American Life in Poetry
American Life in Poetry: Column 927

BY Kwame Dawes

This poem will be my statement for a rather abrupt and unexpected ending to my role as the editor of American Life in Poetry. The poem is one of resilience—the resilience of my ancestors and those that carry the fact of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as a defining moment in our making. It is also a poem about resilience, about looking hopefully, even if with some caution, to the future, and I believe that Marguerite Harrold and Ber Anena who have been laboring with me to make American Life in Poetry a weekly occasion, share this spirit. My great hope is that the legacy left by Ted Kooser will be continued into the future.

LAND HO

By Kwame Dawes

I cannot speak the languages spoken in that vessel,
cannot read the beads promising salvation.

I know this only,
that when the green of land appeared like light
after the horror of this crossing,

we straightened our backs
and faced the simplicity
of new days with flame.
I know I have the blood of survivors coursing through my veins;
I know the lament of our loss
must warm us again and again
down in the belly of the whale,

here in the belly of the whale
where we are still searching for homes.
We sing laments so old, so true,
then straighten our backs again.
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