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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “there comes a time when only anger is love.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact [media@poetryfoundation.org](mailto:media@poetryfoundation.org) for the correct version.)

## THESE WALLS WILL HAVE TO GO

Three newly discovered poems by Langston Hughes have their first known publication in the January 2009 issue of *Poetry* magazine.

By Arnold Rampersad

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Langston Hughes wrote these simple poems\* in 1930, as the Great Depression loomed in America. By the end of 1933, in the depths of the crisis, he had composed some of the harshest political verse ever penned by an American. These pieces include “Good Morning Revolution” and “Columbia,” but above all, “Goodbye Christ.” Here the speaker of the poem ridicules the legend of Jesus in favor of the radical reality of Marx, Lenin, “worker,” “peasant,” “me.” Around 1940, under severe pressure from conservatives, Hughes repudiated “Goodbye Christ” as an unfortunate error of his youth. However, in 1953 he was again forced to condemn this poem when he appeared, by subpoena, before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s infamous subcommittee probing allegedly “un-American” activities by some of our leading scholars, scientists, and artists.

At his core, Hughes was a lyric poet entranced by the charms and mysteries of nature. Nevertheless, political protest was a key aspect of his writing virtually from his high-school days, when many of his classmates were the children of Jewish and Catholic immigrants from Europe who taught him the importance of protesting against injustice. A stirring voyage to colonial Africa in 1923, when he was barely twenty-one, only intensified his commitment to protest art.

These discoveries are minor poems, but reflect some of his abiding concerns and images. The second poem, which begins “I look at the world,” is cut from Hughes’s radical poetic cloth. Again one hears echoes of some of his better-known poems. The words “And this is what I see” followed, as in a sermon-like refrain, by “And this is what I know” is a familiar rhetorical device in his work. Familiar, too, are the conceits of narrow assigned

spaces that almost suffocate blacks, “silly” walls that pen them in, and, both ominously and beautifully, “dark eyes in a dark face.”

The brevity of these poems conserves their power and, in doing so, prevents them from becoming boring. Again, they are simple— but we must remember that Hughes lived as an artist by the idea that simplicity at its best is or can be complex. Surely these three poems do not widely expand our knowledge of Hughes or his art. However, they remind us poignantly, in their lancing grace, of the qualities that made him the poet laureate of his people and an American master. Hughes saw such poems both as “mere” propaganda and also as necessary acts of the committed poet. As a black writer facing racism on a daily basis, he had a remarkably precise sense of scale, as well as an inspired knowledge of the words and rhythms of speech that would best convey his messages to blacks and whites alike. The truth is that we cannot have too many poems by Langston Hughes, no matter how modest they seem to be on the surface.

\*These poems were written in pencil on the endpapers of Langston Hughes’s edition of *An Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry* (Active Press, 1929). They were discovered by Penny Welbourne, a rare book cataloger at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, where the Hughes Papers are housed. Please visit [poetryfoundation.org](http://poetryfoundation.org) to see a facsimile slideshow of the original.

*I look at the world*

I look at the world  
From awakening eyes in a black face—  
And this is what I see:  
This fenced-off narrow space  
Assigned to me.

I look then at the silly walls  
Through dark eyes in a dark face—  
And this is what I know:  
That all these walls oppression builds  
Will have to go!

I look at my own body  
With eyes no longer blind—  
And I see that my own hands can make  
The world that’s in my mind.  
Then let us hurry, comrades,  
The road to find.

Arnold Rampersad is the author of the two-volume *The Life of Langston Hughes* and editor of *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Langston Hughes, and his poetry, at [www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).

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