

Langston Hughes On the IRT; A Poem Arouses Many Feelings

By Joe Sexton

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The Transit Authority's program is called Poetry in Motion, and on this particular morning eight lines of Langston Hughes rumble along the length of the IRT No. 3 line.

Sometimes a crumb falls

From the tables of joy

Sometimes a bone

Is flung

To some people

Love is given

To others

Only heaven.

The poem, titled "Luck," is in the last days of its singular urban life on Car No. 2000, which sits awash in filtered morning sunlight in the outdoor New Lots Avenue station in Brooklyn. It is scheduled to be taken down, replaced by poems No. 26 and 27 in the series that began 16 months ago in the subways.

Wendy Richards is the first person to glance at the poem poster this morning. She reads it quietly and then both smiles and cries. Ms. Richards is two hours late for work. She had spent the morning attending to the details of the death of a neighbor who used to ride the subway with her. Lois Russell, who had talked with Ms. Richards recently about the Hughes poem, had died in her sleep only hours before. She was 45 years old.

"She was with me yesterday," Ms. Richards said of her neighbor. "We both loved the poem. It seems full of knowledge, and it's nice to be offered a bit of it."

The No. 3 train courses through the cold. There are stops at Van Siclen Avenue, and then Pennsylvania Avenue. The poem is posted above the exit doors in the center of the car, helping to frame a frozen East New York. The car at nearly 11 A.M. is crowded, rush hour evidently as free-form as the verse.

Lakiesha McNeil, 22 years old, sits across from the poem, along with her husband. She does not read poetry beyond what interrupts her stares on the subway. She rereads "Luck" and waits a long time before talking.

"I can't express it, but I get it," Ms. McNeil says of the poem. "Everybody has luck, although sometimes you can't be happy. Everything is not good in this world."

The world of the moment for Car No. 2000 changes with each stop. Daylight vanishes as the train descends again underground. Above, the neighborhoods are shifting, and the population of the car undergoes the constant, arbitrary, oddball integration that happens throughout the city.

Hughes, who died in 1967, lived in New York for significant parts of his life, and "mightily did he use the streets," another poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, once said of him. "He found its multiple heart, its tastes, smells, alarms, formulas, flowers, garbage and convulsions," she said.

Now, on this day, on this train, a construction worker stands under "Luck," and never happens to look up. A man with a briefcase rummages through computer printouts in his lap. A mother and child peer curiously into a blackened window, each peacefully deciphering the darkness. 'Nothing Here for Me'

"Luck" will certainly never be enjoyed by Edward Roberts. He refuses to so much as peek at the poem, his eyes full of his anger's unblinking coherence. Now retired, he says he worked on the subway for 34 years, as both conductor and motorman.

"There is nothing here for me," Mr. Roberts says. "I'm sick and tired of it. Poetry or Farrakhan, what's the difference? It's all hate. I'll be glad when I'm dead and gone. The world used to be a good place."

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He departs with his cap pulled down hard on his head, and the train is suddenly beyond Brooklyn. Mr. Roberts is replaced by two young women, out of breath, headed for the next stop, Wall Street. They are too busy to look at the poem, they say at first. Martha Lees, though, relents. She has seven minutes.

"It's not really a positive view of love," she says. "The subject of the poem seems to be under the table, thrown a scrap of attention. That can't be good. But, really, in seven minutes it's hard to get to the bottom of literature." No Pictures, No Names

It turns out to be downright impossible to get the older woman who gets on Car 2000 next to give her name. No pictures, no names, she says: she is off uptown to the hairdresser. Maybe a picture after that, she muses. Her cousin is Allen Ginsberg's mother, she says as the No. 3 hits 34th Street, but a grasp of poetry for her remains elusive.

"I took a course from Ayn Rand once, and she said she didn't know about art, but that she knew what she liked," the woman says. "I know what I like in poetry."

She decides, in the end, to give "Luck" a try.

"A crumb? A bone?" she asked. "What's it got to do with heaven?"

"Luck" is a more profound mystery to Jose Fernandez, for it is printed only in English, and he is from the Dominican Republic. A translation, though, is offered by another rider, and Mr. Fernandez accepts cheerfully. The translation, line by line, irons all creases of confusion from Mr. Fernandez's face.

"There's a reason they call it luck," he says in Spanish. "If you find love, it's luck. If you get to heaven, it's luck."

Mr. Fernandez poses under the poem, glances once more at the foreign language that now has a familiar message, and exits. And Myra Johnson enters. She is from Kansas City, Mo., and fully aware that Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Mo. 'Let's See What Happens'

"I wasn't a real big fan growing up," Ms. Johnson says. "But I know he represented black people as full human beings. To me, the poem means that you are lucky if you even find just some happiness."

Does she concur?

"I don't know," says Ms. Johnson, a theater major at Manhattan Community College. "I'm 20 years old. Let's see what happens."

"Luck" is soon smothered in daylight again, the No. 3 lurching into its final stop at 148th Street in Harlem. Hughes was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, coming, as his biographer said, to stand "for something that has perhaps been lost -- a way of looking at experience with dignity and a certain kind of humor."

Julia Clarke, the final person on Car 2000, lifts her gaze from her book, a collection of sermons by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She has to get off, but has a moment for a poem that will be taken out of the subways any day.

To some people

Love is given

To others

Only heaven.

"I feel I am lucky," Ms. Clarke says. "I have put God in front. It will all fall into place. What I want to happen, will."

The speakers in the train blare: Last stop. Watch the closing door.

"At least I think it will," she said, and was gone.