THE SHAPE OF HER DREAMING

RITA DOVE WRITES A POEM

By Walt Harrington
For Rita Dove, U.S. poet laureate, the writing of a poem is a curious, enlightening journey, an act of creation embedded in the mystery of art and the labor of craft. **By Walt Harrington**
A NARROW WORLD MADE WIDE

It started with a few lines scribbled in a notebook years ago. Then Rita Dove wrote new lines, stepped out onto them—and began the hard, mysterious play that makes a poem

"BED, WHERE ARE YOU FLYING TO?"
—A line jotted in a notebook in 1980 by Rita Dove, U.S. poet laureate

February 5, 1995, 5:35 p.m.
Twilight is not the time Rita Dove prefers to work. Much better are the crystal hours between midnight and 5 a.m., her writing hours when she lived in Ireland the summer of 1978, before her daughter was born, and Rita was young, with only a handful of poems published, before the Pulitzer

BY WALT HARRINGTON

PHOTOGRAPH BY MERLYN ROSENBERG
Prize, before she became poet laureate of the United States. In Ireland, she and her husband, Fred Viebahn, a German novelist, would spend the late afternoons selecting dinner at the fish market, filling their sherry bottle from the merchant’s oak cask, strolling Dublin’s streets. They would cook dinner, write letters, read, talk, make love, watch TV into the late night, and then Rita would write, or do what people call writing, until the milkman arrived at sunrise and it was time to go off to sleep.

No more, not with her 12-year-old daughter, Aviva, the trips to Washington, the phone and fax, the letters, speeches, interviews, the traveling—oh, the traveling. It’s the worst. It doesn’t respect a poet’s frame of mind. Rita can’t go off chasing a shard of thought about the three-legged telescope her father once bought, or why it is that hosts in southern Germany fill up a guest’s wineglass before it is empty, or whether a forest’s leaves can be both mute and riotous at once (they can, of course). While traveling, Rita must catch a plane, look both ways, always muster the dedicated, logical mind of a banker or a plumber.

But this afternoon, for the first time in a while, she sits at her desk in her new writing cabin, which stands down a sharp slope from the back door of her house in the countrified suburbs of Charlottesville, where she teaches at the University of Virginia. The cabin is small—12 by 20, a storage shed with insulation and drywall, a skylight so tiny it’s more like the thought of a skylight, a wall of windows whose Mullions create miniature portraits of the woods, pond, mountains and sunset to the west. No phone, fax, TV, no bathroom or running water, hardly any books by others and certainly no copies of her own nine books: “They’re done. They have nothing to do with the moment of writing a poem.” On a small stereo, she plays music without words—lately, Bach’s Brandenburg concertos and Keith Jarrett’s jazz piano.

The last few days, Rita has been thinking about three poems she’d like to write—“Meditation,” “Parlor” and “Sweet Dreams.” She began to ponder the last poem after she reread a few lines she’d scribbled in a notebook in 1980. For 15 years, she had looked at those lines every couple of months and thought, “No, I can’t do it yet.” She wrote 300 other poems instead. But just seven weeks from today, Rita Dove will consider “Sweet Dreams” done—with a new title, new lines, new images and a new meaning the poet herself will not recognize until the poem is nearly finished.

It will be a curious, enlightening journey; one poem, one act of creation, evoked from a thousand private choices, embedded in breath and heartbeat, music, meter and rhyme, in the logic of thought and the intuition of emotion, in the confluence of the two, in the mystery of art and the labor of craft, which will transform random journal notations, bodiless images, unanchored thoughts, orphan lines of poetry and meticulously kept records of times and dates into some-thing more. Words with dictionary meanings will become words that mean only what the experiences of others will make of them, words no longer spoken in Rita’s voice but in whispering voices heard only inside the heads of those who pause to read her poem.

In 1980, LIVING IN a $50-a-month, one-room walk-up in West Berlin, Rita was sick in bed one day. For light reading, she picked up Das Bett, a German book about the place of the bed in history. She was leafing page to page, when she came upon this sentence: “Vergleiche man die Waende der Wohnung mit einer Nusschale, so waere das Bett jene feine Haut um den Nusskern, den Menschen.”

She stopped. She loved the sentence, its meaning—if the walls of an apartment are like a nutshell, then the apartment’s bed is like the fine, delicate skin around the kernel, which is the human being. But she also loved the sentence’s sound. In the way that the sensuous glissando of a harp, the haunting blue note of a trumpet or the hypnotic percussion of a drum can touch a person’s mood, Rita’s mood was touched by the sound of the German words said together in their sentence. As a composer might hear a bird twittering and a woodpecker pecking and suddenly hear instead a melody, Rita suddenly felt “the cadence of thought.”

The sentence said something beautiful and it sounded beautiful: “And that is the essence of poetry.” It is language as idea and sensation at once: “the clay that makes the pot.” She copied the German sentence into her notebook and wrote, “Bed, where are you flying to?” She imagined the bed as a home, the bed as a magic carpet, the bed as a world; “That’s the inspiration. I have no idea what the leap is.”

Soon after, she wrote:

sie itur ad astra
(such is the way to the stars, or to immortality)

Bed, where are you flying to?
I went to sleep
an hour ago, now
I’m on a porch
open to the world.

I don’t remember a thing,
not even dreaming.

and Chagall shall play
his piebald violin.

we’ll throw away
the books and play
sea-diver in the sheets—
for aren’t we all children
in our over-size shirts (clothes),
white priests of the night!

Rita enjoyed the lines, especially the first stanza. Like the sentence in Das Bett, it seemed to have a music all its own and to carry the exu-
berance and spontaneity of a child’s dream, although the stanza also baffled Rita: “I wasn’t quite sure what it meant.”

Rita has, after a fashion, a filing system—plastic folders in yellow, blue, red, purple, green, pink, peach or clear. She doesn’t file her nascent poems by subject or title, as a scientist or historian might file documents. She files poems by the way they feel to her. Red attracts poems about war and violence. Purple, Rita’s favorite color, accumulates introspective poems. Yellow likes sunshine. Blue likes the sky. Green likes nature. Pink—after a line she wrote about her daughter: “We’re in the pink/ and the pink’s in us”—is a magnet for poems about mothers and daughters. But the categories aren’t fixed: Blue is the color of sky, but blue is also the color of the Virgin Mary’s robe.

Rita’s flying bed poem went in the clear folder, which holds very little: “The clear folder wants to be pure thought.” A perfect, clear, pure lyrical poem: “It was a daunting folder. Very few things ever made it out of that folder.”

But when Rita sits down at her desk this 5th of February, as she goes through her ritual of laying out her folders, looking at each and waiting for the door to her intuition to swing open and reveal to her which she should pick up and thumb through, she reaches for the clear folder, reads the old poem and thinks: “Maybe I can do it now.” Maybe in this cabin, clean and fresh and pure as a lyrical poem, she can finally finish it.

“It was now or never.”
At 5:35, she writes:

SWEET DREAMS
—Sic stur ad astra. (Such is the way to the stars.)

Bed, where are you flying to?
I went to sleep nearly
an hour ago—now I’m on a porch
open to the stars!

I don’t remember a thing,
not the crease in the sheet,
the neighbor’s washing machine.
I’m a child again, barefoot, catching
my death of cold,
in my oversized nightshirt
and stocking cap . . .
but so are all the others,
eyes wide, arms outstretched in greeting—
white priests of the night!

Rita is fiddling, playing, just seeing where her mind takes her words. She has changed the poem’s title to “Sweet Dreams.” She has lost Chagall and his piebald violin, the sea-diver in the sheets. She has gained the neighbor’s washing machine, the crease in the sheet and the bare-foot child catching her death of cold. She has altered punctuation. But as she rereads the poem, it is the stanza she wrote 15 years ago that grabs her—the porch open to the world has become the porch open to the stars: “It changed without me even thinking about it.”

What did that mean?

She jots these notes on her poem: “The original impulse of the poem—it was meant to be magic, pure impossible magic. The speaker goes to sleep & wakes into a journey—is it a dream or the lost feeling when you wake & don’t know where you are? . . . How to capture the ecstasy, the spontaneity?”

Rita now enters a strange and magical place in the creation of her poetry, as she begins to carry on a kind of conversation with her poem, as she tries to actually listen to what the poem she has written is trying to tell her, the poet.

And the poem begins to create itself.

Rita uses this analogy: One of her favorite books as a girl was Harold and the Purple Crayon. With his crayon, Harold drew before him on the blank page the places he wanted to go—a street, a hill, a house. He created the world into which he then entered. But once inside that world, it was real, not an illusion. For Rita, writing a poem is like Harold drawing his way through life: Once a line is written she can step out onto it. The line is like a train and she is a passenger curious to learn its destination. Each line is an idea that carries her to the next idea. Yes, she is taking the poem somewhere, but the poem is also taking her.

Some people’s minds run from point A to point B with the linear determination of an express bus roaring from stop to distant stop. Theirs are minds trained to avoid detours, to cut a path past the alleys and side streets of distraction. Rita’s mind is more like the water of a stream swirling randomly, chaotically and unpredictably down the stones below as it still flows resolutely downstream: “It’s hard to describe your own mind, but I am really interested in the process of thought. Sometimes I catch myself observing my own thoughts and think, ‘Boy, that’s kinda strange how that works,’ ” Rita is not like those who see tangential thoughts as distracting digressions: “I’m interested in the sidetracking.”

When her poem’s first stanza was written, for instance, its character was in a dream, flying on a bed, feeling a child’s excitement—“open to the world.” Perhaps, Rita asks herself, didn’t unthinkingly changed “world” to “stars” in a later version not as a simple slip of the pen, but because the world is really what her dreamer wants to leave behind? Perhaps the stars—or immortality, the word Rita wrote beneath the poem’s title 15 years ago—are her character’s real destination? And, she tells herself, that isn’t just exciting but also frightening, meaning that “Sweet Dreams” was never meant to be only a joyful, childlike poem.

“That’s what had stopped me all these years.”

February 10, 4:30 p.m.

In her cabin, Rita stands at the Schreibpult, the stand-up writing desk that her father, an amateur woodworker, built as a surprise for her two
years ago when she turned 40. While visiting her folks, Rita saw the desk in their basement. She came upstairs and said to her father, "That's a pretty nice desk down there." And he said, "Well, when your birthday comes you can take it home." It had been a decade since Rita had mentioned to her father that she'd like such a desk: "It was astonishing."

Rita is sick today, coughing and feverish, but the jobs of wife, mother, professor and poet laureate go on, with the job of poet taking a back seat. It has been a satisfying and grueling time that will ease this summer when her two-year tenure as laureate expires, but the fame that it has brought will forever change her life. She can no longer write in her university office, because someone will stop by to visit. She can no longer sit in an outdoor cafe in town and read, because someone will recognize her. Some days she hasn't the time to make a single entry in her notebook—not a fragment of conversation, a recipe, a fresh word. She has a new book of poetry just out, Mother Love, but still feels a creative emptiness in the face of so many demands, is afraid of losing the human connection to the clay that makes the pot: "It's harder and harder. Fame is very seductive. I'm tired of hearing the sound of my own voice. I want to be silent." Often, she has asked herself, "Was I writing for prizes? No. I wrote because of those moments when something happens in a poem." She once wrote these lines: "He used to sleep like a glass of water/ held up in the hand of a very young girl."

"That was a great moment."

Rita loves the image, although she doesn't know exactly what it means or even feel the need to know. She remembers a line written by poet Stanley Kunitz: "The night nailed like an orange to my brow." Kunitz once said that for years he lived in fear that someone would ask him to explain that line. He didn't understand the image, Rita says, but he wasn't going to touch it. "Sometimes you have those moments. Those are the moments you live for. There are some that change your life. When I write, I feel like I am learning something new every second. But I'm also feeling something more deeply. You don't know where you've been. That's the mystery of it. And then to be able to put it down so that someone else can feel it! I feel incredibly alive."

Outside Rita's cabin windows, two Canada geese are nesting at the pond beneath the little pier Fred built last year. Never before has she had so comforting a view from the windows of a study. The years she and Fred spent in Europe, they lived in dark apartments that looked out onto concrete. In Arizona, she gazed out at a deceiving swimming pool in the back yard.

This cabin is doing something to Rita. When she was a 10-year-old girl, a few months before her first period, she daydreamed a house for herself: "It was small, one room . . . This dream house would stand in the back yard, away from the house with its clinging odors but close enough to run back—just in case." Her cabin is eerily reminiscent of the fantasy. And like Har-
Rita is writing lines and stepping out onto them. She decides to break away from "the tyranny of the typewritten page." In the margins, at odd angles, she writes: "purple crayon," "blow," "languid," "fluid," "landings," "whispering, happy landings." She is searching for the feeling of flying. Suddenly, she's frustrated: "Can I fly? If I could only remember! How does one remember?" She continues to scribble: "I've lost my feet," "with its garden of smells," "aromas," "crushed smells," "its petals whispering happy landings." She picks up a book of poetry by Wallace Stevens, thumbs through the pages and jots down words that strike her: "confusion," "hermit," "fetched." She scrawls: "purple hermit of dream."

At 6:02, she writes:

I'm a child again, barefoot, catching my death of cold in a nightshirt I've never seen before fluttering white as a sail.

Above me, moonlight cool as peaches. Below . . . but I won't look below . . .

Come here bed, I need you! I don't know my way back. At least leave me my pillow with its crushed aromas, its garden of dreams, its purple petals whispering Happy landings.

"I'm a child again." Too explanatory. The poem should have the feeling of childhood without needing to announce it. "Catching my death of cold." It goes on too long. This poem must be a collage of fleeting images, as in a dream. But Rita likes the line and would like to find a way to keep it. "Moonlight cool as peaches." She likes that line, too, may use it someday in another poem, but to mention food while in flight is too corporeal, too earthly. Still, she'll leave it in for now. 

"In a nightshirt I've never seen before." The image is too surreal, gives the sensation that the poem is a real dream rather than the sensation that it is like a dream.

"I won't look below." Not believable. Her poem's character wouldn't need to remind herself not to look below at the world. She's yearning to leave it behind—for a ride to the stars.

"Come here bed, I need you!" Wait, the poem is talking to Rita again: Its traveler is ambivalent about her journey. She craves the stars but, like a child, also the comfort of her bed.

"I don't know my way back." The word "back" is too narrow, too referential to the world. This traveler isn't worried about the way "back," but the way to the stars, the future, immortality.

"Garden of dreams," "purple petals," "Happy landings." "Yech!" "Awful!" "Disgusting!" But Rita doesn't stop to change them. They are place holders for the poem's cadence. New words will come.

And on and on it goes—each line, each word examined. At 6:10, 6:15, 7:33 and 7:44, Rita begins new versions. She now believes that the complicated emotions in her poem can no longer be described as "Sweet Dreams." She hates it that people always accuse poets of being "hermetic"—hard to understand, obscure—but she goes back to the original Latin title from 1980 anyway. Unlike an essayist, who must keep in mind readers' tastes, interests, biases and education the better to convince them, Rita never thinks of her readers: "That sounds awful, I know. But to me a poem can't possibly be honest if I'm thinking about my readers."

It is a paradox: Rita has a better chance of reaching the emotions of her readers if she doesn't consciously try to reach them, if she doesn't worry about how people will respond to a certain poem. Pondering that would put a kind of emotional membrane between herself and her material, making it less authentic and more distant from the unmediated emotion she is trying to feel and then evoke, reinvent, in her readers: "If I start thinking about 'the world' and about the reception of this poem in the world, then I'm lost. I'm lost. It's not gonna be a poem."

Rita deletes "crushed aromas" because the word aroma is too "thick," not simple enough, That allows her to replace "garden of dreams," a cliche, with "garden of smells." She likes that change, because a smell, unlike an aroma, can be either pleasant or sickening. "Purple petals," which probably referred back to Harold's purple crayon, is excised. It's, well, too purple. Now, without "crushed aromas" and "purple petals," she adds "crushed petals." She plays with the poem's enjambment—the way sentences run on or break from line to line—looking for meanings that she didn't see at first: "Catching my death of cold in a fluttering nightshirt," for instance, can mean something far different from "catching my death of cold in a fluttering nightshirt."

At 7:44, with Keith Jarrett playing, she writes:

SIC ITUR AD ASTRA
—Thus is the way to the stars.

Bed, where are you flying to? I went to sleep nearly an hour ago, and now I'm on a porch open to the stars—barefoot, catching my death of cold, in a fluttering nightshirt white as a sail. Above me, moonlight cool as peaches. Bed, come back here,

I need you! I don't know my way. At least leave me
my pillow, with its garden of smells, 
its crushed petals whispering

_Lay back, Relax. Gentle landings._

On the poem she jots: “dreams” and “worries of the day,” reminding herself not to lose the poem’s dreamlike feeling and to add the idea that traveling to the stars is also a way to leave the trivial bothers of daily life behind.

_February 24, 5:35 p.m._

In her journal, Rita writes: “I want more intriguing, surprising metaphors ... I want the language to imitate the clarity of children’s literature ... I’m looking for an image as wild and apt, as wonderfully penetrating yet impenetrable, as Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s: ‘... and death began to flow through his bones like a river of ashes.’ If I could catch a fish like that, I’d be ready to die. No, not really. But the contentment would be immense and would last my entire life.”

But not so others can read the line and admire her as she admires Marquez, but so she can feel the line’s creation. It’s an addictive joy, a feeling of exhilaration, yes, but not of pride. It’s beyond pride, or maybe before it: “I feel very humble: ‘Thank you, line. I don’t know where you came from, but you’re greater than I am.’ You have those moments. They’re the ones that keep you writing. You’re always after the next fish.”

It is 6:20 now, sundown out the cabin window. Rita takes up a new pen and writes: “Now we’ll see how this pen works. Sungown. Sundown. The light quenched. Oh, fennel bloom. Another ladybug—perennially cute, ladybug, body and name. Too many make a plague of luck. Ah shame on you, duckie: You’ve lost your quack. For an ounce of your prattle I’d hang up my traveling shoes.”

What does it mean? Who knows.

_Gone fishing._

_March 13, 4:23 p.m._

Rita was going through old notebooks earlier today, trying to unclog her mind, searching for inspiration hidden in a line or even a word: “A word that will knock this damn poem back on line.” It was a beautiful 73-degree day outside, but Rita was at her desk imagining the sensations of flying on a bed at night: “The absence of incidental ‘white noise,’ the smells and the cool feelings that night floats up in us, almost like the earth is emitting a faint subterranean sigh.”

She wants to write this poem, but the world is relentless: USA Weekend has asked the U.S.A. poet laureate for an original poem to publish, she must plan her laureate’s farewell poetry reading at the Library of Congress, organize the panels for an upcoming literature conference, write the opening remarks for the Nobel Laureates in Literature convocation, finish writing her lecture for the university faculty colloquium and write the foreword to an anthology of stories written by children.

That’s for starters.

But then, going through a tiny black and red notebook, Rita comes across a snatch of forgotten poetry she jotted down while at a conference in Morelia, Mexico, in January 1994.

READING BEFORE SLEEP

Bed, where are you flying to?
One minute ago I climbed

into the cool
waters of night & now

(end of day)

I’m on a porch
open to the sky

world!

If I close my eyes
I’ll sink back

into the day, made

strange—

but no, my eyes are open
and I am falling it

seems

forward

Rita is amazed. Just the other day, she made a note to remind herself to add to her poem the idea that traveling to the stars was also a way to escape daily life—“the worries of the day.” Now she finds, in the forgotten Mexico notations, these lines: “If I close my eyes/ I’ll sink back/ into the day.” She thinks, “This thing has been haunting me for all these years.” She writes in her journal: “Somewhere there’s a few lines about melancholy ... Where is that sheet of paper?” Then, dutifully, she spends the afternoon and the evening working on a poem for USA Weekend.

_March 17, 5:47 p.m._

Fred has asked Rita to go with him and Aviva to the stable where Aviva keeps her horse. Rita, who hasn’t been out to the stable in months, hears Fred’s plea and agrees, although she plans to sit in the car, watch Aviva and her horse trot around the track and work on “Sic Itur.” But once she gets to the stable, she can’t capture the poem’s mood. The grounds are too much of the earth, not the stars. So Rita works on “Parlor,” one of the three unfinished poems she considered working on way back on February 5. She works for an hour, scribbling additions and deletions and notations on her copy. Then Fred climbs into the car, out of the cold, and turns on the radio news.

“Does that disturb you?” he asks.

“No,” Rita says, lying, “I think I’ll just stretch my legs.”

Walking out along the fence line in the descending darkness, Rita asks herself, “I’ve had all this time to write. Why can’t I give up this few minutes?” She wants to be in her cabin writing, but she wants to be with Fred and Aviva.

She wants to be with Fred and Aviva, but she wants to be poet laureate of the United States: “I want to fly as a poet.” She takes out her note...
book and writes, "Sic Itur Ad Astra: You don't want to come down. Immortality—it's loneliness. You long for the pillow's smells, the earth you are leaving but that's all you can take—the recycled breath, the memory—into the rarefied air... The dear worries, the sweet troubles of dailiness."

And it has happened.
Rita's poem is creating itself—it is a train, she its passenger: "For the first time since I wrote that stupid title down I realized I wrote it down because it had that line about the way to immortality, I realized I was talking about fame."

Naturally, people reading Rita's poem will know none of this. They'll see the poem's themes through the lens of their own ambivalent feelings about whatever are the conflicting demands in their lives. But the tension Rita feels between the satisfactions of fame and accomplishment and the joys of everyday life is her particular lens—and the emotional juice of her poem. Because a new meaning has emerged for that first line written in Rita's sickbed in Germany in 1980, before her life had become a dream ride from earth to the stars: "I want 'em both."

"It's just that I've felt lonely."

"Where's my life? I want a life."

March 19, 4:30 p.m.
It comes quickly. Yesterday, the Brandenburg concertos playing for two hours, Rita ripped through four versions of "Sic Itur." Today, the Brandenburg concertos still playing, she whips through five versions. She has found her old musings on melancholy, cribbed an image—"tiny dismissals"—and combined it with the lines on life's trivial irritations from her Mexico notations: "If I close my eyes, I'll sink back into the day's tiny dismissals."

Rita has turned a corner. Forced to work on her poem for USA Weekend, impelled to work on "Parlor" at the stable, her mind was somehow freed, her attention distracted momentarily from "Sic Itur," which, inexplicably, allowed Rita to finally see her poem clearly. These so-called distractions cleared a path so that her poem could happen to her, as if she is not the creator of insight, but its recipient. Rita keeps a single quote, in German, tacked to her cabin's bulletin board, the wisdom of Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke: It is not enough for a poet to have memories. You must have very great patience and be able to wait until the memories come again. Memories remain, but the poem changes: "You have to wait until it all comes back in a different form to find the meaning."

Rita is loose now, playing—with words, images, punctuation, enjambment and stanza size. She writes a line, walks out onto it, looks ahead, continues or steps back, tries another. For the first time, she can hear the rhythm of her poem before its words are written, as in a song that doesn't yet have lyrics.

"It's very weird."

She writes:

Bed, where are you flying to?
I went to sleep nearly an hour ago, and now
I'm on a porch open to the stars! If I close my eyes, I'll sink back into the day's tiny dismissals—

bagged lunch, the tiny dismissal of a glance—
but no, I'm wide-eyed and barefoot,
catching my death of cold,
nightshirt fluttering white as a sail.

Bed, come back here, I need you!
I don't know my way.
At least leave me my pillow to remind me what I've rested my dreams on—my dear/ crushed pillow, with its garden of smells.

Rita is suddenly hit with an image that grows from the lines she wrote way back on February 5: "I don't remember a thing,/ not the crease in the sheets."

She writes:

What will they do when they come in and find me missing, just the shape of my dreaming creased in the sheets?

The lines make Rita shiver in the way she once shivered when she wrote, "He used to sleep like a glass of water/ held up in the hand of a very young girl." That feeling. So much of writing a poem is less like saying a prayer than it is putting together the weekly shopping list. Then comes a sacred moment... For Rita, these lines are a fish to keep—a rare poet's epiphany in the muck of craft: "I don't know where it came from. It just came."

Then:

Bed, where are you flying to?
I went to sleep nearly an hour ago, and now
I'm on a porch open to the stars—barefoot, catching my death of a cold in a nightshirt fluttering white as a sail. Come here, bed, I need you! I don't know my way.
If I close my eyes, I sink back into the day's bagged smiles, the tiny dismissal of a stranger's glance...

Oh, what will they do when they find me missing, just the shape of my dreaming creased in the sheets?
Who will tell them what it's like here?
No one else knows but my pillow—my poor, crushed pillow with its garden of smells.

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POEM
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Then:

Bed, where are you flying to?
I went to sleep
nearly an hour ago,
and now I'm on a porch
open to the stars!

Close my eyes
and I sink back into the day's
tiny dismissals; eyes wide
and I'm barefoot, in a nightshirt
fluttering white as a sail.

Come here, bed,
I need you!
I don't know my way.
What will they say
when they find me missing,
just the shape of my dreaming
creasing the sheets?
At least leave me
my pillow to remind me
what misery I've fled—
my poor, crushed pillow
with its garden of smells!

Out Rita's window, the sun is lingering
three inches above the mountains. The
days are longer now, but she has been too
busy even to notice that it is spring: "Why
is spring a she? What gender are the other
seasons? Summer is female, surely. And
winter, too. Fall? Actually, they're all fe-
male." Rita's mind, again, is swirling like
water over stones in a stream.

"I had given up on this poem."
"It's a great feeling."
"I'm rolling!"

Rita has deleted the sappy line, "Lay
back. Relax. Gentle landings." She has
again included "catching my death of cold"
but then excised it as too "cutesy-wootsy."
"Bagged lunch" has gone in, become
"bagged smiles" and gone out; "I don't
know what a 'bagged smile' is." She has fi-
nally taken out "moonlight cool as peach-
es," and the cliche "wide-eyed" has become
"eyes wide" and will later become simply
"open wide." She has added "the tiny dis-
missal of a glance," which has become "the
tiny dismissal of a stranger's glance," a
cliche she hates, and which has now be-
come simply "the day's tiny dismissals."
She loves the sneering sound of the kiss in
the word dismissals. The line "Bed, come
back here" has become the more direct
"Come here, bed."

Remembering her notation to emphasize
that this poem should have the feeling of a
dream, Rita has added, "I've rested on my
dreams," which she hates as a cliche. But
she thinks, "Oh, hell, I'm just gonna put the
dreams in and see what happens." Working
from her epiphanic flash, the lines have be-
come "just the shape/ of my dreaming
creased in the sheets," which have now be-
come "just the shape of my dreaming/
creasing the sheets." Rita also has added
a stanza space between "just the shape of my
dreaming" and "creasing the sheets." That
space will force a reader to pause after the
word "dreaming," float in the space and
ponder the image before moving on to the
next line. The newly added gerundive i-n-g
ending on the word "dream" also carries ac-
tion—and the sense that the act of dream-
ning, not the dream itself, is leaving its im-
pression on the bed of real life. As with her
poetry, the product is inseparable from
the process. In the words of Yeats: "How can
we know the dancer from the dance?"

Rita has added "my dear/ crushed pil-
low," although she knows it's too corny.
She has quickly changed it to "my poor,
crushed pillow." Despite the truism that a
poet should never use two adjectives when
one will do, she wants two adjectives to
precede the word pillow. Less for the
words than for the double beat of emphasis,
which is meant to mimic the intense affec-
tion of a child for a blanket, toy or pillow:
"It's not always the words themselves that
bring you the nostalgia but the sound and
the rhythm of the words."

This is Rita's ideal: She wants to take a
reader to the place she would go as a girl
when she read a poem and suddenly felt
her breathing begin to synchronize with
the poem's cadence: "Before you know it,
your body's rhythm is the rhythm of the
poem. That's one of the things poems do.
You don't even notice that it's happening.
But what convinces you is the way the po-
em influences your breathing, your heart-
beat. It becomes a physical thing."

"You want people to get there."

Rita has realized that the final sentiment
of her poem is mundane. After visiting the
stars, her traveler discovers the wonder of
what she has left behind: "my poor, crushed
pillow/ with its garden of smells!"—mean-
ing her ordinary life with Fred and Aviva,
the days Rita cooks those quick meals of
frozen fish fillets, sliced fried potatoes and
salad with Caesar dressing, the evenings
they all plop down at the TV and watch
Aviva's favorite show, "Star Trek: Voyag-
er," and then Rita quizzes Aviva for her
test on earthquakes and volcanoes, and
Aviva is curled up on the chair and in the
silence between Rita's questions and Avi-
va's answers, Rita can hear the sound of
the leather creasing as her daughter ad-
justs her body, which makes Rita think to
herself, "There's no sound in the poem. Is
there sound in dreams? Sound does funny
things in dreams—it's like telepathy."

Of her yearning to travel to the stars and
her irritation with daily life, Rita asks
herself, "Where you gonna go? Is there
anything really better than this?" And how
else to be a poet? Aren't the trivial, even ir-
ritating distractions of life the wellspring,
the clay that makes the pot? A poet free
from "the day's tiny dismissals," living only
among the stars, will not be a poet for long:
"It sounds like the old, corny notion, 'Love
will bring you back,' but you know that's
what it is. How many different plots do we
have in this world? Not many."

For the first time, Rita stops to analyze
the poem's rhyme and discovers a surpris-
ing array of rhymes, half-rhymes and
"cousins" of rhymes: barefoot/nightshirt,
my way/they say, creasing/sheets, fled/bed,
smells dismissals, sail/smell. Although a
reader wouldn't consciously notice the
rhymes, they still weave the poem to-
gether, like the repressing melodies of a
minuet.

"Okay, I'm ready!"

Rita has been writing versions of "Sic
litur" with different stanza configurations—
experimenting, seeing if stanza breaks at
different lines carry meanings she hasn't
recognized, in the same way that playing
with a poem's enjambment can reveal a
new insight. But now she realizes how she
wants the stanzas constructed: "It's really,
really picky." But if "Sic litur" is a jour-
ney up to the stars and back down to earth,
it demands a narrow, vertical silhouette
on the page: "To lift you up in the sky." And
if it is to evoke the simplicity of child-
hood, it also must look clean and pure on
March 26, 1:43 a.m.
After allowing herself a week of distractions, a week for her poem to simmer, Rita writes:

SIC ITUR AD ASTRA

Thus is the way to the stars.
—Virgil

Bed, where are you flying to?
I went to sleep
nearly an hour ago,
and now I’m on a porch
open to the stars!

Close my eyes
and sink back to
day’s tiny dismissals;
open wide and I’m
barefoot, in a nightshirt
fluttering white as a sail.

Come here, bed,
I need you!
I don’t know my way,
What will they say
when they find me missing,
just the shape of my dreaming
creasing the sheets?
At least leave me
my pillow to remind me
what misery I’ve fled . . .
my poor, crushed pillow
with its garden of smells!

RITA HAS A FEW NITS . . .

“I’m dotting the i’s.”

She worries about the word “fluttering” in the line “fluttering white as a sail.” Is it necessary? Does it add enough for the space it takes? Unlike prose, which Rita compares to walking through the woods and describing everything you see, poetry is like walking through the woods, coming upon an old, deep well and describing only what you see as you stare down its casing.

Poetry is a narrow world made wide. So every word, every line in a poem must stand on its own. But without the word “fluttering,” the line is lame: “white as a sail.” Pick any line: “just the shape of my dreaming” or “and sink back to.” Each adds something—action, an image, lyricism, intrigue, an idea. But what?

That one line: “At least leave me.” What does it add? Nothing: “It just sits there.”

“This line and I are going to battle.”

Rita’s not sure about those three i-n-gs in a row—missing, dreaming, creasing. And she’s not sure about the line “Close my eyes”—she might add a comma. Today, she’s not even sure about the title—maybe she should go back to “Sweet Dreams,” which now carries a touch of irony. But adding “Sweet Dreams” would put too much type at the top of the poem and muck up her mirror-image construction of the stanzas. And for the poem to make sense she still needs the Latin and its translation—“Thus is the way to the stars.” Come to think of it, maybe she should go back to translating “thus” as “such”—“Such is the way to the stars.” Less pedantic. And she’d better look up the quotation. Turns out to be from Virgil’s “Aeneid,” which she didn’t know: “Oh, shame!” She must attribute it. No room for “Sweet Dreams” now.

Maybe she should move down “Come here, bed, I need you” and move up “just the shape of my dreaming creasing the sheets”, so the poem’s character flies from sky to earth, earth to sky, sky to earth—a trip that ends back home, where Rita has realized she wants to be. But then she’d lose the spatial pause between “just the shape of my dreaming” and “creasing the sheets.” And that word “misery”? Rita wants it to be self-mocking. “What misery I’ve fled . . .” is supposed to mean that her daily life wasn’t misery at all. But the word is too strong. “I think there’s a different word that won’t ring as many bells. One word. And it should be three syllables, but it might end up having to be two.”