

Jefferson, American

Noble Father, we stand beneath your boot heels
Our feet shrunken, our mouths agape,
Genuflecting our straw bodies at your marble bust
In our Pantheon of Brothers, you were our pen
Not a voice, not a speech, not a warrior
Your quill fought the oncoming Atlantic
You fired letters, and down came redcoats
You roared and declared, and down came a crown
We were a canvass of voids, and you filled us in
Your pen weaved the borders
It sprung temples in deserts and prairies

You are with us now, your discourse coursing in our rivers
Generating life in our blood
Your syllables pulsing in our very breath
Your face smiles as we buy our living
You sketched us, Noble Father
Or at least, what we should strive to be

For you, the pen was an extension of the mind
For a nation, it was a blade that drew red with simple black ink
For the world, it was a torch that parted seas
That took history by the throat, and shook out of its iron trees an enfeebled notion
kept chained under lock and key

That one's tongue is his castle to rule as he wishes
That one may leave his door and travel a mile or a continent
Without a toll booth asking where we're going
That one may plant his bit of dirt, call it is kingdom, and keep out invaders
That one may gather his nickels and spend them on what he wills
And finally, momentarily, that one may storm the Capitol and tear down the leaders
Not with muskets but with ballots

The enfeebled notion was suffocating, withering
Your pen released them to the light, letting it germinate
We were ready, our moment had come
You seized the torrential river and diverted it to a new direction
And we learned to swim on our own

Or, at least, rich white ones did

Oh, Puzzling Father, what of the others?
The scraps left beside the road?
Negroes, Savages, the Gentle Sex
We stand against the wall
Watching you dine with men of stature
You speak of Tacitus, Newton, and Michelangelo
You cradle telescopes, dance minuets of science, and sleep amidst books
And you call us the lower orders
We cannot sit at your velvet-draped table
We lack the mind to reach it with our own feet
Even if we could, we cannot speak your tongue
Yes, we are the scraps
Your science, your pen declared it so

When you penned a nation's existence, we were kept below
Could you not hear us banging on the wall, clanging our chains?
We that tended the sheep, picked the fruit, hammered the ironwork
We weaved your brocade, carved your Ionic columns,
We dressed you, fed you, warmed you at night, rocked you to sleep
We built the leather throne that let you worship your mountains of books
We grew calluses so you could sip wine and your daughters have delicate palms
Isn't that worth a meager retirement
In homes rather than quarters?

But your deed of our hides wasn't the worst
Your gravest sin was deeper
It was *Knowledge*
You knew it was wrong. All the Pantheon Brothers did
The Great General did right with his possessions
Scattered them to run towards wherever
What possessions did you scatter, Noble Father?
You wrote of how wrong it was
You spoke of how wrong it was
Our freedom was afoot, just fingertips away
Close enough for your pen, but not your mind
Your Rational Mind, saluted by whole continents
Free of superstition, dripping of Enlightenment
Such a mind could move mountains
You made the world believe so

But it still did not move your pen
We lingered under your soles
"Benevolent Master," you termed yourself
And others after you
"Kind to his possessions"
So the adjective drowned the noun
You could not part with your comfort
Your birth demanded we stay
A gentleman without possessions is not one

Your pen decreed the system an abomination
Your bones echoed it, you preached it from you mountaintop
Even as you reaped its juices in your wineglass
Once upon a time, your pen cut whole nations
Shot down soldiers with sharp-edged letters
But for once, only once, and only for us scraps
Your words turned into hollow air

Today, your words still carry steel, as they should
Even the grandchildren of your possessions
Sing the praises of your words, as they should
But neither should they cast aside your faults
Once, we curtsied to your bust
There was no need to argue your name
Because no wrong could be found
Or would be permitted to be found

Now we know better
And we are better for it
We argue your name and your words
Feeding not only that tree of liberty
But that tree called America
Every verbal clash adds ten years to your name
Ensuring your principles go on
Your existence painted a conversation
The whole nation is still trying to resolve
Will we ever reach it?
Perhaps not even you could answer that one