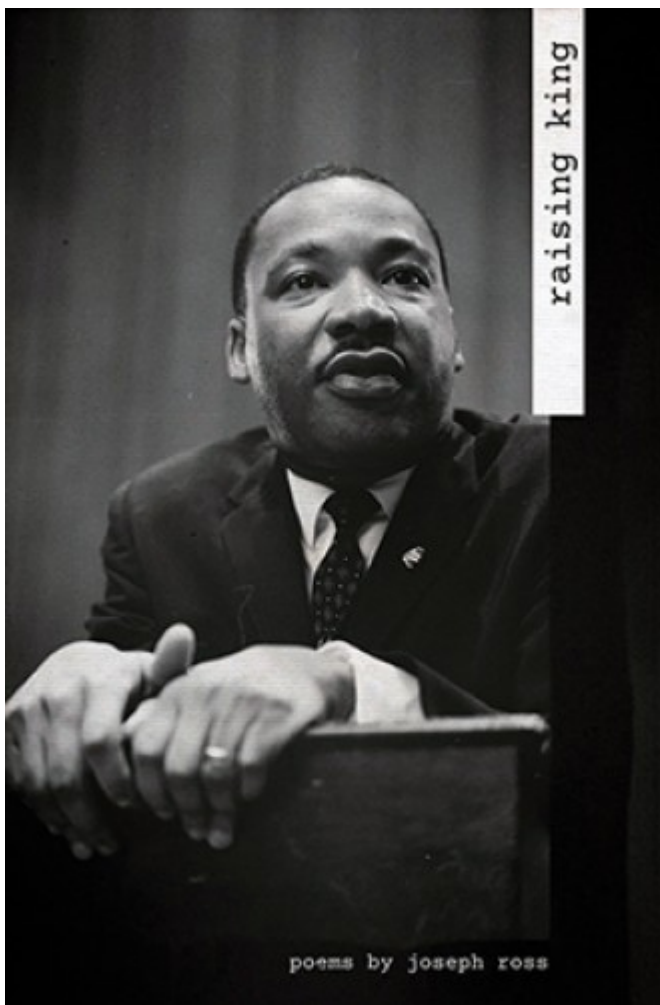


Dr. King's voice in verse

Joseph Ross's poems are an elegy for the civil rights movement's martyrs.

by [Philip C. Kolin](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Raising King

Poems

By Joseph Ross

Willow Books

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Raising King is hauntingly prophetic. Published this month, it comes after the horrific killing of George Floyd, marches across the country protesting police brutality, assaults on the Black Lives Matter movement, billy-clubbing paramilitary police's abrogation of civil rights, the continual undermining of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the tyranny of Lafayette Square, and the deaths of iconic civil rights leaders John Lewis, Joseph Lowery, and C. T. Vivian. Many of today's civil rights struggles look back to the 1950s and '60s—an era that Joseph Ross writes about so tellingly, so powerfully.

Echoing Maya Angelou's and Michelle Obama's affirmations, the book's final poem declares of Martin Luther King Jr.: "Using time with love / is our revolution. // This is how we raise him. / This is how // we rise." At their best, Ross's poems raise King's soul and spirit to give us the sustenance of hope that America sorely needs now.

The book's 78 poems are divided into three sections, each based on one of King's political autobiographies: *Stride toward Freedom* (1958), by the 28-year-old pastor writing about the Montgomery bus boycott; *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), which bewails the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing and other violence; and *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967), written during the last year of King's life. Each poem carries a sentence or two from one of these books as an epigraph.

King's words, voice, and vision flow into and inspire these poems, almost all of which feature King as the speaker. The poems are written in Ross's signature style, staccato and sharp. Most are between seven and 12 stanzas long, with lines of three to seven syllables. A few feature one-word climaxes, such as "Midnight":

. . . I have always known
this is when

the strength comes. In this
midnight country.

In my midnight throat.
From this midnight

God.

Some of Ross's poems jab like pokers to shock the soul; others are solemn, a tapered candle for the beloved community.

These poems insightfully take us into King's psyche, expressing his conflicts, his confession, and even his guilt. "It's like / Jesus touched my face // with wet fingers," he laments in "Tears." In "Faith," Ross reveals King's hope that "this creative God // could surely rewrite / my questions into a poem // less blasphemous / than my night prayers." Juxtaposing events 70 years apart, Ross compresses time in a way that stresses the urgency of King's message today. Interrogating the Emancipation Declaration in "Startling," King proclaims that African Americans have been waiting 100 years for its promises to be realized; its ink is "still wet." "Late is never," he claims in another poem on the same subject.

Ross does an extraordinary job of listening to King's voice in the epigraphs and then, in a way that's alternately chilling and revitalizing, using imagery to capture a theology of nonviolence. He likens King to an Old Testament prophet, an Isaiah come to save a "weeping America." The Catholic bishop Robert Barron has emphasized how King's social revolution in his monumental "I Have a Dream" speech is attuned to Isaiah's mystical vision.

Many of King's exhortations in these poems sound biblical: he makes an altar out of lunch counter sit-ins and christens the protesters "salt." Almost as if he were King's amanuensis, Ross, too, writes with a "prophet's staff." About Ralph Abernathy, King professes:

I am sure
God looks like

a certain Baptist minister
with a lined face,

rivers of worry
have washed

his skin for decades . . .

Several poems call readers to love the hate out of the movement's enemies. However vile, dangerous, and evil those bigots who shoot, burn, and bomb are, they become King's brothers: "The bones within are / the same as yours." Referencing the Montgomery boycott, King declares: "We want to ride / beside everyone."

But freedom's enemies try their best to overcome King, who declares that "the police / have nails // in their nightsticks." He describes the feeling of having "their saliva // land on your ear." He sets the assassination of John F. Kennedy in "this spitting land // with more than enough // bullets for us all." Hearing that James Meredith was shot in the back, King warns: "But no one with skin / the color of wood // should walk alone / in Mississippi."

Coretta Scott King speaks in only three poems, each of which ends one of the book's sections. She proleptically references the Black Lives Matter movement, crying out, "Black / bodies mean nothing" to racists and concluding that "Black // bodies still do not count / in America." But she and Martin know that they "mean / everything." Indeed, in another poem King laments the horrors befalling black lives by those who deny their very existence: "You cannot set dogs / on humans unless // you do not see / them."

Raising King is a major achievement. It's a capstone history of the civil rights movement, a protest march in poems, and an elegy that honors King and all the other martyrs who fought to save the soul of America.