The Border of Lights Reader
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FOREWORD

Parsley*

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

*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.
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 madle, mi amol en muelte.* 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.