

Three Poems

RITA DOVE

Aubade: West

Ferguson, Missouri

Everywhere absence mocks me:
Jimmy, jettisoned like rotten fruit.
Franklin blown away.
Heat aplenty of all kinds,
especially when August blows its horn—
cops and summer and no ventilation
make piss-poor running buddies.
A day just like all the others,
me out here on the streets
skittery as a bug crossing a skillet,
no lungs big enough to strain
this scalded broth into brain and tissues,
plump my arteries, my soul . . .

Voice in my ear hissing *Go ahead, leave.*
Look around. No gates, no barbed wire.
As if I could walk on water.
As if water ever told one good truth,

lispering her lullabies as she rocks
another cracked cradle of Somalis
until it splits and she can pour
her final solution right through.
Me watching from the other side of the world,
high and dry on this street
running straight as a line of smack,
sun shouting down its glory:

No one's stopping you.
What are you waiting for?

Ghettoland: Exeunt

follow the morning star

Tell yourself it's only a sliver of sun
burning into your chest, a cap of gold
or radiant halo justly worn by
the righteous at heart—

then take it off, stomp it, rip out the seams.

Wherever a wall goes up, it smolders.
Gate or street corner, buried canal—
you'll catch yourself before crossing,
stumble over perfectly flat stones,
skirt the worn curb to avoid a cart
rumbling past three centuries ago.

You stop to gaze up at the softening sky
because there is nowhere else to look
without remembering pity and contempt,
without harboring rage.

Sketch for Terezín

breathe in breathe out
that's the way

in out
left right

where did we leave from?
when do we stop leaving?

*

*This far west, summer nights cool off
but stay light, blue-stung,
long after sleep lowers its merciful hammer.*

*

breathe left
breathe right

one two
in out

*

*There will be music and ice cream
and porcelain sinks.
Carts of bread for the looking;
choirs and gymnastics.*

I get to carry the banner.

*

that's the way keep it up
in out in out

where did we leave from
when did we stop leaving

*

*I was a girl when I arrived,
carrying two pots
from my mother's kitchen.
It was October, growing crisp,
my sweater soft as cream cakes,
my braid blonder than the star
stitched across my heart.*

*

breathe breathe
that's the way

left right left
right left right

*

*no one asks what village I'm from
though I look out from its leaf-green eyes*

*no one asks if I remember how the butterflies
startled, churning up lemony clouds*

*no one else hears the river chafing its banks
the one road singing its promises
going out*

*

when did we leave from
where did we stop leaving

*

*if I am to become a heavenly body
I would like to be a comet
a streak of spitfire consuming itself
before a child's upturned wonder*

About the Author

Rita Dove won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for her third book of poetry, *Thomas and Beulah*, and served as U.S. Poet Laureate from 1993 to 1995. She received the National Humanities Medal from President Clinton and the National Medal of Arts from President Obama—the only poet ever to receive both. Her most recent honors include the 2019 Wallace Stevens Award and the 2021 Gold Medal in poetry from the American Academy of Arts & Letters—the third woman and first African American in the 110 years of the Academy’s highest honor. Her song cycle *A Standing Witness*, 14 poems with music by Richard Danielpour, was originally sung by Susan Graham at the Kennedy Center and other venues in 2021. She is the Henry Hoyns Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Virginia. Her eleventh collection of poetry, *Playlist for the Apocalypse*, was published in August 2021.



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