the *son* without Langston? Perhaps. But we will never know. As I said there are no accidents in an artist life. Langston would continue to translate many of Guillen's poems. The two would next meet up in Spain during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Langston had gone over with the [Abraham Lincoln Brigade](#). He functioned mainly as a correspondent. There in Madrid the two were reunited but they couldn't do anything to save the life of Garcia Lorca who had returned to Spain and was assassinated by Franco's police/guarda. Langston translated the "[Lament for Ignazio Sanchez](#)." Many feel that in this poem Lorca was foreshadowing his own death but in truth Lorca had been rehearsing his own death since Harlem.

At five in the afternoon
At exactly five in the afternoon
A boy brought in the white sheet
At five in the afternoon.

The poem “Lament for Ignacio Sanchez” is a perfect poem. The repetition of the phrase, “At five in the afternoon,” pierces the heart. This is the poem for which Lorca is most remembered. There are no accidents in a poet’s life.

Langston’s next port of call was Haiti. It was his lifelong dream to visit the island of Haiti. Haiti is the first black republic to achieve independence (Langston always said it was an act for which it will never be forgiven in this world or the next). Never forget that Haiti’s revolution was considered more amazing than the American Revolution because the odds against its success was even greater and, irony of ironies, the American Revolution was only finally achieved because of the decision of France to become an ally. Haiti on the other hand had no major power to call on for assistance because they all wanted to own Haiti not help her.

When Langston came to Haiti it was in fact the completion of a circle. His great uncle Langston (for whom he was named) had been the first American ambassador to Haiti. Now the Haiti which Langston entered was under U.S. occupation. The marines had in effect set up a base there to “Protect U.S. interest.” Namely, [Citibank](#), which controlled the currency of Haiti. It was on Langston’s first visit to Haiti that he met [Jacques Romain](#), a writer and social activist who came from Haiti’s elite class. Class is very important in Haiti. When the two writers met it must have been like looking in the mirror. They could have been twins. Both fair complexioned and both products of privilege. They could either of them so easily have stepped off into the secure and corrupt middle class. Haiti was divided between those with shoes and those without. Both Jacques Romain and Langston chose instead to cast their lot with the “*sans souliers*” the shoeless. Later, Langston would translate Romain’s greatest novel, [The Masters of the Dew](#). He would also be instrumental in the campaign to have Romain released from prison when he was arrested for socialist activities in Haiti. Also later Langston would write a powerful children’s book on Haiti called [Popo and Fifina](#), which gave a beautiful and accurate portrait of life in a Haitian village.

Back in America, Langston would fight with publishers who had little interest in either Cuba, Spain, or Haiti other than as travelogues and were extremely reluctant even to allow translation by a black writer of a Spanish or French writer. Langston soon learned that there was apartheid even in translation.

He then wrote one of my favorite poems.

[White Shadows](#)

I’m looking for a house
somewhere in this world
Where white shadows
Will not fall.

There is no such house
Dark brother
No such house
At all.

But if Langston thought he had trouble with his Caribbean translations, it was nothing compared to his Russian translations of Pushkin, Yesenin, and [Mayakovsky](#). When Langston visited [Russia](#) they hailed him in the streets. His work was known and even published in Russia. Together with Claude McKay he was a celebrity. The Russians had a tendency to want to touch you and call out: “Pushkin, Pushkin.” It was a source of pride that Russia’s greatest poet was a black man, and they knew it, accepted the fact that Pushkin had singlehandedly changed the perception of Russian as a barbaric language not worthy of poetry. (Before Pushkin, the intelligentsia barely spoke Russian except to their servants; the thought of actually writing poetry in anything but French was inconceivable). Then God sent Pushkin. So to be called Pushkin was quite an honor. Even if they did want to rub your head like a Buddha.

No, I'm not Pushkin
So please don't rub my head
In the Russian way (Po-Rooski)
for luck.
I'm not going to die in a duel over some woman
Once loved
Then twice regretted.
Although I've died many times already
It was always for freedom
mostly my own and seldom forgiven.
No, I'm not Pushkin
although
Like him I've worried words unto a page
and waited.

Not that I fear dying
It's the dead I fear
The dead among the living who won't let you pass
Pass to joy
Pass to art.
The dead among the living, who always try to block the way.
Yet I've worried words unto a page
And prayed.

Later, Langston Hughes would be made to appear before [H.U.A.C.](#) (the House Un-American Activities Committee). The experience was as frightening as being summoned to Rome by Caesar. Some committed suicide, some betrayed friends and family. Most betrayed themselves. In effect what he was asked was:

“Mr. Hughes, who gave you permission to travel to these places?”

He answered quietly.

“My youth gave me the permission.”

They wanted him to recant many of the statements he'd made and promise never to do it again.

“I promise only never to be so young again in this life.”

After H.U.A.C. Langston would let his character Simple, the Everyman, speak for him. They say that Galileo, when asked to recant for saying that the sun was the center of the universe and not the earth, replied, and yet it still moves.

The stillest fall of all is the fall from grace. There's no sound to it. Like a feather falling in some forest.
And yet the sun also rises.

Edgar
Nkosi
White is a
playwright.

