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## INTERVIEW WITH RITA DOVE

by Camille T. Dungy

**CAMILLE DUNGY:** First off, let's talk about your latest book, *American Smooth*. This book literally came out of the fire, in some ways.

**RITA DOVE:** In a sense, yes, it was the phoenix that rose from the ashes. We had a fire in 1998; lightning struck our house. Beyond the fact that it's the kind of tragedy you work your way out of, it also split the creative work. I identify my poems now as "before the fire" and "after the fire." I was about halfway through a book when the fire intervened; the manuscript took a different path, and the path that it took turned out to be *American Smooth*.

Because of the fire, my husband and I began ballroom dancing. After about a week of recovery, our neighbors came up to us and said, "It's time to get out of the ashes. We've bought tickets for a dinner dance this weekend, so Rita, buy a dress; Fred, get a tuxedo. Let's have fun." We went; and when we saw people dancing—really dancing, like in swooping across the floor—I said, "Oh, I've always wanted to do that." You know, there's a feeling of incredible freedom after such a big whammy, and you think, "I'm alive, and that's what matters; now I can do anything I want." The little things fall away. We simply said, "We're just going to dance and see what happens." So we did, and we're still doing it.

The title refers a type of ballroom dancing—American smooth is the jazzier, American version of fox trots, tangos, and waltzes. When I first encountered the term, it seemed representative of so much that is quintessentially American. By "quintessentially American" I mean more African American, the way we kind of riff on things and make them our own. And that became the overlying metaphor for the entire book, the idea of taking whatever you're handed—whether it's history's ironies or a dance style—and making it your own.

**DUNGY:** You speak several different languages. You speak English, you speak German, you have an ability to pick up the nuances and intonations of the languages. You're also a musician, you play the viola de gamba and the cello. Now you speak the language of dance, which has its own technical terms and its own physical language. How has the language of dance influenced your poetry? Do you see it differently influencing your poetry than the music or the German has?

**DOVE:** Well, in some ways all of us have different languages that we move by, that we think by. It may be too soon for me to be able to answer that question as well as I'd like. I can say that dance has brought more physicality into my life—when you dance, you have to get up and move—but I also think it adds more body to the poems; they want to get up off the page and strut around. There's an energy in the new poems that's different from the energy that happened before.

I've always been intensely musical, and my poems have often reflected that musical impulse. First of all, let me say it straight out: I believe that if a poem doesn't sing, it has no business being a poem. Granted, each poem must have its own music, but it should sing that music without any kind of shame. During the course of my writing life I've heard and played many different musics—blues and jazz, call-and-response, symphonic and ensemble—and I think now my poems are actually getting up and walking around.

**DUNGY:** You've talked about poetry being a cage whose walls you were working against with the sonnets in *Mother Love*. Are you feeling with these new poems that there is a difference—that it's not the restriction of a cage?

**DOVE:** It's a different cage, but that's all right. Musicians can tell you they have cages within cages—there are measures, formats, and rests; there are key signatures, time signatures. And no matter what kind of dance you do, you have to dance to the music. In those poems in the book about specific dances, I do try to knit the cadence of the poem to the rhythm of the dance. "Fox Trot Fridays," for instance, emulates the easygoing, lilting stroll of a Nat King Cole song. A Latin dance called the bolero consists of a long, sweeping, sensuous movement, followed by a tight little grind, as if you were screwing your hips into the ground; the poem "Bolero" combines a very long line with two short lines, so that you have to snap back to the left margin. The poems exist within different formal cages that suggest the basic "mood" of the dance. Maybe "cage" sounds too pejorative; I don't mean it to. It's simply the tennis net you play across, the thing you get around; it's the basketball hoop, what you want to go "swoosh" when you aim and let go. It's more a challenge than something restrictive.

**DUNGY:** You talk about the different ways that you use this term "American smooth" and what that implies in terms of being American and operating in this world. One of the things that is a central part of the book are the soldiers in World War I. Could you talk about how you became interested in these soldiers? In particular in the journal that you use with the poem "Passages"?

**DOVE:** Oh, that's a long story! Those poems started over 20 years ago with a beautiful photo I had seen, I can't remember where—one of the black army regiments from World War I: Lieutenant James Europe's military jazz band marching up Fifth Avenue in perfect formation, for the Victory Parade in 1919. These proud black soldiers who had brought jazz to Europe—what was it like to play while the fighting raged around them? How did they come to enter the war? The more I read, the more fascinated I became. I discovered they had enlisted as Americans but had entered the war under

French command because the leaders of the segregated U.S. forces could not envision black soldiers fighting side by side with white soldiers. Just one more of those absurd situations produced by this country's racial trauma. What incredible irony—here they were, fighting in the war that was supposed to make the world “safe for democracy,” yet coming from a country that clearly had not been honoring the spirit of democracy and would not live up to its promise of democracy upon their return. The more I read, the more amazed I was. So little was known about these men! They distinguished themselves in combat; they received more medals and citations of honor—not from this country but from the French, the *Croix de Guerre*—than you can shake a stick at. Even though they didn't have adequate training beforehand, they went overseas and were the first Allied units to reach the Rhine in their push east. Lieutenant James Europe's band played jazz all over France; ironically, they became goodwill ambassadors for the very country that had reviled them.

I began thinking about how I wanted to present these remarkable soldiers. Ideally as individuals—let each man speak his piece, bear witness in his own particular way. The poem you referred to, “Passages,” emerged from a marvelous bit of serendipity. . . it was a gift, actually, in the purest and least metaphorical sense of that word. In 1987, when I received the Pulitzer Prize, I was living in Tempe, Arizona; when interviewers asked what I was working on, I mentioned the World War I soldier poems. Shortly thereafter I was contacted by an elderly black gentleman, already in his late eighties then, who had retired from Ohio to Tucson. “You know,” he said, “I kept a diary during my tour of duty; I'd be happy to talk to you.” So my husband, Fred, and I drove down to Tucson and spent a wonderful afternoon with him and his wife. As we were preparing to leave, he gave me his diary and said, “I'm not going to use it anymore. I remember it all; I don't need a diary.” What a treasure! “Passages” details his travel by ship across the Atlantic to enter the war, not knowing what lay in store for him and his comrades. In my poetic distillation, I tried to be true to his words—the innocence, the hope that was also a kind of stoicism—“Okay, I'm not going to be afraid, I'm a soldier, I know what's expected of me”—indeed, the *honor* with which he entered battle.

**DUNGY:** I see in your work several different approaches to history. There's history from an official sense—this is the story that happened, let me reinvestigate the story. There's the personal history, just as you're talking about with “Passages.” And there's the speculative history, as you're talking with the James Europe poems—these are stories we have, images you have, about James Europe, Hattie McDaniel. You reimagine what might have been the story of that story, or the story behind the story. I remember in the poems in *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* you look at figures of other people on the bus, people you don't often hear about, as well as Rosa Parks. What do you think about that intersection between those different kinds of history? Do you consciously work with those? Do you just *find* yourself working with them?

**DOVE:** Probably both. I consciously work at exploring it because I find those junctures—where History with a capital H intersects with lower-case history—fascinating. But I also find that the topics creep up on me. I believe each of us

experiences history on all these levels. There's the talk on the street; there's the front we put up in order to hide our true feeling—which is another level of personal history that's already a revision. Then there's History, the official version, whatever gets written down and lasts. As a black woman, from a very early age I was acutely aware of the discrepancies between history as I experienced it and History as it was reported. In the words of W. E. B. DuBois, such a marginalized position gives you binocular vision, because when you're not in the mainstream you must still understand and be able to "go with the flow" if asked, and yet you have knowledge from another vantage point as well. So these interstices are fascinating; they are the nodes where we can be most aware of the ways in which we negotiate life, from the innermost feelings to the outward presentation. My poetry often emanates from that crossroads; I love the view it gives me.

**DUNGY:** You've said before that when you were born—coming too young to be actively in the Vietnam protests or actively in the Black Rights movement but old enough to be influenced by it, to be aware of what was going on and follow it—has affected who you are both as a person and as a poet. Do you think that affects how you look at history and write about it?

**DOVE:** Yes, it does. I was 17 when I graduated from high school in 1970; the Watts riots happened five years before that, and though I was aware of them—you had to be locked up under a mountain not to notice that the country was erupting—I was 12 or 13 years old then and obviously wouldn't have been actively engaged in protest. So I listened to the adults talking. For a large part of my life growing up, I felt I was watching history occur; I was on the sidelines. The march on Washington—August 28, 1963—took place on my eleventh birthday. My whole family drove down to Washington so my father could march, and I stayed at my grown cousin's house watching it on TV. I was always looking through those kinds of frames, which influenced my perspectives greatly. And during the big Vietnam protests, I was still too young to demonstrate in the streets. So it set me to questioning—I think every human being, at some point, wonders about things like this—if the situation presented itself, would I have protested or not? Would I have been the person to remain seated on the bus in Montgomery in 1955? Would I have been the person to get arrested or clubbed in Selma? How much do we imagine we would do the right thing, and how ready would we really be when it came to putting it on the line? That's the central question in my book *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*. Who among us would have been ready to do what she did?

**DUNGY:** Do you think you would have gone on the march?

**DOVE:** I remember watching it on television and wanting to be there. My cousin said, "You're too young, you're staying right here." But I really wanted to be part of that crowd. And later, when I graduated from high school, college in the early seventies for me was in the small town of Oxford, Ohio—let's put it this way: I was spared that decision.

**DUNGY:** I imagine that part of your father's idea of not taking his 11-year-old daughter to the march was that there was potential for danger and harm coming to you. In many of your poems, there's this potential for violence, a barely masked sense of destruction or potential for destruction. You even speak about it in the epigraph to one section of *American Smooth*. There you say, "Our hearts are forged out of barbarism and violence" and that "we learned to control it, but it is still part of us." Can you talk about the way that tension between the potential for violence and the decision not to act in violence is coming through in your poems? I'm thinking particularly about "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target."

**DOVE:** The idea of mastering the potential for violence is certainly the spirit in which I was raised. The nonviolent tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Know your enemies but never let them see you sweat. If you react to their taunts, if you explode in violence, then they've won. What you have to do is get better than they are. And then there was Malcolm X on the other end, scaring the white folks silly. There are positive aspects as well as dangers to either approach. But adhering to the principle of nonviolence was how I was raised. Being naturally shy, it was a path I walk fairly easily.

I believe that my poems work best when violence simmers just under the surface. It's more frightening, more threatening, to feel it is right beneath this polite, contained exterior, ready to burst. Take the poem "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target." It's a poem about guns and the eerie pleasure of target shooting, the power and the danger. Since gun control is a very bristly topic in this country—everyone has an opinion—our defenses go up immediately. I wanted to circumvent all that by backing into the issue.

The personal story behind all this begins with the house fire, too. My husband and I took up target practice when a neighbor approached us after the fire and offered to teach us how to shoot. He said we should at least know something about self-defense. He was a retired high-ranking army officer. He started out from the standpoint of safety—here's what you have to do to keep from shooting off your own toe; this is what you need to know in order not to hurt anyone. I didn't want anything to do with the whole thing—forget it, I don't want to hold the gun, this is horrible. But as I began firing, I felt something very interesting happening—an immense, unsettling pleasure, a strange sense of power and possibility. Now, I could have sat at my desk and denied those feelings, said no, this is wrong. But that doesn't mean the sensation doesn't exist, nonetheless. I think it's important to acknowledge these kinds of feelings if we're going to understand anything at all about controlling them.

Also, it really gives you a strong sensation of success to be able to hit a target. I'm not talking about just guns, I'm talking about all the kinds of targets one aims for.

So I wanted to get at that sense of exaltation—the beauty of a gun with a name like Glock, or Keltec. And then, right in the middle of all that beauty, to remember that this thing can kill. It can go through walls. To comprehend that kind of power unleashed, not only the beauty but the danger—not only the danger but the beauty. At the end of the poem, I have the bullet speak, which is a strange thing to do. There's something unimaginable about a bullet, how fast and single-minded it is, how completely

without right or wrong. I enjoyed inhabiting the bullet's consciousness, though it scared me to death. But I gradually understood that the challenge was, in essence, the point: A bullet moves so fast, faster than thought—it's pure body, yet it takes the body with it as it burrows through. To render that kind of violence in a restrained manner is to my mind more penetrating (pun intended) than an outburst of protest. Because vehement protest only convinces those who already believe. You're preaching to the choir. It's better to sneak in and get to someone before they know they've been persuaded.

**DUNGY:** That poem, like many others, is in several parts. Why do you think you find yourself working from several angles?

**DOVE:** It's true, isn't it? The other night while giving a reading, I noticed how many of my poems are in, say, four parts. Again, it comes from the idea of getting beneath the official History. There are many sides to the truth, so many facets, and I like exploring a situation from different angles. In the case of *Thomas and Beulah*, we get both sides of a marriage—the husband's, then the wife's. In "Meditation at 50 Yards, Moving Target," the focal point won't stay still and we circle it as well—let's look at safety, let's consider men versus women, who's the better shot, let's take the bullet's perspective, let's analyze the act of squeezing the trigger, how controlled an action that is, if you really want to hit your mark.

Exploring a topic from different angles enables me to get—if not a 360-degree view, at least a three-dimensional picture. The reader is given the chance to contemplate the disturbing elements in tranquility, because he or she can pause to take a breath, then plunge in and look at it again.

**DUNGY:** So do you sit down and say, "I'm going to write a poem in four parts"? Or do you write one part, then say this isn't finished, and figure out a new angle to finish?

**DOVE:** I never sit down to write a poem in four parts. On the other hand, it's rare that I'm writing and think it's finished when it's not. At some point I may realize there's going to be more than one part, and though I might not be able to tell right off the bat how many, I would know before the penultimate section was finished!

I knew that "Meditation at 50 Yards" would have at least two parts. "Safety First" talks about how a gun should be handled. And I knew there would have to be something about male/female differences, which became the third section, called "Gender Politics." I learned that women tend to be better shots than men because our heartbeat is slower; we actually shake less. But writing that section led to the fourth part about the bullet. Now, the last thing I thought I'd ever do was to write from the point of view of a bullet. But by then I'd reached the point where accuracy depends on the speed of a heartbeat. How close is that to pure body? How intimate is that? That's when I thought, oh gosh, I've got to do the bullet. People will think I'm out of my mind!

**DUNGY:** You sometimes repeat poems from one manuscript to another: “Dusting” appears in both *Museum* and *Thomas and Beulah*, and “The Sisters: Swansong” is in *American Smooth* but picks up characters from *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*. Can you talk about why and how you carry ideas, characters, and even whole poems from one book to another?

**DOVE:** Well, you have to follow—I hate to say the Muse, but whom else? You follow the Muse without quite understanding why, and you keep doing what she says until it becomes clear. The first duplication was accidental: When I wrote “Dusting” I didn’t know that this was the first of the Beulah poems that would go into the next book. Although the woman dusting was clearly my grandmother and the room in the poem her solarium, I thought I was merely using her as a template. That was also the last poem written before *Museum* was sent to the publisher; I had already started writing poems about my grandfather’s life, but I hadn’t realized this was going to become a whole book of poems. But there came a point, after *Museum* was published and I had turned my full attention to these strange new poems, when I realized suddenly that “Dusting” was my grandmother’s way of stepping into the work and kind of throttling me, saying, “Wake up Girl! I’m here, too! I wanna talk!” So that poem became the bridge from one book to the next; it proclaimed, “This is an ongoing story.” “Dusting” led me to write the Beulah section in what turned out to be an entire book, yet it was also the linchpin, opening the door from room to room.

After all, the theme of *Museum*—the idea of bearing witness to people and deeds forgotten by history—was an essential part of what’s going on in *Thomas and Beulah*: This couple’s lives were significant to those close to them, but their story would never appear in the history books. In that sense, they belonged in *Museum* as well, but now they had their own book.

A similar thing happened between *Thomas and Beulah* and the publication of the next book. “Summit Beach, 1921,” the first poem in *Grace Notes*, could have easily appeared in *Thomas and Beulah*, but it takes on a different energy in the new book.

I don’t believe art stops when you turn away from the painting or shut the book. A poem exists not only on the page; it reverberates through the poems we’ve read before it and on into the poems we will read next. Art becomes a lot more interesting because we feel the resonances long after the initial contact experience. So repeating a poem or continuing a story in a different context raises interesting aesthetic issues.

**DUNGY:** Most of your books seem to operate in sections. Frequently five sections in a book. Have you ever realized that you would have to actually extract a whole section or add a whole section to make a book work? You talked a little about the Beulah section having to go in. What goes into those decisions?

**DOVE:** How about agony? Oh, I have extracted whole sections—in fact, I took an entire section out of *American Smooth*. I’m glad now I did it, but I anguished over it for weeks. The book felt too long; around the three-quarter mark one’s attention threatened to go off in a different direction, and taking that section out changed the way the book moved. I also realized that section could, and would, become part of another

book someday. It was an interesting tangent to the umbrella concept of *American Smooth*, but I decided to let it go for a while. It was a heartrending decision, but one made in service of both the book and, I think, its individual poems.

I took an entire section out of *Thomas and Beulah*, too. Originally I had intended the book to be a triptych, with the Thomas and Beulah sections flanking a central group of poems about the city of Akron, the landscape and the environment they both inhabited. But it just didn't work; it didn't have the right dynamics. Again, it was a matter of tightening the manuscript so that poems rubbed against each other more. As you know, these decisions are very intuitive—that is, they can be justified after the fact but the actual process is fraught with despair and struggle. (*deep sigh*).

**DUNGY:** It's good to know that agony is actually normal and one must continue through it.

**DOVE:** Through it, yes.

**DUNGY:** One thing I've heard you say, which is something people often say and I've wondered if it's just self-defense or if it really ends up being true, is this idea that something belongs in another book. That poems belong in another place. How frequently do you operate consciously in multiple projects and when do you begin to see how the projects tease apart or come together?

**DOVE:** I almost always work on multiple projects. When I began writing seriously, I did not do so—not only because I simply didn't have enough poems, but also because I just assumed it wasn't "done." As a young writer one is always looking for role models, and all my models at the time seemed to proceed in a "manly fashion"—straightforward, linearly—toward their goal. Sometime around the transition from second to third book—the "Dusting" period—I had established a multifaceted approach, so that I was working on the Thomas poems while I was filling in the holes in the manuscript of *Museum*. I work best this way. Right now, my desk drawers are full of color-coded plastic folders, and in these folders are drafts of poems at varying stages, and on any given day I will work on more than one of these drafts at a time. As far as that section that I took out of *American Smooth* is concerned . . . I know it belongs to a manuscript—I can almost see it, shadowy—but I don't think it will be the next one. I'm pretty sure another book is going to happen before that. You know, some of the Soldier poems from the section "Not Welcome Here" in *American Smooth* were written in the early 1980s; I continued to work on them over the years but they never found their home until now. Patience, patience . . .

I am immensely comforted by working on many different projects at once. Not only because there is always something in the pot, hopefully, but also because it just seems to fit my temperament. This occurs in other areas of my life, too. For instance, Fred and I went to Venice for Carnival 2005. A friend who's on a Save Venice committee invited us to join their entourage, and we decided it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. So here I was, sewing costumes day and night, yet at the same time I was working on



poems in my head. It sounds bizarre but it happened during the poems that became *Mother Love*, too; I started sewing a lot as *Grace Notes* neared publication, and one day Fred commented: "Oh, you're working on a poem." He had figured it out; he knew that I needed to pursue another activity in order to let the creative juices bubble on their own.

**DUNGY:** I've heard you speak before about your training, while growing up, to be polite. I hear it translated in what many critics say about your work, that a defining feature is that it is reserved. But you say you need to struggle against that politeness, and I imagine that your very public roles as the U.S. poet laureate and now the Virginia poet laureate mean that there's this public eye that you have to worry about—people are going to think I'm crazy, writing about this bullet. How do you find yourself in the actual day-to-day practice of writing a poem working with and against this politeness or this reserve?

**DOVE:** When I'm writing, the only thing I'm concerned about is being absolutely honest. Whatever the topic, I don't believe in reserve when it comes to exploring it; I am dedicated to following that moment as far as it will take me. If people think I'm out of my mind to write about a bullet, then so be it—because I'm not only going to write about it, I'm going to *become* that bullet. I don't care if they might say I'm crazy. As an artist, I don't have a choice in the matter—not about whether I'm going to write about something, not about how deep I'm going to go: I will go as deep as I need to. The reserve comes into play in the way that this exploration is expressed, the craft of it. And I do struggle—no, "struggle" is the wrong word—I push against my sense of what a poem should be, and against what has worked technically for me in the past. I push against that cadenced and polished surface. I find it interesting to rough it up but still keep it there. It's like modern dance: You'd better be able to do a split and point your toes and achieve full extension; you are freer to create shapes and moves not permissible in classical ballet. Artistically I struggle with exploring a looser line and more rambling syntax, perhaps a more exuberant rhetoric. A poem like "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Coconut Grove," which feels like one long rhapsodic sentence barreling over itself—kind of a blues rant—was a joyous release for me because it's so different from a lot of my poems.

So I don't find the reserve problematic per se. But it is *my* thing to work against, pushing, resisting. I am constantly reminding myself: Okay, you're way too polite here, you're editing yourself; can you lighten up a bit, can you be a little messier?

**DUNGY:** You've said several times that one of your concerns is this idea of speaking for those who have not had their histories on the record. In regards to this and to your project in many of your books—and how others perceive your project in many of your books, what do you think about Helen Vendler's comments relatively early in your career? She suggested that you had made this "Important discovery—blackness need not be one's central subject, but equally need not be omitted."

**DOVE:** I'm not quite sure what I should say about that quote. It's one thing to read what a critic has written and think: "Oh yeah, that's right!"—to experience that delighted shock of recognition, as I do with much of Helen Vendler's criticism. But it's another thing to think about that commentary in an active way. Part of me bristles at having to engage myself artistically with a critic's perception of me. I would say this: One of the big stumbling blocks I have had to get over was coming to terms with what blackness meant to me as an artist. Is that my central concern? Or is that one concern among many? It took a lot of going back and forth before I felt confident enough to admit that I don't really care to think about any of these "themes," these "concepts" when I'm writing. I am in the moment; I'm filtering the moment through language and through my *self*, through my artistic heart, which may be 60 percent black, 40 percent female one day, but 10 percent black, 50 percent female, 40 percent dancer—whatever!—the next.

Frankly, I just want to write the poems. Of course, I want to be true to the task. And because I'm black and because I'm female and because I'm the age that I am at this particular time on this earth, certain aspects of my environment and my society are going to come through in the work.

I've had the luxury of coming of age as a writer at a time when I could make these choices. So many generations of black writers before me could not afford to attend artistically to their full human selves because the critical reception would not permit it. They had to "be black" or nothing. Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, had to make a decision: Was he going to write the poems of conflicted black identity—"We wear the mask that grins and lies"—or was he going to be the happy-go-lucky folk poet who penned *Lyrics of Lowly Life*?

I will say that because of my birthright—my genetic makeup, if you will—I am more receptive to the stories of people who've been sidelined by history. It is part of my heritage and therefore has become, I suppose, one of my themes. One could argue that if there's one influence being both female and African American has had on my aesthetics it is that I've had both the opportunity to watch from the sidelines, and to insert myself into the mainstream and insist upon my presence. One is a passive stance; the other is something you have to do, actively. So Helen Vendler's comment, and my own perception of my mission, actually complement one other. It's a complicated balance.

**DUNGY:** You've said before that you think that many critiques of writers are framed in terms of aesthetics when what is really at the heart of the question is class.

**DOVE:** One finds it to be the case more and more, particularly in academia, which is an entirely different ball of wax; the way gender and race impinge upon one's sensibility is dramatically different from the world of business or simply "making it" out there in the world at large. Class becomes all important. And yet—to mix it up a bit—we must remember that we are living in an era where African Americans can enter the hallowed arena of academia a bit more easily than our forefathers and mothers. Our predecessors, no matter how intelligent they were, were not welcomed into the ivied compounds of America and therefore could not enjoy the casual

privileges of university life. It used to be that class and status was achieved as a consequence of one's bloodlines and/or financial circumstances; the advent of academia as a sanctioned group has shaken up the socioeconomic equilibrium.

None of this is clear-cut. I've become cautious about class and race distinctions because I feel that sometimes we, as African Americans, will opt for the easier mark of race as the factor that galvanizes inequalities when in fact it is due to class—quite often class more than race, at least nowadays. Not that race doesn't matter; but class is an issue we haven't quite dealt with yet.

**DUNGY:** Can you speak about the letter that you wrote to *Poetry* magazine last year in response to the reviews of Garrison Keillor's *Good Poems*? It seems that much of what you were saying in that letter was that the aesthetic decisions regarding what should be considered good poems were actually driven somewhat by ideas of race and class and gender, and that these inform perceptions of what matters and what doesn't.

**DOVE:** My anger toward Garrison Keillor's anthology *Good Poems* was fueled by the fact that when the issue of race again reared its ugly head, the onus of burden of issuing blame, the burden of fighting the necessary fight, fell to those who had blessed little time to do it. Meaning, in this case, African-American and other minority poets who were left out, both as a group as well as as individuals, and therefore would not receive the imprimatur that being chosen for an anthology called *Good Poems* could have, an anthology that tells its readers—from the vantage point of a popular radio personality—what they should adore and what they should collect.

One interesting aspect of Keillor's introduction to this anthology was his attempt to get away from academia and the well-to-do elite as arbiters of taste by saying: These are the poems that good, solid, middle-class and working America likes to hear. He lambasted the social lions and literary Brahmins of New York City with one hand, while the other hand was trying to undercut the intelligentsia. At the same time, however, he betrayed his own brand of exclusivity by ignoring pretty much everybody not his own skin color—African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics. He just didn't notice they were there. It's the old *Invisible Man* story again. So most of my anger—my fury, really—was triggered by race. Even though I said earlier that class is largely today's defining factor, it doesn't mean the old problems have gone away. Every now and then the hydra heads grow back. That Garrison Keillor—who is a kind and gentle soul and a very vocal liberal, someone you certainly would want on your side—would betray this kind of blindness, is shockingly depressing.

**DUNGY:** And, furthermore, that neither of the two white men who reviewed the book in *Poetry* had that in mind added to the mix.

**DOVE:** Yes, it compounded the horror. My response was limited by space, so I couldn't go after the reviewers as much as I would've liked. Dana Gioia and August Kleinzahler—I know both of them, and to be truthful, I didn't expect much more from them: August's rather Rimbaudesque obsessiveness serves his poetry quite well,

while Dana has always hankered after more elegant and gentile qualities. Both those modes reflect the privilege of a white male sensibility, so you can figure out which way the wind blows. You look at them and you say, "Yeah, well, that's the way it is." You know what's going down.

But I would have expected better of Keillor. I reserved most of my fury for him, because he has, in fact, displayed inclusiveness with the guests he's had on his radio show; he's funny, he's smart. . . . I was on his program several times. He's shown indications of being a forward-thinking person, therefore I was more disappointed by him.

**DUNGY:** You sew, you play music, you dance, you play the cello, you do a lot of things very well. What is it that keeps you coming back to the poetry? You've written a novel and a play, essays, you do a lot of different things, but why poetry? I realize this might be a hard question.

**DOVE:** It is hard, sort of like asking why we fall in love with *x* and not *y* or *z*. The easy answer—though it's true, it's a little too easy—is that poetry unfolds at the heart of the language. If one is going to succumb to the spell of writing, then it seems to me that poetry is the purest love. It's adoring the very syllables on which everything hinges. And not only the syllables, but the breath between syllables. It verges on the first utterance ever made by *Homo sapiens* that was understood by other *Homo sapiens*. Therefore, writing poetry approaches anthropology. And it embodies music, because it relies on sound, sound that has been made to spawn an emotional response. And then history comes in, and linguistics. History because words change their meaning, and the way that they make us feel changes with that meaning. All those layers!

If I were to couch it in the negative, I would say that poetry satisfies so many of my other interests. Though it goes deeper than that. I mean, I could say it takes on music, for example, or that when I string words into sentences that spiral down the invisible central axis on the page, the thrill derived from fitting things together—which in turn become a third, larger entity—is similar to sewing or doing crossword puzzles, two of my passionate hobbies. Gosh! Then there's the lure of history with its event trajectories and my general love for books—the feel of pages turning, the discovery of little-known facts, philosophy of why we are here and keep insisting on proclaiming, "We are here! We are here!" Poetry can contain all those things. To me it's the noblest of the arts.

And: I can do it alone. I'm not dependent on anybody else to make a poem work. One of the frustrations of ballroom dancing, for instance, is that you have to do it with another person; if that person's good, then the dancing can be *great*, and if he's not, you're thinking, "Oh, let me go, I can do better than this!" But you can't, not by yourself. There are problems with music as well—in another life I was a cellist, and unless I was playing the *Bach Unaccompanied Suites for Cello*, I needed a piano accompanying me, or the other three members of a string quartet. Although I like working with other people, poetry is one thing I can do alone.

I warned you I was going to take the negative approach, but the main reason is positive: Nothing beats being able to articulate how I feel or an imagined character feels, using words that hopefully convey more than they actually mean because of their sounds, or because of the way they look on the page, or how the sentences underscore the unsaid as they butt up against the right margin as they travel the page. Putting together this four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle—there are probably more dimensions than that!—is incredibly exciting.

Poetry was my first real passion. It will always be my true love. It is glorious and impossible and bigger than me. Much, much bigger than me.

**DUNGY:** How do you think that your poetry has influenced other poets?

**DOVE:** Whew, that's a big question! If anything, I'm part of a tradition that is still growing among African-American poets: That is, finally exploring the freedom to write about anything we choose without it necessarily having to be about "being black"—whatever one imagines by that. To have the poetry emanate from the entire person, with race, gender, age, et cetera emerging in the poems as needed, as they color the life, without such distinctions being the sole point of the poem. I hope poets of my generation and younger no longer feel the "burden of explanation"—that is, the expectation from the mainstream that as a "minority"—oh, I hate that word!—we should explain our cultural references in the text of the work itself. You know, the *Norton Anthology* has footnotes telling you what a bodkin is or what Keats meant by "lucent fans" of "dales of Arcady"; and no one thinks anything of looking up all the footnotes to "The Wasteland." And yet an African-American writer would be expected to explicate "Dixie Peach" within the context of the poem. What I'm saying is we should be able to write "Dixie Peach" in full confidence that a reader won't merely ask, "What the hell is that?" and feel excluded, but will be interested enough to look it up. I think the more diverse our writing becomes, the more it touches on all aspects of life as if it's the most natural thing in the world—and it is—then the more that burden will be relieved. I do think that some of that is contained in my work.

**DUNGY:** So do you see African American poetry moving in any particular direction?

**DOVE:** I see it moving in every direction you can look at, and I think that's fabulous. From performance poetry and slams to sonnets and villanelles—we're using all the music out there, and that's the way it should be.

**DUNGY:** My final question is a quote from your own poem "And Counting": "When the sky's the limit, how can you tell you've gone too far?"

**DOVE:** I ask myself that question to make sure I keep going further. You might want to say to some writers, "Put a lid on it"; I always have to remind myself to dare a bit more, because I have a natural tendency to be economical in my work, not to wander "off topic" or get too rhapsodic. It has to do with being a good daughter but also, as

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an African American, wearing Dunbar's mask, not letting people know they're getting to you. Consequently, I have erected a force field to protect myself and my work. So I must continually remind myself that I have to push on until I hit the edge of the sky. Until something bounces me back. And maybe, maybe it won't happen at all, you'll just keep flying! What holds me back is my inclination toward rigor. That's a good thing too, but one's strong points can widen into pitfalls.

So that line in my poem is an admonition to fly. You might go too high; you might pass out from lack of oxygen and fall back to earth—maybe the air will no longer hold you up. But you can't really figure that out until it happens, so you might as well go on up there, and keep going.