

# Parsley

*By Rita Dove*

## 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, practicing  
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.