

Samuel Menashe Reads at the Harvard Club

You're reading your poems at the Harvard Club
in New York City. The hall, rimmed with oak,
sputters a dying light suffused with thick
brown shadows, like intellectual antelope
gazing at their reflections on the wall.

You can't believe you're here. Poems

leap-
frog

from your throat, poems so short
that if you miss a
word

you miss the point. I listen, neither
Harvard alum nor university-bred,
but a young poet seeking encouragement
from an elder. Invited here,

I hold your book open and read along.
The light is bad. My clothes are shot. No tie
is knotted in the hollow of my neck.
My shoes, the worn-out patent leather ones
from the J. Crew catalog, are husks
that hug my feet.

In private, you told me
to give up poetry and dedicate
myself to writing narrative instead.
"Nobody reads poetry," you said.

Certainly you spoke from experience.

They used to snicker when you'd ramble in
off 47th to the Gotham Book Mart.
"Here comes the poet Samuel," they'd joke.
"Come on," I'd say, "He's really not so bad."
You'd stop and talk about the war, recite
Blake and the Hebrew Bible (King James Version)
and then your own compacted prosody.
You stopped the tourists in their tracks. *A pot*

poured out fulfils its spout, your voice
intoned. Then you'd explain, to stupefied
cliente, what the poem *really* meant
based on its linguistic roots ("the pot
fills up the spout, *fulfilling* it etc.")
You'd sign their books before they'd even bought:
"To Jo, from Canada. Best, Samuel."

That said, your poems are now canonized
in the Library of America. You
snagged the first Neglected Masters Award,
the kind of name you always called yourself
alluding to the *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town"
the only place they'd publish you back then.
You felt yourself a curiosity
in your hometown, an underdog, the last
of your generation, a congregant
of Homer's, the Greek café long since shut down.

What more could anybody do for you?
Your wish-list is complete, you have become
a famous poet with a style, to boot:
Menashesque. I can almost hear it said
in college classrooms, by professors younger
than I am, too obliviously young
to have attended the *Nutcracker* with you
at Lincoln Center.

Wedged between Masters
and Michelangelo, your volume rests
on my bookshelf. I flip through it, recalling
your evening reading at the Harvard Club
ten years ago. Like Emerson, you blurred
the distance between poetry and faith,
the kind one has in literature, not God.

That evening you gave your best performance.