

My grandfather died five years ago, and since then our lunch-time ceremony has never quite been the same. My grandmother moved into my aunt's house, on the opposite side of the city. She cooks in a different kitchen now, and no one comes home for lunch anymore, because it's too far from people's jobs.

The last time I visited was also the first time I had travelled to Panama by myself. My grandmother and I sat together in the midday heat and shared Chinese food, the leftovers from my dinner at a restaurant the night before. The dog, who was our only companion, stretched out under the table, cooling his belly against the floor. I warmed two plates of mixed vegetables and tofu in the microwave and slid one in front of my grandmother. She studied it for a long time. Finally, she speared the tofu with a fork and tentatively put it to her lips. When she tasted it, she grimaced.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Where did the author live at the time the essay begins? Where does the lunch of the title happen?
2. This essay is quite brief but also quite rich and vivid. This is so in part because of the author's use of detail and imagery. Make a list of the different kinds of details and sensory images used in the essay. Then break the list down by what the details pertain to—the food itself, or the table and eating of the food, or clothing, or people. What effects do the details make possible? What do they tell us about the different things they illustrate?
3. **connections** Read Henriquez's essay with Audre Lorde's "The Fourth of July" (p. 221). How can you compare and contrast the significance of food and the occasions for eating it in the two essays? To what larger social issues does eating connect in each?
4. Write about something from your own memories of food—from your own home, or visits to friends or relatives. Can you think of times when food was important and different from what you or others you know normally ate? What stands out? The food? The way it was served and eaten? If you don't remember anything like this, write about how food was prepared and eaten in your childhood. What did it mean? What does it mean to you now?
5. **looking further** Read up on the cultural meaning of food and rituals surrounding eating. Anthropology is a good place to start. What are the most important things about food across cultures? What are the important differences between cultures?

LANGSTON HUGHES

Salvation

Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, Langston Hughes became a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of African American literature, art, music, and scholarship in the 1920s and 1930s. He was first and foremost a poet, incorporating the vernacular of the streets and the rhythms of the jazz clubs into his voice. He was also a playwright, a fiction writer, an essayist, and an autobiographer. In "Salvation" we can see the skills with which Hughes created imaginative literature; here, in nonfiction, he both tells the story of an important point in his life and makes his readers think about significant ideas, doing so poetically and with great economy and expressiveness. As you read, keep the essay's title in the back of your head, and think about why Hughes might have chosen it.

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved. It happened like this. There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church. Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds. Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." My aunt spoke of it for days ahead. That night I was escorted to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and 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. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon, all moans and shouts and lonely cries and dire pictures of hell, and then he sang a song about the ninety and nine safe in the fold, but one little lamb was left out in the cold. Then he said: "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus? Young lambs, won't you come?" And he held out his arms to all us young sinners there on the mourners' bench. And the little girls cried. And some of them jumped up and went to Jesus right away. But most of us just sat there.

A great many old people came and knelt around us and prayed, old women with jet-black faces and braided hair, old men with work-gnarled hands. And the church sang a song about the lower lights are burning, some poor sinners to be saved. And the whole building rocked with prayer and song.

Still I kept waiting to see Jesus.

Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley. Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying. It was very hot in the church, and getting late now. Finally Westley said to me in a whisper: "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." So he got up and was saved.

Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench. My aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and songs swirled all around me in the little church. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting—but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened.

I heard the songs and the minister saying: "Why don't you come? My dear child, why don't you come to Jesus? Jesus is waiting for you. He wants you. Why don't you come? Sister Reed, what is this child's name?"

"Langston," my aunt sobbed.

"Langston, why don't you come? Why don't you come and be saved? Oh, Lamb of God! Why don't you come?"

Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons

and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.

So I got up.

Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. Women leaped in the air. My aunt threw her arms around me. The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform.

When things quieted down, in a hushed silence, punctuated by a few ecstatic "Amens," all the new young lambs were blessed in the name of God. Then joyous singing filled the room.

That night, for the last time in my life but one—for I was a big boy twelve years old—I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. 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, and 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.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Why does Hughes cry that night?
2. Hughes's story is told very briefly; how does that brevity make it more powerful? How might a longer version have been less affecting?
3. **connections** Compare the feeling the young Hughes has when he is the last child on the bench to the feeling George Orwell has when the crowd follows him in "Shooting an Elephant" (p. 272). What are the effects of being watched on each?
4. Write about a time when you felt your family held certain expectations for you. Was it a positive experience, a negative one, or both? Why?
5. **looking further** There are people today who profess what some refer to as secular religion. Research this topic, then describe it. If you could speak to the twelve-year-old Langston Hughes, or to the adult Hughes who wrote "Salvation," what might you say to him about it? How would you relate it to the experience he writes about?