American Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner Rita Dove graced the podium at the University of Hong Kong to enrapture an audience with the spoken word. Her mastery of language displayed via exquisite renditions of her poetry, it was a tour de force performance that left the audience applauding and a parliament of professors giving her a standing ovation. The Peninsula has its own audience with Dove in Hong Kong.

in the “Google” generation of instant gratification, is there any time left to ponder the significance of the written word when the instant messaging messengers have no time to “spl” out “nuffin” to its cohesive conclusion? Where the most common derivative of the New Age is the acronym lol? Caffeinated culture vultures hover at publishing houses that deem poetry writers as the last of a dying breed, as the noble resort to publishing them, not so much in appreciation or for profit, but more so as a tax write-off.

Bless Rita Dove for stringing the last strand of hope among generation next, as a congregation of 20-somethings packed the halls of the University of Hong Kong (HKU) where she gave a talk. Of course, some were there in compulsion, Dove’s books are a matter of study in many Universities, HKU included. But there were over 100 other students and fans, in rapt attendance, filling up all the chairs, lining up at the back of the hall, double-seated on the aisle in the descending arena which led up to the podium, where Dove even danced a little to showcase a term she coined in one of her poems.

She dances with words, makes them move to her groove, she sings them, contorts them, and ignites them into life. It’s hard not to deify Dove, for her sheer acuity is overwhelming, and her poetry is embedded with rich subtext, laced with historical facts, each syllable rippling with empathy, erudition and exactitude.
shaped the lips to an o, say a. That is island.

One word of Swedish has changed the whole neighborhood. When I look up, the yellow house on the corner is a galleon stranded in flowers. Around it the wind. Even the high roar of a leaf-mulcher could be the horn blast from a ship as it skirts the misted shoals.

We don't need much more to keep things going. Families complete themselves and refuse to budge from the present, the present extends its glass forehead to sea (backyard breezes, scattered cardinals) and if, one evening, the house on the corner took off over the marshland, neither I nor my neighbor would be amazed. Sometimes a word is found so right it trembles at the slightest explanation.

You start out with one thing, end up with another, and nothing's like it used to be, not even the future.

From the collection of poetry in “The Yellow House on the Corner”

Looking around the cluster of aspiring literati, with their digital recorders, snapping pictures from their phone-cams, I can hear the pitch of someone texting rows behind me, an activity that's engendered a new lexicon of misspellings and dubious acronyms. Even legendary photographer Richard Avedon declared that “images are fast replacing words as our primary language.”

“Well, of course he would say that wouldn’t he? And of course I disagree,” says Dove with a throaty, sardonic laugh. “From the outside, it looks like we’re speeding up and we’re about to tumble over the cliff, but I find evidence actually from the “Google” generation (of instant access, information and gratification) I guess you can call it, of hope. When you look online, its evident to me that words are still important. People are writing - fan fiction, blogs, to each other, instant messages - it's disappearing into the air never to be seen again, but they're still writing. More so than my generation because we just wrote letters when necessary. Language is still there, as is the urge to use it, to create realities and to bring back events, in other words creative writing is still evident even in the Google generation. So I don’t think we’re tumbling down the cliff. Our language is speeding up, but it still exists.”

For someone whose craft necessitates that she be sensitive to the nuances of language, rhythm and meter, Dove can see how the daily erosion of the idiom is occurring, lamentably. “When they want it done quicker through less typing on the screen. I despair. Every time I see someone spell a lot as one word (“alot”), I want to scream!” she says, her multicoloured lacquered nails clutching into a fist. “I'm in the usage panel for, the American Heritage Dictionary, which is a really fun panel to be on. Every once in a while they'll send you a huge document, multiple choice. Basically it asks whether we should include this word or not, or what the definition of a word should be. It’s wonderful riding the wave of the language, and whether it’s going to be included in the dictionary and I find myself, incredibly conservative, raising my voice to say, ‘No we will not pronounce that word that way!’ It’s a muddying of the language, you’ve got all these great little subtleties of language that you can use as a writer, but as a speaker why mush it all together? So I am very conservative!” But does Dove spell in the English manner or the American? “As an American writer, I do use the American spelling - except the word ‘grey’ which I insist on spelling with an ‘e’ - because it looks ‘greyer’ with an ‘e’!” she says with a chuckle.

Born in Akron, Ohio in 1952, this 1970 Presidential Scholar received her B.A. summa cum laude from Miami University of Ohio and her M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. She also held a Fulbright scholarship at the Universität Tübingen in Germany. Known for her intellectual curiosity (her subject matter has a vast Diaspora – from an ancient Chinese princess, a German woman widowed during World War II, mythological characters to the blues singer Bessie Smith) and of her love of travel, she said an invitation to visit China and Hong Kong was an offer she couldn’t refuse. The evening of our interview was the last leg before the journey home (currently she’s a Professor of English at the University of Virginia where she teaches creative writing).

Moments after her talk at a private function, as the wine and cheese crowd form a nucleus around her every step, clutching her every word, someone congratulates her on receiving the Common Wealth Award earlier this year. She simply says, “It's nice to be recognised and acknowledged.”

And now, brace yourself for this list. Dove served as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant to the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995 and as Poet Laureate of the Commonwealth of Virginia from 2004 to 2006. Among numerous literary and academic honors, the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry; the 2003 Emily Couric Leadership Award; the 2001 Duke Ellington Lifetime Achievement Award; the 1997 Sara Lee Frontrunner Award; the 1997 Barnes & Noble Writers for Writers Award; the 1996 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities; and the 1996 National Humanities Medal. Before she landed in Hong Kong, 26 years after her first book was published, she had just received the coveted Commonwealth Award of Distinguished Service (together with Anderson Cooper, John Glenn, Mike Nichols and Queen Noor of Jordan).

Criticism has come in various permutations too. As dubious as it may be, in one of the online discussions on Dove, many a finger has typed that in her subject matter lies a cold distancing of herself. Her books are peopled by characters in world history, not hers. She writes “from the brain, not the heart”.

Shape the lips to an o, say a. That is island.
“No I don’t agree with that. Everything I have written about means something deep to me. The thing that confuses a lot of people is that I write a lot about many subjects,” she says in self-defense. Indeed, between her books “Fifth Sunday” and “Through the Ivory Gate”, the range and versatility is astonishing.

“I haven’t decided to only write about my liver or whatever! Every time I’ve written about a subject, it’s because it has moved me deeply. Every time I’ve written with a persona, through the voice of someone else, I’m living with that anguish at the moment that I write it. I do think there’s a great desire in my writing, in my psyche, I guess to protect myself - that comes from being black and being told as a child that you have to, even if someone does something bad to you, don’t let them know that you’re upset – so you build up this mask. It is self-protection and preservation.”

As her brows furrow in a pause, she leans back in the otherwise empty auditorium. It’s well into the evening as the students have exited, the canapé crowd has trickled out and her radio and newspaper interviews are over and done with. “In the last couple of books of mine, there has been a lot more autobiographical reference. The dancing is about me (she says of her latest book “American Smooth”). They’re all first person. The “I” finally came out!”

Dove, married to writer and journalist Fred Viebahn, has one daughter, Aviva. In her last release “American Smooth”, she verbalises her passion for dance, and dancing with her husband. The world she describes suddenly is an intimate of two, not 20,000. Perhaps brought on by a confidence borne to her with maturity and recognition? “No, I wouldn’t call it a growth in self-confidence, I was always confident,” she says in a matter-of-fact manner. “I think that a part of me, growing up as a writer, really reacted to the confessional mode. I didn’t want to write as a “me, me, me” writer - I wanted to get away from that because I felt that there had been so many voices who never been heard. If I could get into their voice, if I could give them voice, then I was doing something. Moreover a feeling of what happened to me was not so important – that’s not a lack of self-confidence. It’s a feeling that what happened to those 20,000 people (in the poem “Parsley”) was more important than… well, than writing about my liver!”
"Every time I've written with a persona, through the voice of someone else, I'm living with that anguish at the moment that I write it. I do think there's a great desire in my writing, in my psyche, I guess to protect myself."

The 20,000 people she speaks of are in reference to the mass execution carried out by Rafael Trujillo, the dictator of the Dominican Republic in 1937. 20,000 Haitian blacks, who worked in cane fields with Dominicans, were killed in an act of 'ethnic cleansing'. She explains, "The Haitians spoke French Creole and could not roll their 'r's. So the 'r' sounds like an 'l'. Trujillo had all the cane workers pronounce perejil (Spanish for parsley) and those who could not pronounce it correctly — whoever said 'pelejil' instead of 'perejil' — were Haitian and so executed. That he had them pronounce their own death sentence, the ultimate in cruelty, haunted me. That fuelled my writing — more so than look at me, my sad life, and my past.

So there is tragedy in her past? "You know that Leo Tolstoy quote from Anna Karenina, 'Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way'? she asks. Well that does ring true," she says, seemingly deflecting from answering that specific question, perhaps unintentionally. "When we're happy, we really don't give a damn about analyzing it. When you're happy, you just want to be happy. What really engages our interest is when something sad happens. We want to work it out so that we can be happy again. It's about survival of the species so that makes it very difficult to write a poem for anyone which deals with the happier, celebratory aspect of life. People have a said of me that I write a lot of happy poems, accusatorially! How can you have a happy poem? Well, you can talk about the happy poems and I was really happy to release American Smooth!"

All poetry published with permission of the writer. American Smooth is available in all good bookstores now.

Rosa
How she sat there,
the time right inside a place
so wrong it was ready.
That trim name with
its dream of a bench
to rest on. Her sensible coat.
Doing nothing was the doing:
the clean flame of her gaze
carved by a camera flash.
How she stood up
when they bent down to retrieve
her purse. That courtesy.
-- Reprinted from "On the Bus With Rosa Parks" by Rita Dove.

Wiring Home
Lest the wolves loose their whistles
and shopkeepers inquire,
keep moving, though your knees flush
red as two chapped apples,
keep moving, head up,
past the beggar's cold cup,
past the kiosk's
trumpet tales of
odyssey and heartbreak—
until, turning a corner, you stand,
staring: ambushed
by a window of canaries
bright as a thousand
golden narcissi.

Golden Oldie
I made it home early, only to get
sailed in the driveway-swaying
at the wheel like a blind pianist caught in a tune
meant for more than two hands playing.
The words were easy, crooned
by a young girl dying to feel alive, to discover
a pain majestic enough
to live by. I turned the air conditioning off,
leaned back to float on a film of sweat,
and listened to her sentiment:
Baby, where did our love go?-a lament
I greedily took in
without a clue who my lover
might be, or where to start looking.