

Rita Dove wrote this poem for the dedication of the William J. Clinton Presidential Center and read it during ceremonies Thursday in Little Rock.

This Life

My grandmother told me there'd be good days
to counter the dark ones,
with blue skies in the heart as far
as the soul could see. She said
you could measure a life in as many ways
as there were to bake a pound cake,
but you still needed real butter and eggs
for a good one - pound cake, that is,
but I knew what she meant. She was always
talking around corners like that;
she knew words carried their treasures
like a grape clusters around its own juice.
She loved words; she thought a book
was a monument to the glory of creation
and a library . . . well, sometimes
just trying to describe Jubilation
will get you a bit tongue, so let's
leave it at that. But my grandmother

was nobody's fool, and she'd tell anybody
smart enough to listen: Don't let a little pain
stop you; try as hard as you can
every minute you're given or else
sit down and shut up - though in her opinion,
keeping quiet in noisy times was a sin
against everything God and democracy
intended us for.

I know she'd like
where I'm standing right now. She'd say
a man who could measure his life in deeds
was larger inside than the vessel that carried him;
she'd say he was a cluster of grapes.
My grandmother was only four feet ten
but when she entered a room, even the books
came to attention. Giants come in all sizes:
Sometimes a moment is a monument;
sometimes an institution breathes -
like a library. Like this halcyon day.

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