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American Smooth

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American Smooth

We were dancing — it must have
been a foxtrot or a waltz,
something romantic but
requiring restraint,
rise and fall, precise
execution as we moved
into the next song without
stopping, two chests heaving
above a seven-league
stride — such perfect agony
one learns to smile through,
ecstatic mimicry
being the *sine qua non*
of American Smooth.
And because I was distracted
by the effort of
keeping my frame
(the leftward lean, head turned
just enough to gaze out
past your ear and always
smiling, smiling),
I didn't notice
how still you'd become until
we had done it
(for two measures?
four?) — achieved flight,
that swift and serene
magnificence,
before the earth
remembered who we were
and brought us down.

Rita Dove served as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant to the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995 and is currently Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia. She read her work as part of Poetry Night at Grand Valley State University in October 2003. Her most recent poetry collection is *American Smooth*, where this poem appears. Reprinted by permission of the author.