

# Forest of Europe

Derek Walcott

*“The last leaves fell like notes from a piano  
and left their ovals echoing in the ear;  
with gawky music stands, the winter forest  
looks like an empty orchestra, its lines  
ruled on these scattered manuscripts of snow....”*

*(Full poem unable to be reproduced due to copyright)*

## VOCABULARY

**Ovals** - slightly squashed circular shapes

**Gawky** - awkward looking and nervous

**Manuscripts** - handwritten documents

**Inlaid copper laurel of oak** - the few last leaves of an oak tree, that look as though they are made out of inlaid copper rather than natural material as they have turned brown and are about to drop off for the winter

**Mandelstam** - Osip Mandelstam, a Russian poet (see the context for more info)

**Ruble** - the currency of Russia

**Neva** - a river in Northwest Russia (see the context for more info)

**Gutturals** - harsh sounds made from the throat

**Oklahoma** - a state in the Southern US

**Gulag Archipelago** - a non-fiction text by the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn about life in the Gulag, Soviet forced labor camps that were set up for prison inmates (see the context for more info)

**Runnels** - small gutters made by the flow of water, usually rainwater

**Herdsmen** - a shepherd, someone who rears herds of animals

**Stubbled** - making short and stiff shapes, as in stubbled hair growth that occurs as a man grows a beard

**Writer's Congress** - a meeting of Soviet writers and intellectuals that occurred in August 1934.

**Cossacks** - people from the East Slavic region, primarily Russians and Ukrainians (see the context for more info)

**Choctaw** - a Native American people who live in the Southern US region

**Treaties** - political documents that are drawn up and signed by states or countries in order to make agreements over certain socio-political matters

**Brazen** - brave, fearless, reckless

**Icons** - a picture or representation of a spiritual person, such as a religious leader or saint.

**Floes** - floating sheets of ice

**Freight yards** - a space on a railway line that is designed for loading and unloading cargo from freight trains

**Consonants** - non-vowel letters (everything except 'a, e, i, o, u')

**Forlorn** - sad, lonely, abandoned

**Prairie** - low, flat-lying grassland

**Desolate** - abandoned and empty, a bleak and barren place

**Parapets** - protective walls or railings such as those found on the edges of a castle - used either for military defense or to protect people from falling

**To mint a sovereign** - 'to mint' means to make coins by imprinting them, a sovereign is an old fashioned type of coin made out of solid gold

**Hudson's silhouettes** - the shadows of the Hudson River, a large river that flows through the Eastern US states, from Vermont to New York.

**Tributary** - a small river that flows into a larger river or lake

**Emigrants** - people who leave their native country to live elsewhere

**Exile** - being cast out from a place and not allowed to return

**Classless** - not having a specific class (e.g. working, middle or upper class)

**Threshing harvesters** - farming machines which separate

**Quivering** - trembling

**Sunstroke** - a sickness contracted from being in the sun too long

**Corruptible** - able to be corrupted / manipulated / spoiled

**Worth its salt** - an expression meaning 'good at the job'

**Condensation** - when water vapour turns back into the water on a surface

**Borealis** - the 'northern lights', an aurora of light that emerges over the northern hemisphere

**Ague** - illness / shivering fever

**Ruble** - a Russian form of currency

**Mastodons** - extinct elephant-like creatures, woolly mammoths are part of the mastodon group of animals

## STORY/SUMMARY

**Stanza 1:** At the end of Autumn, the final leaves fell off the trees in oval shapes, like notes from a piano. The bare winter trees looked like an empty orchestra full of abandoned music stands, the leaf-littered snow beneath them resembled a document with scattered notes and lines.

**Stanza 2:** There is an oak tree with a few coppery leaves still clinging to its branches, I can see it shining through a window framed with brown bricks above your head - it shines as brightly as whisky. You recite the poetry of Mandelstam in wintry breath, which uncoils like cigarette smoke as it makes vapour in the air.

**Stanza 3:** You recite Mandelstam's line of poetry: 'The rustling of ruble notes by the lemon Neva.' You speak as an exile, and your sounds crackle like decaying leaves as you speak. This line from Mandelstam circles with light in a brown room, in barren Oklahoma (far from the country in which it was created).

**Stanza 4:** There is a Gulag Archipelago (floating islands of imprisoned Russians) under the ice of Oklahoma, where the salt mineral spring of the Trail of Tears runs through the plains, which are hard and open like a shepherd's face, cracked with the sun and stubbled with unshaven snow.

**Stanza 5:** Starting with whispers from the Soviet Writers' Congress, the snow circles like cossacks round the corpse of a Native American Choctaw who died from exhaustion, until it is a blizzard of treaties and white papers - the issue becomes more social and universal and it becomes difficult to see the individual humans who were affected because of an increasing focus on the cause.

**Stanza 6:** Every spring the branches sprout new leaves, like libraries with newly published books, until they fall and become recycled - paper to snow - but one mind continues suffering even at zero degrees temperatures, it lasts like the oak tree with a few bold leaves still clinging to it.

**Stanza 7:** As the train passed through the tortured icons of the forest, the ice sheets clanging like freight yards, the spires of frozen tears, stations with steam trains, he managed to capture all of this in a single winter's breath of words, and his freezing consonants turned to stone - they became permanent and everlasting.

**Stanza 8:** His inspiration for poetry was found in lonely train stations, under clouds that were as large as Asia, districts in Russia that were so large they would be able to

swallow Oklahoma as if it was a grape, not the tree-shaded prairies of Oklahoma but space so desolate that it mocked the idea of arriving at a destination.

**Stanza 9:** Who is that dark child standing on the boundaries of Europe, watching the evening river create gold coins stamped with power, not with poets, the Thames and Neva rivers rustling like banknotes then, black on gold, the silhouettes of the Hudson River in America.

**Stanza 10:** A tributary of immigrants flows from the frozen Neva to the Hudson, under airports and stations, emigrants for whom exile has wiped away their class like the common cold, citizens of a language that is now yours

**Stanza 11:** Every February, every 'last autumn' you write your poetry far away from the rural fields of Russia, which fold wheat like a girl plaiting her hair, far from Russia's canals that quiver in the sun, you are a man living with English in one room.

**Stanza 12:** The tourist islands of my South are prisons too, they are corruptible, and though there is no harder prison than writing poetry - what is poetry, if it is worth the effort, except a phrase that men can pass from the hand to the mouth?

**Stanza 13:** Poetry is passed from hand to mouth, across the centuries, the bread that lasts when old political and social systems have decayed, when, in his forest of barbed wire branches, a prisoner circles, chewing the one phrase that has music which will last longer than the leaves.

**Stanza 14:** This prisoner's condensation is the marble sweat of angel's foreheads, which will never dry until the peacock lights of the Aurora Borealis that fan out from LA to Archangel shut down, and until memory needs nothing to repeat.

**Stanza 15:** Osip Mandelstam was frightened and starved, but he shook with a divine sickness, every metaphor that he wrote made him shudder with illness, each vowel sound was heavier than the stones they set on the boundaries of edges of countries or territories, as he wrote the line 'to the rustling of ruble notes by the lemon Neva,'

**Stanza 16:** But now the fever of poetry is a fire, and the glow from it warm our hands, Joseph, as we sit in this wintry cave of a brown cottage, grunting in harsh sounds like apes, while in the snowdrifts outside giant mammoths are forcing their systems through banks of snow.

## SPEAKER/VOICE

The **speaker** is Walcott himself, and he speaks to an **addressee**, 'Joseph', whose name is only mentioned in the final stanza of the poem. Joseph seems to be a close friend, as the pair find themselves isolated in a wintry collate in Oklahoma, sitting and reading poetry together. The **subject** varies from the personal to the political, going back and forth from individuals who achieved greatness to vast sociopolitical entities such as governments who are almost impossible to fight against. Nonetheless, it centers around the poet Osip Mandelstam and the everlasting power of his poetry.

## LANGUAGE

**Synesthetic imagery** - 'The last leaves fell like notes from a piano / and left their ovals echoing in the ear;' - Walcott blends visual and auditory imagery, conflating the change of the seasons with a transition in a musical symphony to create a rich and diverse sense of setting at the beginning of the poem.

**The extended metaphor of snow** - the snow is a consistent **motif** that repeats in the imagery of the poem, beginning with the **sibilant line** 'scattered manuscripts of snow' - the **sibilant** 's' and **plosive** 't' sounds in this image recall the motion of scattering or littering, as the letters fall erratically in the line just as leaves fall randomly onto the snow in Winter. Later, 'the snow circles...til it is a blizzard of treaties and white papers / as we lose sight of the single human through the cause'. It becomes a **metaphor** for blankness, a whiteness that obliterates history and erases our collective memory of those who suffered, struggled, and died for past causes that are no longer relevant to our modern time or location. The 'treaties and white papers' refer to government documents which in Walcott's opinion occur in a flurry throughout history, each new document erasing or changing what has gone before until no true history or memory is left. He states that 'we lose sight of the single human through the cause', opining that the individual person who suffers and struggles is losing when we only consider politics and society on the macro-level of the 'cause'. In this poem, he is resolved to focus instead on the individual - in this case, the poet Osip Mandelstam, who chose to suffer and die rather than give in to pressure from the Soviet government to change his poetry and make it align with their own political motives, despite the fact that all his friends and allies had already done so and distanced themselves from him because he refused.

**Symbolism** - 'the phrase from Mandelstam circles with light/ in a brown room, in barren Oklahoma.' - the line of poetry takes on an ethereal, spiritual quality; it 'circles with light' as Joseph reads it aloud as if it is a living and potent entity that symbolises Mandelstam's spirit or soul, his core beliefs and perspective on the world. This is **juxtaposed** with the 'brown room, in barren Oklahoma', the **adjectives** 'brown' and 'barren' directly contrast the brightness of the poetic line, showing how uninspiring and bland the physical surroundings are, yet the poetry's ability to transcend this physical space and suffuse the moment with an artistic and spiritual light.

**Metaphor** - Walcott calls Mandelstam's poetry 'the bread that lasts when systems have decayed', implying that he feels that art is first and foremost a provider of sustenance, perhaps spiritual rather than physical nourishment. It also has the ability to transcend any transient political system as it 'lasts' after they have 'decayed', because it speaks to the soul and comments on the human condition, which is a universal experience for us all.

**Repetition** - 'The rustling of ruble notes by the lemon Neva.' - this line echoes as a **motif** throughout the poem, and clearly it was an important line that resonated strongly with Walcott. The repeated 'r' and 'n' sounds evoke the sense of rustling, which also blur with the wintry landscape of Oklahoma as Joseph reads the poem aloud, as Walcott stares out of the window of their cottage and observes the leaves falling off the trees, which perhaps reminds him of the rustling money by the river.

## FORM/STRUCTURE

**Elegy** - the poem serves as a tribute to Mandelstam and his work, as well as his artistic integrity as he refused to compromise himself or his poems and bend to the will of the Soviet state. In this sense, it is an elegy, a commemoration of a brave man, and an assertion of the continued relevance of his writing in modern times. Walcott is not always completely positive in his elegies, but here he shows nothing but reverence for the man.

**Regular meter** - the poem is written in **quintets** - five-line stanzas and has a **regular metrical pattern, using iambic pentameter**, with five feet of unstressed-stressed syllables per line. This meter closely imitates natural speech, giving the poem a conversational style and rhythm.

**Imagism / Visual imagery** - 'As the train passed the forest's tortured icons, / the flocks clanging like freight yards, then the spires / of frozen tears, the stations screeching steam, / he drew them in a single winters' breath / whose freezing consonants turned into stone.' - Walcott recounts the imagery that he was exposed to through reading Mandelstam's poetry, the imagery of Soviet Russia which blends the cold, barren landscape with images of industrialisation and progress. The 'train' in the poem is presumably to one which Mandelstam himself took when he was exiled from Moscow and forced into prison camps in the Ural Mountains in Siberia. The stanza imitates the **genre** of **imagism**, a modernist form of poetry that originated in the early 1900s and seeks to capture poetic images in a manner that imitates photography and film.

## ATTITUDES

**Writers have the power to voice their strong dissent against political authority, but this can sometimes have drastic consequences for themselves** - Walcott attests to the power of poetry, which can transcend its location and circumstances and also critique society or oppression. He also wonders at the strength of a figure like Mandelstam, who was able to continue being critical and personal even though he knew it would cost him his life and freedom under the Soviet government. There is a slightly **despondent tone** as Walcott considers his own poetic power and the potential he has for speaking out against corruption in his own homeland of the West Indies, where governments are notoriously manipulative and corrupt. He notes 'The tourist archipelagoes of my South / are prisons too, corruptible,' drawing a direct parallel between the state oppression of his own country and his own power to fight against that as a dissenting and radical voice through poetry. However, far from the physical imprisonment that writers faced in the Russian Gulag, he feels that the Caribbean Islands are 'prisons' because of their heavy reliance on tourism, and their governments are intrinsically corrupted.

**Exile is not just a geographical dislocation, but a cultural one too** - The addressee 'Joseph' and the speaker (Walcott himself) both find themselves dislocated from their homelands in a wintry landscape in Oklahoma. Joseph is presumably Russian as he recites lines from Mandelstam's poetry, whereas Walcott is St Lucian (Caribbean). Despite the vast differences in culture and lifestyle, they find themselves united as 'exiles' in America, as neither are originally from there. Being in exile means to be cut off from your homeland, from familiar cultural surroundings, and to feel a sense of 'otherness', of being an outsider.

**The process of writing poetry is draining and sometimes like a sickness** - here and elsewhere in his poems Walcott observes that the creative process is difficult work, as well as being ritualistic and sacrificial in nature. He speaks of Mandelstam's poetry as 'a divine fever' and 'a fire whose glow warms our hands', demonstrating the idea that poetry has the power to transcend time and space, providing comfort and intellectual growth long after the poet himself has passed on.

## CONTEXT

**Osip Mandelstam** - a Russian Soviet poet and essayist who was imprisoned by the Soviet government in 1930, under Joseph Stalin's rule. He was born in Poland into a Polish-Jewish family under the Russian Empire, and his family relocated to St Petersburg, Russia, soon after his birth. Politically, at first, he supported the Bolsheviks and the Russian Revolution in the early 1900s; his poetry was populist - for the people - and actively opposed elitist beliefs. However, once the Bolsheviks gained power they started forcing all art forms to be adapted to their own political ends, and Mandelstam resisted this. In 1922 he published the collection *Tristia*, which champions the individual over the collective, suggesting that his political sympathies had changed drastically to no longer support the comradeship and reverence for government proposed by the Russian Communist State. This led to him being rejected even by other Russian artists and poets, most of whom had been coerced into aligning their work with the Communist cause. In the 1930s, he became a specific target of the Communists and when he released a satirical and critical poem in 1933 entitled 'Stalin Epigram' for a private audience, he was arrested and tortured. His friend and supporter Nikolay Bukharin, a man prominent in Stalin's Russia, managed to prevent Mandelstam from being executed, and instead, he was exiled to the Ural Mountains. His exile ended in 1937 but when he traveled back to Moscow, he found that the state had seized his former home. His health took a turn for the worse, and then he was arrested again whilst recovering in a sanatorium. He was sent to the Gulag and died in 1938 after being imprisoned in forced labour camps.

**Neva** - a river that runs across Northwestern Russia, through St Petersburg - the former capital of Russia. The line that is **repeated** in the poem - 'the rustling of rouble notes by the lemon Neva' perhaps refers to government corruption and money exchanging hands by the bank of the river. The adjective 'lemon' also is arguably a reference to pollution and corruption, since the Neva once had a thriving ecosystem around it, but that was destroyed with industrialisation.

**Cossacks** are a group of East Slavic people (mostly Southern Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox Christians), who have a reputation for military might and horsemanship, though modern Cossacks do not have as fearsome a reputation as their antecedents.

**Gulag Archipelago**- a non-fiction text by the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn about life in the Gulag, Soviet forced labour camps that were set up for prison inmates. The text is based on Solzhenitsyn's own exile and imprisonment. It exemplifies the oppression of the Soviet regime, taking the form of a 'literary investigation', constructing a story through a series of reports, interviews, statements, diary entries, and documents. In Russia, the Gulag and the atrocities that its prisoners faced was considered a taboo subject until the 1980s, despite the text being published in 1973 and other writers also speaking out against the horrors they had experienced when imprisoned by the Soviet Union.

- **Trail of Tears** - the Trail of Tears is the name given to the forced relocations that the Five Tribes (the Native American Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations) were made to take between the 1830s and 1850s. Around 60,000 Native Americans were removed by the US government from their homelands in the Southern US and forced to march for several weeks to the Indian Territory, Oklahoma. The journey was tough, and many died from starvation and sickness along the way.

## THEMES

- Social Justice
- Seasons
- Exile
- Alienation
- Collectivism vs the Individual
- Politics and Government
- Oppression

## **ESSAY QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss Walcott's attitude to exile in 'Forest of Europe' and two other poems of your choice.
2. In what ways does Walcott use the setting in 'Forest of Europe'?
3. How far do you agree that Walcott's poetry always champions the individual over the collective? Use 'Forest of Europe' and two other poems of your choice in your response.