

Edgar O. Lake

WALCOTT READS TO BRODSKY'S GOD-MOTHER



Over on Fifty-Third Street, across from The Modern
an airy building named Donnell, a city-library branch
and friendly sanitarium of plate-glass window inmates
Old city-dreamers, ignored by Monet-watchers,
snooze in safety, avenged from a silver-badge guard
who sits on a stool by a lectern, guarding an elevator-door
You'd need a pass to go upstairs and read the "Foreigns"
"You never quite leave the Soviet Union," an old man mutters
Besides, the City must protect the very young, the guard says
The toddlers' reading room – a giant padded cell – is also there
Melted snow, lost pratfalls on the sidewalk claimed by Spring
Pigeons mimic pedestrians' hurried walk: strut and canter
Street-peddlers selling poster art from Gaughin's Martinique
perch their wares on subway grids that send up ticker-tape
Walcott arrives surreptitiously, his tweed Welsh coalminer's hat
pulled down over his Ben Franklins, the signature moustache
A library-aide hurries him to the auditorium, expecting an audience
Instead, the room's empty; blue wall-paper traces a single person
Walcott shows no surprise, traveling from Brooklyn
He reaches for his poems, curled in a coat-pocket – and begins to read
The lady shifts her weight, and clamps her feet about her bags
Walcott's caught his breath and leapfrogs to another page
He's accustomed to this silence, pigeons caught in eaves
Some Simile, once winged, and now fretting for the rhyme
Walcott, litany-voiced, free-verses about sea-grapes
The subway rattles beneath the stage; he stands, looks down
and pauses, and in this rail-screeching minute his audience
grows: two aspiring souls – younger, with more earnest baggage
He's on to something troubling, something about "half a Nigger"

The bag lady fidgets, just as Saint Patrick's bell-tower tolls
Remembering it is time for evening prayers, fishes for her rosary
She falls asleep again, between Walcott's chanting of Another Life
Dreaming with her head bowed on her chest, her opening palm
accepts the wafer of his poem about his Brooklyn Aunt
When he finishes, there is no applause; no questions from the seats
The library-aide whispers something kindly, grips his arm, hurrying
past the library's shrinking liability insurance
Across the street, a distant roar escapes: Ivan the Terrible has fallen
The "RR" local pulls The Modern's soundtrack into Walcott's room
Brodsky's God-mother stirs, a smile wafts over her thawing lips
Walcott's line trails off: An Inner Life, her Autumn in Norenskaia