

HAPPY HOLIDAYS
AND ALL THE BEST
FOR 1990!

Rita, Fred and Aviva



Rita Dove, Fred Viebahn
and Aviva Dove-Viebahn

Charlottesville, VA
[U.S.A.]

Rita's new office address:

Rita Dove
Dept. of English
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA 22903

*Our
new
house:*



A Letter from Fred

Charlottesville, Virginia
December 1989

Dear friends,

For the past thirteen holiday seasons we've resisted the temptation to write and photocopy a general "events of the year" letter. Instead we either tried to be more personal, or we didn't write at all. Now, as our fourteenth New Year together approaches and after the turmoil of moving across the country to Virginia last summer, Rita and I decided that such a letter is the only manageable way to communicate with all of you at once -- and at the same time let you know of our new address. This of course requires a more bare-bones approach than a personal letter, for which I apologize. First of all, let me assure you that the three of us are as healthy and happy as ever. It's a pleasure to watch Aviva grow up (she'll be seven in January). Rita and I continue our dance around the magic age of 40, I on the one side and Rita on the other.

On to the facts: We spent the 1988/89 academic year in Durham, North Carolina, where Rita had a Mellon fellowship at the National Humanities Center. Aviva enjoyed public kindergarten; after the three wonderful years in the warm embrace of Jewish culture and tradition at the Tempe JCC pre-school, she was suddenly plunged into a multi-racial and socially diverse group of children. She did well; at the same time she became more aware of her "specialness," which did not shake her self-confidence at all. Rita worked on new poems and her first novel, travelled a lot (readings, a U.S.-French-U.S.S.R. women writers' conference in Paris in February, a second honorary doctorate, this time from Knox College in Illinois) and learned to turn down reading offers -- which had been (and still are) coming in at such a rate that she could, if she wanted to commit suicide, criss-cross the States via jet practically every day of the academic year, plus fill the summer with one writers' conference after the other. To keep her sanity and find some time for her writing, she turned down most readings (plus another writers' conference in France and a German tv talk show) for this past fall, and she now regrets that she accepted more for the coming spring than she should have. She has decided to declare a moratorium on readings for 1990/91. In addition, her professional mail has reached mountainous proportions -- the only way she's been able to manage such amounts is by throwing half of it aside and answering the other half with the help of a dictaphone and an assistant.

Which brings me to our "major move:" After eight years on the faculty of ASU, Rita accepted a position as English professor and

fellow in the Center for Advanced Studies (for the first three years) at U.Va. It was a trying decision for all of us; Aviva, our child of the desert sun, certainly liked the idea the least. Even we, who had moved so easily from continent to continent before settling in Tempe in 1981, found it traumatic to pack up our household in August and leave our friends, our cozy home, and our backyard with its palm, fig tree and olive trees (even though we suspected them of causing the horrible mild season allergies that had plagued us in Arizona) -- and even the 112°F temperature seemed strangely homey to us on the day of our final departure. We made a last trip to Disneyland, glanced once more into the Grand Canyon, hiked in Oak Creek Canyon, tubed down the Salt River, marvelled at the amazing purple desert sunsets we'd be missing. Despite the depressed market in the Phoenix area, our friend and real estate agent Carl Goldberg managed to sell our house rather quickly and reasonably, after we'd found -- as quickly and reasonably -- a beautiful new place in Charlottesville, complete with its own pond, a view of the Shenandoah Mountains in the distance, and, best of all, nice neighbors who made us feel welcome right from the start. Aviva even found friends her age in the immediate neighborhood, something she missed in Tempe. She's keeping up with the violin lessons started at Duke University String School in Durham last year. Rita and I fulfilled our part of a bargain struck with Aviva when we'd begun to discuss moving away from Tempe: horseback riding lessons. Although the youngest by far in her small group of beginners, she's set her mind on it and is already talking of having a horse all her own.

So far we feel we made the right move at the right time, despite the resulting complications in our life and work. Rita's work on her novel really suffered from the relocation, as well as all the demands and expectations people have been projecting on her since the Pulitzer. So her novel is not yet finished, and it looks like Putnam won't be able to publish it before 1991. I myself am only slowly getting back into the regular routine of concentrated time at my desk, which I need for consistent writing. After all the run-arounds of acquainting oneself with a new place and setting up shop, I'm finally trying to pick up the threads of my new book again -- my first novel originally written in English. By the way, *The Stain*, which came out last year with Story Line Press, was able to make some sales in-roads in independent bookstores, and received good reviews.

Because of the move, our usual European summer was cut short (to five weeks) this year. As always, Aviva stayed with my mother in my home village near Cologne. In June Rita and I went to the International Poetry Festival in Rotterdam, where we had a marvelous time. We met old friends (among them Kazuko Shiraishi from Japan, who had been a co-fellow of mine at the University of

Iowa's International Writing Program in 1976, and a direct witness to Rita's and my first meeting) and we made new friends from all over the world. We then went on a short German reading tour (Cologne, Munich, Berlin, Hamburg); Rita read from her German collection *Die morgenländische Tänzerin* (containing *Thomas and Beulah*) which came out with Rowohlt Verlag in 1988 (translated by Karin Graf).

This fall, just two months ago, a second collection of Rita's poetry was published in Germany, this time by Heiderhoff Verlag, a publisher who specializes in bilingual editions. I selected and translated about forty poems from *The Yellow House on the Corner and Muscum* under the title *Die gläserne Stern der Gegenwart*. Easily one of the most elegant books either of us has had, this volume also contains four pictures by Baltimore artist Laurence Hurst as well as an excellent essay on Rita's work by Wolfgang Binder, one of the foremost German scholars of Afro-American culture.

In September Rita's new poetry collection, *Grace Notes*, came out with W.W. Norton, and the reviews have been quite positive. Gerald Costanzo, Rita's editor at Carnegie-Mellon University Press, was very gracious and understanding regarding her switch to a big commercial publishing house. Also this fall, Akron Public Television produced an insightful half-hour documentary on Rita that has been distributed to PBS stations in Ohio. Video Press, a private company in Arizona, is now marketing the fine *Thomas and Beulah* video they shot last year (in 30 and 60 minute versions) to PBS affiliates and educational channels nationwide; a low-priced cassette for general sales is to be released sometime in 1990.

We'll be spending Xmas at my mother's in Germany, and on Dec. 26 Rita & I are off for a week in Berlin. The political situation should provide for interesting (and probably more or less crazy) New Year's Eve events in the newly un-divided city. Despite my spontaneous feelings of elation, I can't help but feel a bit uneasy about such a sudden and radical change in the status quo -- as if this unexpected ecstasy might be the prelude to new horrors in the cruel course of history. For the time being, however, the more superficial part of myself is bound on enjoying the changes and the experiences these changes surely will provide (including the emotional upheaval) when we again visit the city where both of us have had such productive, inspired times in the past.

With love and best wishes from the three of us,

Fred