

AMERICAN POET

The Journal of The Academy of American Poets

FALL 2003

BOLERO

Not the ratcheting crescendo of Ravel's bright winds
but an older, crueller passion.

Not some leonine fantasy in a bikini
but a woman with hips

who loves how she can move them,
who holds nothing back

but the hurt she takes down with her
as she dips, grinds, then rises heavily
into his arms again.

*a man who loves / to look
at the waist / she
rising*

*Can't you see
What pain and heartache
Done to me*

Bessie in a dream of younger, slimmer days:

Not delicate. Not tame, restrained
the way a debutante is not, the way
a bride pretends she understands to be.

IN MEMORIAM

Poems by Ted Joans and Theodore Weiss

Everything hurts now, each slow upsurge
onto a throbbing toe, the prolonged descent
to earth, to him, her body ferocious,

ON MY BOOKSHELF: CHANCELLORS' READING LIST

Susan Howe, Philip Levine, and Heather McHugh

finally; a grim, hunted ululation

NEWLY ELECTED CHANCELLORS

Frank Bidart, Gary Snyder, and Ellen Bryant Voigt

she delights in, every slippery molecule of flesh

Oh, yes, she loves him. And he adores

EMERGING POETS

looking at **Introduced by Marilyn Chin, Henri Cole, B. H. Fairchild, and Cole Swensen**

and she moves, (she moves for him with him)

INTERVIEW WITH RITA DOVE

to the music in this allotted space,
spot lit across the hardwood floor.

by Robert McDowell

PLUS

Walt Whitman Award, Harold Morton Landon Translation Award,

Raiziss/de Palchi Fellowship, and more . . .

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Cover Poem

"Bolero" by Rita Dove



Rita Dove Poet at the Dance

ROBERT McDOWELL

RITA DOVE served as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1993 to 1995 and was reappointed Special Consultant in Poetry for 1999–2000. She is the author of seven books of poetry including *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), *Mother Love* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), and *Thomas and Beulah* (Carnegie Mellon University, 1987), which received the Pulitzer Prize. She is the recipient of the 2001 Duke Ellington Lifetime Achievement Award in the Literary Arts, the 1996 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, and the 1996 National Medal in the Humanities. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with her husband, Fred Viebahn, and daughter, Aviva.

ROBERT McDOWELL is a founder and editor of Story Line Press. His most recent book of poetry, *On Foot, in Flames*, was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2002.

I SAW RITA DOVE and her husband, Fred Viebahn, dance for the first time on Christmas eve, in 1984. I fell in love. As I loved them before, I suppose it would be more accurate to say that I fell in love with them all over again. In the words of Theodore Roethke, they were dancing mad. It was the first of several annual gatherings we shared in Santa Cruz, California, at the historical-landmark house of the poets George Hitchcock and Marjorie Simon, which we were house-sitting while they wintered in Mexico.

How often, among the vast number of poems in our time about other art forms, have the poets excelled at the forms they wrote about? It isn't necessary, of course. At times, too much self-involvement can degrade a poem. But Rita Dove's poems about dance educate and excite us. They do so in part because Rita is a brilliant dancer, a showstopper. They do so because dance, like poetry—like song—occupies a central place in the poet's life.

Settle in then, and learn, as I did, more about dance than you thought you'd ever know. As you read Rita's extraordinary responses, and read her poems, I'll be surprised if you don't start tapping your feet and feel the urge to be lighter, to move a little.

Rita Dove: Poet at the Dance

Robert McDowell Can you talk a little about the movement of dance, and the movement (as in line to line, image to image, idea or thing to idea or thing) of poetry?

Rita Dove Poetry is a kind of dance already. Technically, there's the play of contemporary speech against the bass-line of the iambic, but there's also the expression of desire that is continually restrained by the limits of the page, the breath, the very architecture of the language—just as dance is limited by the capabilities of our physical bodies as well as by gravity. A dancer toils in order to skim the surface of the floor, she develops muscles most of us don't even know we have; but the goal is to appear weightless. A poet struggles to render into words that which is unsayable—the ineffable, that which is deeper than language—in the hopes that whatever words make the final cut will, in turn, strike the reader speechless.

In “Bolero,” for example, the rhythm of the dance is duplicated visually on the page, with one extremely long line followed by two short lines in an approximation of the “slow / quick-quick” of this very slow and sensuous dance. I wanted the reader to be stretched out to the limit of the page, and only then snapping back to the left margin—to reality? back to earth?—where he is allowed to take a breath (i.e., the stanza break) before returning to the fray.

McDowell Can you tell us about your personal history with dance, both as a participant and viewer?

Dove In African American culture, dance has always been a key element—a communal activity that soothed and united all levels. Everybody was expected to know how to dance, which usually meant hand-dancing (jitterbug or shag), as well as whatever new dances came along on the R&B scene. I grew up believing that any get-together was a good enough excuse to dance.

Although my older brother and I watched *American Bandstand* during our early teenage years, *Soul Train* was our weekly TV ritual, because the dancing there was more exuberant, more in-your-face, more demanding. The highlight of the show was the actual soul train, where couples would form two parallel lines, male and female; as they reached the head of the line, they would merge and dance down the gauntlet while the others clapped and shouted their approval or criticism. Each couple would try to outdo the other, and in this painfully public crucible, new moves, styles, even entire dances would be forged.

So I danced all through college, at parties and in the dormitory hallways—but it was of the shuffle-and-bop-to-the-beat variety. When I went to graduate school, I walked into my first student party at the Iowa Writers' Workshop and was shocked to find everyone just standing around talking!

McDowell Were there professional dancers or a consistent love of dance in your family while you were growing up? Where does this love of ballroom dancing come from?

Dove There were no professional dancers in my family, but my husband and I have been doing ballroom for about five years now. A week after our house had burned down—it had been struck by lightning, which was pretty bizarre by itself—we were still combing through the ashes when our dear neighbors came by with tickets to a benefit dinner that weekend. “Go get yourself a gown; Fred, buy a tuxedo,” they said. “We're all going dancing.” It felt miraculous to preen, wondrous to zip into fabric that gleamed and slithered. And later, when the band started playing and a couple floated by our table—there's no other word for it—and everybody agreed that we'd always wanted to learn how to do ballroom, someone said, “Well, why don't we?” So we all signed up for a free introductory lesson at the local dance studio. Fred and I were the only couple who kept at it.

McDowell Tell us about your writing process. Does writing about dance change the way you tactically work through and revise a poem?

Dove My writing process is a bit odd, because I work with lots of fragments (from different poems) for a long time before anything coheres into a presentable piece. I may start with a line that I know will appear in the middle of the poem, so I write it down in the middle of the page (college-ruled notebook paper, usually). Other lines may gather around that original, or I may skip to the beginning and work until I am stymied, at which point I will turn to another collection of fragments—too early to honor them with the term “draft”—and work on them until I reach a dead end there, too. The process is similar to assembling a jigsaw puzzle, and yet I don't skip around willy nilly—I'll tend a particular corner of the poem-to-be until I've exhausted both it and me. In time—days, weeks, months—a draft will emerge, and then another, and another, until I can see the entire picture, and then the polishing begins. It's a nerve-racking way to work, because I have to dwell in possibility, walking through the valley of the shadow of failure, for a long time before anything happens that others could call Process. But I've found it's the best way for me to cultivate the unconscious connections a bit longer, and it often happens that several poems will complete themselves in the charmed span of a single week.

The only change in the creative process I've seen with the dance poems comes with the luxury of writing within a framework—each dance has a distinct feel, an imbedded cadence that will suggest a certain shape or silhouette on the page. That frame, however, can also become a gallows. “Fox Trot Fridays” was the first in the group; it wrote itself rather quickly. After that felicitous birth, I imagined writing a poem about each type of ballroom dance—waltz, tango, quickstep, rumba, cha-cha, mambo, samba, swing, even paso doble. And then, of course, I couldn't write a word, because I was trying to write about dance, not get inside the dance. When I began to appreciate the technical intricacies of each style—not just the pattern “quick-

quick with a / heel-ball-toe” but the rise upon tiptoe that occurs between the slow count and the first quick in fox-trot, for example, or the gradual lowering from tiptoe that one executes in the second half of the third beat in the waltz—only then did “American Smooth” start to shimmer into being. My scaffolding was to provide a humble description of the dance technique—what each part of the body should be doing, measured out precisely, without emotion—in the hopes of finding the poem’s true desire, to achieve flight of consciousness, a lifting of the spirit as well as of the human form. The political implications of the American brand of smooth (which allows the partners to do more open work as opposed to the more restrictive international standard), has suggested, in turn, different avenues to pursue in other poems that are not printed here.

McDowell In “American Smooth,” you refer to dance movement as “such perfect agony / one learns to smile through” and “ecstatic mimicry.” Pain and disguise; supreme effort and the mask. These appear to be recurrent conditions explored in your work. How does dance, as a catapulting subject, change your perception of pain and nimble artifice?

Dove To quote Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We wear the mask.” I grew up with that reality. In a society that could not be trusted to be fair, you’d be a fool to show all your cards, to reveal your weak spots. As I’ve grown older, I have tried to be more open (personally), since all effective masks obscure vision somewhat; besides they’re hot and uncomfortable. A corollary caveat, though: As I struggled to work through my own shyness—oh, how horribly self-conscious I was!—I began to realize that perceptions shaped reception: If I imagined everyone was looking at me critically when I entered a room, I would behave in a way that might evoke critical (or at least curious) stares; if I let my struggle show, others might be uncomfortable watching that struggle and therefore make the task just that much more fraught with anxiety and difficulty.

McDowell I admire the edginess, even the bluntness of “Brown.” Could you elaborate on “the difference I cause / whenever I walk into a polite space . . .”? I am thinking of the conditions creating that “difference,” and the ways that poetry, song, and dance, for that matter, have empowered you.

Dove Anyone bearing a visible difference to the mainstream society cannot decide when to be noticed; attending a party is to bring an active presence to the composition, and there is no relief to being in a crowd. Like most African Americans in academia, it is not unusual for me to be the sole “representative” of my race—and I use that word deliberately, since often the gazes I must navigate through will register me as symbol first, especially the gaze from a stranger or someone not very familiar with me.

For a shy person, such curiosity can be quite terrifying, and therefore, long ago, I decided to preempt it by making an entrance: shoulders back, smiling, looking several people deliberately in the eye, introducing myself with a handshake—in other words, confronting the observer so there would be no chance to be confronted with any evidence that I was being viewed as “the black woman in the room.” In ballroom dancing, however, provoking stares is a good thing. Egocentricism is the privilege of the dancing couple, who wants all eyes to be trained on them as soon as they cross the threshold. If I’m feeling shy, I never wear neutral colors—give me red or lime or turquoise!

My poem “Brown” is edgy, yes; but I don’t find it particularly blunt. The narrator’s consideration of color-based bias has a nuanced irony; she excuses the dress lady’s gaucheries even as she lets us see the meshwork of insecurity/pain/vulnerability that the dress lady’s comment has called up. There’s defiance, yes—but the reader is never shut out or attacked; rather, the narrator adopts a conspiratorial tone, inviting the reader to see what she’s experienced all her life in “polite” society.

Personally, I find it empowering to be able to trash the High Precepts of Western Civilization—to label the waltz as “that European constipated / swoon,” for example—and then to master that canon. Although I prefer the Latin dances, I executed that waltz beautifully . . . I even enjoyed it! Artistically, I want to use all my heritages—sonnet and free verse and oral tradition, Shakespeare and Langston Hughes, classical music and jazz—in the same way that Nat King Cole gave the fox-trot his own brand of smooth. Waltzing in a red dress was part of that rebellion *cum* mastery.

McDowell Did you have the pacing of “Fox Trot Fridays” in your head as you began to work on the poem? Was the poem born of it, or does that pacing complement another initiating insight or opening act?

Dove Absolutely. The words fitted themselves into the music—it was the best kind of synchronicity a writer can experience.

McDowell How long did it take you to write “The Seven Veils of Salomé”? Was there a point when the poem included dialogue between the characters before you chose the series of interior monologues?

Dove It’s difficult to say, given my writing process. But the kernel had nestled inside me for so many years . . . ever since I heard Leontyne Price’s amazing rendition of Richard Strauss’s *Salomé*. Then came a wonderful film about Oscar Wilde with snippets of his *Salomé* delivered as counterpoint to the main, biographical action. Once Fred and I went to a Halloween party as Salomé and John the Baptist, complete

Rita Dove: Poet at the Dance

with his bloody head on a platter . . . we had a ball thinking out that bit of illusion. So you see, the story had been nagging me for quite a while, although I wasn't really conscious of it. But when I finally looked up the excerpt in the Bible, I was surprised to discover that it was not Salomé but her mother who had devised this theatrical revenge. I was shocked, actually, to realize how easily I had forgotten the real story . . . or repressed it. Perhaps I'd been too young to understand what was at stake for Herodias, perhaps because I wanted to believe in the power of beauty to get whatever it wanted; I hadn't understood the sorrow underlying the drama.

McDowell Tell us once and for all: What is your favorite dance as a dancer? As a watcher? After "Brown," you'll shock us all if you say *waltz!*

Dove Don't worry! Though there's nothing like a jazzy fox-trot to combine both the Western and the African American traditions, and the quickstep is essential if you want to feel both light and swift, I prefer the Latin dances—cha-cha, rumba, mambo— but samba is my favorite. That dance has sass! And it's terrifically difficult to do well, because for all that wriggling and grinding, it demands tremendous restraint. Coiled energy, grace, and punch—just like poetry. ✨

American Smooth

We were dancing—it must have been a fox trot 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.

Brown

Why you look good in every color!
the dress lady gurgled, just before I stepped onto the parquet for a waltz. I demurred; we were in a country club, after all, and she—fresh from Fort Lauderdale (do people actually live there?) with five duffle bags' worth of ball gowns, enough tulle and fringe and pearls to float a small cotillion—was only trying to earn a living. For once I was not the only black person in the room (two others, both male). I thought of Sambo; I thought a few other things, too, unmentionable here. Don't get me wrong: I've always loved my skin, the way it glows against citron and fuchsia, the difficult hues, but the difference I cause whenever I walk into a polite space is why I prefer grand entrances—especially with a waltz, that European constipated swoon.

The dress in question was red.

Fox Trot Fridays

Thank the stars there's a day each week to tuck in

the grief, lift your pearls, and stride brush stride

quick-quick with a heel-ball-toe. Smooth

as Nat King Cole's slow satin smile,

easy as taking one day at a time:

one man and one woman,

rib to rib, with no heartbreak in sight—

just the sweep of Paradise and the space of a song

to count all the wonders in it.

The Seven Veils of Salomé

Salomé Awaits Her Entrance.

I was standing in the doorway
when he reproached her.
Not with words, but a simple
absence of attention: She was smiling,
holding out a slip of meat, skewered fruit—
some delicacy he'd surely never seen
in all his dust-blown, flea-plagued
wanderings—and he stared at it
for the longest while,
as if the offer came from it and not
those tapered fingers, my mother's
famous smile. He said nothing,
merely turned away his large
and beautifully arrogant head.

Herodias, in the Doorway.

More than anything I ache to see her
so girlish. She steps languidly
into their midst as if onto a pooled expanse
of grass . . . or as if she were herself
the meadow, unruffled green
ringed with lilies
instead of these red-rimmed eyes,
this wasteland soaked in smoke and pleasure.
Ignorant, she moves as if inventing
time—and the musicians scurry
to deliver a carpet of flutes
under her flawless heel.

Herod, Watching.

I should have avoided this, loving her mother
as I do, to the length and breadth of my kingdom
even to the chilly depths of history's wrath.
But it was my birthday; I was bent upon
happiness and love, I loved
Herodias, my Herodias!—who sends
her honeyed daughter into the feast.
The first veil fell, and all
my celebrated years
dissolved in bitter rapture. O Herodias!
You have outdone us all.

The Fool, at Herod's Feet.

Just a girl, slim-hipped, two knots
for breasts, sheathed potential
caught before the inevitable
over-bloom and rot (life's revenge
if death eludes us)—all
any of us men want, really.
Just a girl. Otherwise,
who can fathom it, how is it
to be fathomed? At his behest, her mother's?
It matters little—she was dispatched
into the circle of elders, and there
she rivets the world's desire.

Salomé, Dancing.

I have a head on my shoulders
but no one sees it; no one
reckons with a calculated wrist or pouting underlip.
I've navigated this court's attentions
and I will prove I can be crueler than government,
I will delegate what nature's given me
(this body, this anguish,
oiled curves and perfumed apertures),
I will dance until they've all lost their heads—
the nobles slobbering over their golden goblets,
the old king sweating on his throne,
my mother in the doorway, rigid with regret,
the jester who watches us all and laughs—

O Mother, what else is a girl to do?

Bolero

Not the ratcheting crescendo of Ravel's bright winds
but an older,
crueler

passion: a woman with hips who knows when to move them,
who holds nothing back
but the hurt

she takes with her as she dips, grinds, then rises sweetly into
his arms again.

Not
delicate. Not tame. Bessie Smith in a dream of younger,
(Can't you see?)
slimmer

days. Restrained in the way a debutante is not, the way a bride
pretends she
understands.

How everything hurts! Each upsurge onto a throbbing toe,
the prolonged descent
to earth,

to him (what love & heartache done to me), her body ferocious,
a grim ululation
of flesh—

she adores him. And he savors that adoration, this man in love with looking.
She feels his look,
his sigh

and she moves, moves with him to the music in the space allotted them,
spot lit across
the hardwood floor.

RITA DOVE
Bolero

The manuscript version of "Bolero" appears on the cover and on page 63.

"Bolero" was previously published in *Ploughshares*.