

BIO

Rita Frances Dove (born August 28, 1952) Born in Akron, Ohio, U.S., as an American poet and essayist. From 1993 to 1995, she served as Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. She has the distinct honor of being the first African American and the youngest person to serve as poet laureate of the United States (1993–95). In 2018 she was named poetry editor of The New York Times Magazine.

EDUCATION

1977- MFA in creative writing at the University of Iowa

EARLY LIFE

Both of her parents encouraged persistent study and wide reading. From an early age, Rita loved poetry and music. She played cello in her high school orchestra, and led her high school's majorette squad. She was an exceptional student and was invited to the White House as a Presidential Scholar out of high school. She studied in Germany on a Fulbright Scholarship, later teaching creative writing at Arizona State University.

AWARDS

1986 The Pulitzer Prize-winning for her poetry book "Thomas and Beulah"

1996 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities

2003 Emily Couric Leadership Award

2006 Common Wealth Award

2007 Chubb Fellowship at Yale University

2008 Library of Virginia Lifetime Achievement Award

2009 Fulbright Lifetime Achievement Medal

2009 International Capri Award

2014 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Furious Flower Poetry Center at James Madison University

2019 North Star Award from the Hurston/Wright Foundation

Twenty-eight honorary doctorates, among them from Yale University in 2014 and Harvard University in 2018

In 2019, she received the Wallace Stevens Award, given annually by the Academy of American Poets to recognize outstanding and proven mastery in the art of poetry.

President Bill Clinton bestowed upon her the 1996 National Humanities Medal, and President Barack Obama presented her with the 2011 National Medal of Arts, making her the only poet who has received both medals.

WHAT CRITICS SAY ABOUT HER WORK:

“Dove's work traverses a wide range of landscapes, applying an unflinching eye upon historical and political events.” -poets.org

“There are so many casual pleasures in Ms. Dove’s poetry that the precision and dexterity in her work – the darkness, too – can catch you unawares.

Ms. Dove’s poems have earthiness, originality, power and range. Despair and loss are among her central themes, but so is the hunt for bedrock human pleasures.”

-Dwight Garner, for the New York Times, May 31, 2016

The Los Angeles Times described Dove’s book [American Smooth (2004)] as an “ambitious effort, using multiple distinctive voices and perspectives to chronicle the complex tale ‘of light and shadow, / what we hear and the silence that follows.”

Poet Mark Doty called the work [American Smooth (2004)] “richly imagined,” with “the sweep and vivid characters of a novel, but... written with a poet's economy, an eye for the exact detail.”

Rusks

This is how it happened.

Spring wore on my nerves--
all that wheezing and dripping
while others in galoshes
reaped compost and seemed
enamored most of the time.

Why should I be select?
I got tired of tearing myself down.
Let someone else have
the throne of blues for a while,
let someone else suffer mosquitoes.

As my mama always said:
half a happiness is better
than none at all.

Parsley

1. The Cane Fields

There is a parrot imitating spring
in the palace, its feathers parsley green.
Out of the swamp the cane appears

to haunt us, and we cut it down. El General
searches for a word; he is all the world
there is. Like a parrot imitating spring,

we lie down screaming as rain punches through
and we come up green. We cannot speak an R—
out of the swamp, the cane appears

and then the mountain we call in whispers Katalina.
The children gnaw their teeth to arrowheads.
There is a parrot imitating spring.

El General has found his word: perejil.
Who says it, lives. He laughs, teeth shining
out of the swamp. The cane appears

in our dreams, lashed by wind and streaming.
And we lie down. For every drop of blood
there is a parrot imitating spring.
Out of the swamp the cane appears.

2. The Palace

The word the general's chosen is parsley.
It is fall, when thoughts turn
to love and death; the general thinks
of his mother, how she died in the fall

and he planted her walking cane at the grave
and it flowered, each spring stolidly forming
four-star blossoms. The general

pulls on his boots, he stomps to
her room in the palace, the one without
curtains, the one with a parrot
in a brass ring. As he paces he wonders
Who can I kill today. And for a moment
the little knot of screams
is still. The parrot, who has traveled

all the way from Australia in an ivory
cage, is, coy as a widow, practising
spring. Ever since the morning
his mother collapsed in the kitchen
while baking skull-shaped candies
for the Day of the Dead, the general
has hated sweets. He orders pastries
brought up for the bird; they arrive

dusted with sugar on a bed of lace.
The knot in his throat starts to twitch;
he sees his boots the first day in battle
splashed with mud and urine
as a soldier falls at his feet amazed—
how stupid he looked!— at the sound
of artillery. I never thought it would sing
the soldier said, and died. Now

the general sees the fields of sugar
cane, lashed by rain and streaming.
He sees his mother's smile, the teeth
gnawed to arrowheads. He hears
the Haitians sing without R's
as they swing the great machetes:
Katalina, they sing, Katalina,

mi madre, mi amor en muerte. God knows
his mother was no stupid woman; she
could roll an R like a queen. Even
a parrot can roll an R! In the bare room
the bright feathers arch in a parody
of greenery, as the last pale crumbs
disappear under the blackened tongue. Someone

calls out his name in a voice
so like his mother's, a startled tear
splashes the tip of his right boot.
My mother, my love in death.
The general remembers the tiny green sprigs
men of his village wore in their capes
to honor the birth of a son. He will
order many, this time, to be killed

for a single, beautiful word.

Notes:

On October 2, 1937, Rafael Trujillo (1891-1961), dictator of the Dominican Republic, ordered 20,000 blacks killed because they could not pronounce the letter "r" in perejil, the Spanish word for parsley.

Rita Dove, "Parsley" from Museum (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1983). Copyright © 1983 by Rita Dove. Reprinted with the permission of the author.
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American Smooth

We were dancing—it must have
been a foxtrot or a waltz,
something romantic but
requiring restraint,
rise and fall, precise
execution as we moved
into the next song without
stopping, two chests heaving
above a seven-league
stride—such perfect agony,
one learns to smile through,
ecstatic mimicry
being the sine qua non
of American Smooth.
And because I was distracted
by the effort of
keeping my frame
(the leftward lean, head turned
just enough to gaze out
past your ear and always
smiling, smiling),
I didn't notice
how still you'd become until
we had done it
(for two measures?
four?)—achieved flight,
that swift and serene
magnificence,
before the earth
remembered who we were
and brought us down.

Lady Freedom Among Us

Don't lower your eyes
or stare straight ahead to where
you think you ought to be going
don't mutter oh no
not another one
get a job fly a kite
go bury a bone
with her oldfashioned sandals
with her leaden skirts
with her stained cheeks and whiskers and
heaped up trinkets
she has risen among us in blunt reproach
she has fitted her hair under a hand-me-down cap
and spruced it up with feathers and stars
slung over her shoulder she bears
the rainbowed layers of charity and murmurs
all of you even the least of you
don't cross to the other side of the square
don't think another item to fit on a
tourist's agenda
consider her drenched gaze her shining brow
she who has brought mercy back into the streets
and will not retire politely to the potter's field
having assumed the thick skin of this town
its gritted exhaust its sunscorch and blear
she rests in her weathered plumage
bigboned resolute
don't think you can ever forget her
don't even try
she's not going to budge
no choice but to grant her space
crown her with sky
for she is one of the many
and she is each of us.

EXIT

Just when hope withers, the visa is granted.
The door opens to a street like in the movies,
clean of people, of cats; except it is your street
you are leaving. A visa has been granted,
'provisionally'-a fretful word.

The windows you have closed behind
you are turning pink, doing what they do
every dawn. Here it's gray. The door
to the taxicab waits. This suitcase,
the saddest object in the world.

Well, the world's open. And now through
the windshield the sky begins to blush
as you did when your mother told you
what it took to be a woman in this life.

Hades' Pitch

If I could just touch your ankle, he whispers, there
on the inside, above the bone—leans closer,
breath of lime and pepper—I know I could
make love to you. She considers
this, secretly thrilled, though she wasn't quite
sure what he meant. He was good
with words, words that went straight to the liver.
Was she falling for him out of sheer boredom—
cooped up in this anything-but-humble dive, stone
gargoyles leering and brocade drapes licked with fire?
Her ankle burns where he described it. She sighs
just as her mother aboveground stumbles, is caught
by the fetlock—bereft in an instant—
while the Great Man drives home his desire.

From: Mother Love
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Ludwig Von Beethoven's Return To Vienna

So when my proud city spread
her gypsy skirts, I reentered;
she burned a greater, constant light.
Call me rough, ill-tempered, slovenly- I tell you,
every tenderness I have ever known
has been nothing
but thwarted violence, an ache
so permanent and deep, the lightest touch
awakens it - it is impossible
to care enough. I have returned
with a second Symphony
and 15 Piano Variations
which I've named Prometheus,
after the rogue Titan, the half-a-god
who knew the worst sin is to take
what cannot be given back.
I smile and bow, and the world is loud.
And though I dare not lean in to shout
Can't you see that I'm deaf?
I also cannot stop listening.

The Bistro Styx

She was thinner, with a mannered gauntness
as she paused just inside the double
glass doors to survey the room, silvery cape
billowing dramatically behind her. What's this,

I thought, lifting a hand until
she nodded and started across the parquet;
that's when I saw she was dressed all in gray,
from a kittenish cashmere skirt and cowl

down to the graphite signature of her shoes.
"Sorry I'm late," she panted, though
she wasn't, sliding into the chair, her cape

tossed off in a shudder of brushed steel.
We kissed. Then I leaned back to peruse
my blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole.

"How's business?" I asked, and hazarded
a motherly smile to keep from crying out:
Are you content to conduct your life
as a cliché and, what's worse,

an anachronism, the brooding artist's demimonde?
Near the rue Princesse they had opened
a gallery cum souvenir shop which featured
fuzzy off-color Monets next to his acrylics, no doubt,

plus beared African drums and the occasional miniature
gargoyle from Notre Dame the Great Artist had
carved at breakfast with a pocket knife.

"Tourists love us. The Parisians, of course"--
she blushed--"are amused, though not without

a certain admiration . . ."
The Chateaubriand

arrived on a bone-white plate, smug and absolute
in its fragrant crust, a black plug steaming
like the heart plucked from the chest of a worthy enemy;
one touch with her fork sent pink juices streaming.

"Admiration for what?" Wine, a bloody
Pinot Noir, brought color to her cheeks. "Why
the aplomb with which we've managed
to support our Art"--meaning he'd convinced

her to pose nude for his appalling canvases,
faintly futuristic landscapes strewn
with car wrecks and bodies being chewed

by rabid cocker spaniels. "I'd like to come by
the studio," I ventured, "and see the new stuff."
"Yes, if you wish . . ." A delicate rebuff

before the warning: "He dresses all
in black now. Me, he drapes in blues and carmine--
and even though I think it's kinda cute,
in company I tend toward more muted shades."

She paused and had the grace
to drop her eyes. She did look ravishing,
spookily insubstantial, a lipstick ghost on tissue,
or as if one stood on a fifth-floor terrace

peering through a fringe of rain at Paris'
dreaming chimney pots, each sooty issue
wobbling skyward in an ecstatic oracular spiral.

"And he never thinks of food. I wish
I didn't have to plead with him to eat. . . ." Fruit

and cheese appeared, arrayed on leaf-green dishes.

I stuck with café crème. "This Camembert's so ripe," she joked, "it's practically grown hair," mucking a golden glob complete with parsley sprig onto a heel of bread. Nothing seemed to fill

her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear, speared each tear-shaped lavalier and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth. Nowhere the bright tufted fields, weighted

vines and sun poured down out of the south. "But are you happy?" Fearing, I whispered it quickly. "What? You know, Mother"--

she bit into the starry rose of a fig-- "one really should try the fruit here." I've lost her, I thought, and called for the bill.

There Came a Soul

She arrived as near to virginal
as girls got in those days—i.e., young,
the requisite dewy cheek
flushed at its own daring.
He had hoped for a little more edge.
But she held the newspaper rolled like a scepter,
his advertisement turned up to prove
she was there solely at his bidding—and yet
the gold band, the photographs ... a mother, then.

He placed her in the old garden chair,
the same one he went to evenings
when the first tug on the cord sent the bulb
swinging like the lamps in the medic's tent
over the wounded, swaddled shapes that moaned
each time the Screaming Meemies let loose,
their calculated shrieks so far away
he thought of crickets—while all around him
matted gauze and ether pricked up
an itch so bad he could hardly sketch
each clean curve of tissue opening.
I shut my eyes, walk straight to it.
Nothing special but it's there, wicker
fraying under my calming fingers.

What if he changed the newspaper into a letter,
then ripped it up and tucked the best part
from view? How much he needed that desecrated
scrap! And the red comb snarled with a few
pale hairs for God in his infinite greed
to snatch upon like a hawk targeting a sparrow—
he couldn't say At least I let you keep your hair
so he kept to his task, applying paint
like a bandage to the open wound.

Pretty Ida, out to earn a penny
for her tiny brood.
He didn't mask the full lips
or the way all the niggling fears
of an adolescent century
shone through her hesitant eyes,
but he painted the room out, blackened
every casement, every canvas drying
along the wall, even the ailing coffeepot
whose dim brew she politely refused,
until she was seated
as he had been, dropped
bleak and thick,
onto the last chair in the world.

all poems in this pamphlet are owned by Rita Dove