LETTER TO ALEX COMFORT

By DANNIE ABSE

Alex, perhaps a colour of which neither of us had dreamt
may appear in the test-tube with God knows what admonition.
Ehrlich certainly was one who broke down the mental doors,
yet only after his six hundred and sixth attempt.

Koch also, painfully and with true German thoroughness
eliminated the impossible, and proved that too many of us
are dying from the same disease. Yet was his green dream,
like yours, fired to burn away an ancient distress.

Still I, myself, don’t like Germans, but prefer the unkempt
voyagers, who, like butterflies drunk with suns,
can only totter crookedly in the dazed air
to reach charmingly their destination, as if by accident.

That Greek one then is my hero, who watched the bath water
rise above his navel and rushed out naked, ‘I found it,
I found it’ into the street in all his shining, and forgot
that others would only stare at his genitals. What laughter!

Or Newton, leaning in Woolsthorpe against the garden wall
forgot his indigestion and all such trivialities,
but gaped up at heaven in just surprise, and with
true gravity, witnessed the vertical apple fall.

O what a marvellous observation! Who would have reckoned
that such a pedestrian miracle could alter history,
that henceforward everyone must fall, whatever
their rank, at thirty-two feet per second, per second?

You too, I know, have waited for doors to fly open and played
with your cold chemicals and written long letters
to the Press; listened to the truth afraid and dug deep
into the wriggling earth for a rainbow, with an honest spade.

But nothing rises. Neither spectres, nor oil, nor love.
And the old professor must think you mad, Alex, as you rehearse
poems in the laboratory like vows, and curse those clever scientists
who dissect away the wings and the haggard heart from the dove.