

SARAH BROWNING

Langston Hughes Joins the Merchant Marine, 1923

Langston drops all his books except *Leaves of Grass*
into New York harbor, so that

the two poets lie down together in the cramped
hold of the ship, wrapped in the hammock

of language—song of themselves spooning
in the middle of the ocean. Uncle Walt whispers

to Langston out on the blue, cajoles, welcomes him—
stretching vocal cords, straining body: ship, men, hunger.

Langston touches and is touched, ship sheen of the other,
skin the question, skin the answer. No land, but music.