

THREE POEMS



Rita Dove

THE GREAT PIECE OF TURF
(after Albrecht Dürer's Das Grosse Rasenstück, 1503)

Dug out just before sunrise,
still moist where the roadside dips
into a hollow, each common
closed blossom:

plantain, heath rush,
feathered shoot of yarrow,
creepy Charlie, cock's foot
and a dandelion.

What possessed him
to tote it
home? And why
whenever I see this watercolor—

its charms held lightly
in check, lightly allowed
to carouse—do I see
charcoal bones on a horse

croaking "memento mori?"
*For in truth, art is
implicit in nature, and
whoever can extract it, has it.*

Each blade of meadow
poises discrete
in its moment, abstract.
What road

could I be walking on,
fresh with weeds and

the gnarled insistent
wildflower? Nature holds
a knife to my throat
by the sweaty canal.
I want my piece of earth
on a white cloth,

a block excised
from the living lap
and set before me to mourn:
magnificent edifice

dying before the very eye...

DESERT BACKYARD

Argentinean Pampas grass slices the careless ankle easily
and stings three days, most ardently at night.
Peruvian mulberry beguiles us
with purple pods called *pochettes d'amour*:
plump satchels that attack the heart.
The pear will not bear fruit; each spring
she stands arrayed in lace until
heat and wind bring that white affair

shamelessly down. We trim Egyptian sea grass
along the stone embrasure, prop up
flatulent elephant cars with sticks.
(Starved into vagrancy, the roses weep
gnawed petals.) The oleander, of course,
refuses to die. Burned in alleyways,
its sharp smoke cloys and raises welts,
fevered pockets of love leeches from the air.
Nowhere a delicacy, a pittance:

O deliver us
from magnificence.

AGAINST FLIGHT

Everyone wants to go up—but no one can imagine
what it's like when the earth smoothes out, begins

to curve into its own implacable symbol.
Once you've adjusted to chilled footsoles,

what to do with your hands? Can so much wind
be comfortable? No sense

looking around when you can see
everywhere. There'll be no more clouds

worth reshaping into daydreams, no more
daybreaks to make you feel larger than life;

no eagle envy or fidgeting for a better view
from the eighteenth row in the theater...

no more theater, for that matter, and no
concerts, no opera or ballet. There'll be

no distractions except birds,
who never look you straight in the face,

and at the lower altitudes,
monarch butterflies—brilliant genetic engines

churning toward resurrection in a foreign land.
Who needs it? Each evening finds you

whipped to fringes, obliged to lay down
in a world of strangers, beyond perdition or pity—

bare to the stars, buoyant in the sweet sink of earth.

Trees reshape themselves, the swallows disappear, lawn sprinklers
do the wave.

Nevertheless, it's still summer: cicadas pump their boxes,
Jack Russell terriers, as they say, start barking their heads off,
And someone, somewhere, is putting his first foot, then the
second,
Down on the other side,
no hand to help him, no tongue to wedge the weal.

LANDSCAPE AS METAPHOR, LANDSCAPE AS FATE AND
A HAPPY LIFE

August. Montana. The black notebook open again.
Across the blue-veined, dune-flattened, intimate blank of the page,
An almost-unseeable winged insect has set forth
On foot.

I think I'll watch his white trail.

—To set one's mind on the ink-line, to set one's heart on the dark
Unknowable, is far and forlorn, wouldn't you say?

Up here, our lives continue to lift off like leaf spores in the
noon-wash,
Spruce trees and young hemlocks stand guard like Egyptian dogs
At the mouth of the meadow,
Butterflies flock like angels,
and God knees our necks to the ground.

—Nevertheless, the stars at midnight blow in the wind like high
cotton.
There is no place in the world they don't approach and pass over.

Wind lull, midmorning, tonight's sky
light-shielded, monkish and grand
Behind the glare's iconostasis, yellow poppies
Like lip prints against the log wall, the dead sister's lunar words
Like lip prints against it, this is as far as it goes...

—The sun doesn't shine on the same dog's back every day.
Only you, Fragrant One, are worthy to judge us and move on.