Nestor’s Bathtub

RITA DOVE

As usual, legend got it all wrong: Nestor’s wife was the one to crouch under jug upon jug of fragrant water poured until the small room steamed. But where was Nestor—on his throne before the hearth, counting the jars of oil in storeroom 34, or at the Trojan wars while his wife with her white hands scraped the dirt from a lover’s back with a bronze scalpel?

Legend, as usual, doesn’t say. But this heap of limestone blocks—look how they fell, blasted by the force of olive oil exploding in the pot, look at the pattern left in stucco from the wooden columns, sixty flutings, look at the shards scattered in the hall where jars spilled from the second floor, oil spreading in flames to the lady’s throne.
For the sake of legend only the tub stands, tiny and voluptuous as a gravy dish. And the blackened remains of ivory combs and 2,853 tall-stemmed drinking cups in the pantry—these, too, survived when the clay pots screamed and stones sprang their sockets and the olive trees grew into the hill.

About the author

Rita Dove served as US Poet Laureate from 1993–1995. Winner of the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in poetry and the 2023 honorary National Book Award, she also received the 1996 National Humanities Medal from President Clinton and the 2011 National Medal of Arts from President Obama. Other recent honors are the 2021 Gold Medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, where she currently serves as vice president for literature, a 2022 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize from the Poetry Foundation and both the 2019 Wallace Stevens Award and the 2024 Leadership Award from the Academy of American Poets. Among her numerous books are *Thomas and Beulah*, *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, *Sonata Mulattica*, *Playlist for the Apocalypse* and *Collected Poems 1974-2004*. Her drama *The Darker Face of the Earth* was staged at the Kennedy Center in Washington and the National Theatre in London, and her song cycles with composers John Williams, Tania Leon, Richard Danielpour and others were performed at Tanglewood, Lincoln Center in New York and the Kennedy Center in Washington. Rita Dove teaches creative writing at the University of Virginia.