on naming yourself (a cento)

i caught my breath & called that life
i cannot be comprehended
it is better to write

spit out words into small cans
prepare knives for the cutting
of orange peels and doorways

i arrive at a space that no longer needs
autumn or spring, this forest
of telling each other the truth

where they suck the bones of the alphabet
over a floor of rubble & gravel & ashes

mOUTHS WIDE OPEN, WE DRANK
we became the forest
drunk with sky

we felt awful after parting
from ourselves
played hide-and-seek,
begging to be liked
among the leaves

i turned myself into myself
and was clean water, prayer
love colored with iron and lace

i wrote my name upon the water
i stood proudly at the helm
the names of things
hadn’t had time to stick
another face going under the waves

if you don’t know
who you are
your story cannot be pronounced

i have much to learn
from my errors
day by day i am a student
i step deeper into myself

this is a large voice
when you rise through the dead leaves
we will remember you

COLOR KEY:

RITA DOVE
NIKKI GIOVANNI
PATTI SMITH
ANGELA JACKON
HAKI MADHABUTI
SANDRA CISNEROS
ARTHUR SZE
CA CONRAD
SHARON OLDS
SONIA SANCHEZ
JUAN FELIPE HERRERA